



Supervisão 2020

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Through the looking-glass and what faculty found there: Peer observation of teaching as a tool for professional development

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Abstract:

Peer observation of teaching is a modality of (self-)training in the field of faculty professional development, in which faculty observe each other's classes to ignite processes of reflection, discussion, and exchange of experiences, in order to learn and improve different dimensions about "being a teacher" in higher education (Franco & Vieira, 2020; Mouraz & Pêgo, 2017). This kind of professional development opportunity becomes especially important considering that, in Portugal, faculty are not requested to possess any basic didactic-pedagogical training to teach (Marques & Pinto, 2012); in the meanwhile, there is a strong appreciation for attested scientific knowledge and for a research resume (Vieira, 2014).

At University of Aveiro, a program of peer observation of teaching – Programa de Observação por Pares (POP) – is underway to serve as an aid to faculty who wish to contact with peers, observe other ways of being and performing as teachers, as well as learn and transform dimensions of their pedagogical practices. POP is a voluntary multidisciplinary program inspired in a similar program with a 10-year longevity from another Portuguese university (Mouraz & Pêgo, 2017), which stresses the relevance bestowed by faculty to this kind of training opportunity.



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Here, we analyze data that emerged from a pilot study of POP (2018/2019 academic year) and from its first two editions (2019/2020 academic year), referring to (i) the perceptions of faculty about the advantages and potentialities of participating in a peer observation of teaching program, as well as to (ii) our analysis of such perceptions and potentialities, in light of key-concepts such as faculty professionalism and faculty professional development. We followed an interpretative qualitative methodology, given our interest in unveiling the significance given by faculty to the experience of participating in POP. Data were collected mainly at lunch time with each group of teachers who had observed each other's classes: in the pilot study, this was a literal lunch between the participants and the two coordinators of the program (who accompany faculty throughout the program and support their observations and reflections, also observing classes and providing feedback when requested); in the first edition, data were collected at a meeting with all participants of that edition; in the second edition, data were collected at an "online lunch" (via Zoom), given the confinement restraints brought by a pandemic situation that transported our lives to the online mode.

According to the results obtained, faculty value the opportunity to observe and reflect on their peers' classes/practices and, simultaneously, to "observe" and reflect on their own classes/practices; to receive and provide feedback; to explore and experiment different pedagogical practices; and more. Thus, and adding to the body of evidence in the literature, we put forward that peer observation of teaching (in the form of a program such as the one implemented, for instance) is fundamental as a training place for professional development and for the transformation of the pedagogical practices of faculty. Drawing a parallel with the adventures lived by Alice (Carroll, 1871) in her journey "through the looking-glass", we conclude that faculty who dared to trespass the looking-glass and observe their peers – to observe themselves – found a rather unfamiliar experience, but also a truly rewarding one.

Keywords: Faculty professionalism; Higher education; Pedagogical training and transformation; Peer observation of teaching; Professional development.

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