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Peers Observing Peers: Exploring Cross-Institutional Observations and Dialogues Facilitated by Videoconferencing Software

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Abstract

While observing exemplary in-service teachers is important, researchers suggest there may be benefits to observing peers as well. Much of the peer observation literature is focused on the process of peers observing peers in the same institution. The authors of this study brought together undergraduate music education peers from two separate institutions to observe and discuss music teaching and learning via videoconferencing software. Using qualitative analysis techniques, we identified three emergent themes: (a) technology as a tool for diverse experiences, (b) self-reflection and questioning assumptions, and (c) evolving issues of identity. Participants believed the experience was uniquely valuable when compared with traditional observations of peers within their own institutions. While all participants reported growth in self-awareness and ability to question assumptions, those who were observed developed stronger teacher identities and those who were observing learned vicariously through peers they wished to emulate.

Keywords

community of learners, music education majors, music teacher identity, music teacher preparation, peer observation, preservice teachers, questioning assumptions, reflection, student teaching, technology

Prior to student teaching, music teacher educators commonly rely on early field experiences to increase pedagogical knowledge and develop teacher identity (Haston & Russell, 2012). Within these early settings, the preservice music teacher often receives

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instructional assistance from the classroom teacher or even assumes responsibility for teaching a portion of the class. Classroom observations, however, often precede or complement teaching opportunities provided to preservice music teachers as part of early field experiences (Conway, Smith, & Hodgman, 2010). While observing exemplary in-service teachers is important, there may be benefits to observing peers as well. Smith (1998) points out that people learn vicariously through observing and interacting not only with mentors but also with peers whom they wish to emulate.

Through peer observation, students view teaching from the perspective of someone who is on their same experience level. According to Rauch and Whittaker (1999), student teachers value the opportunity to put themselves in their colleague's position and consider how they might handle particular situations in relation to their peers. Music education researchers note similar results to those within general education, namely that peer observation can help music students develop an objective view of their teaching (Barry, 1996), enhance critical thinking (Searby & Ewers, 1997), and open students' eyes to new ways of thinking about music education (Burton, 2011). Interestingly, Napoles (2008) found that music students more often recalled comments about their teaching made by peers than those made by instructors.

Peer observation appears to benefit students most when the purpose is explicitly developmental (designed to improve performance) rather than evaluative (Cosh, 1998). Though researchers have shown students to be reliable assessors when compared with experts in the field (Liu & Carless, 2006; Magin, 2001), students may still dislike assessing peers out of concern that bad grades or hurt feelings may damage relationships (Arnold, Schue, Kritt, Ginsburg, & Stern, 2005). Providing observation experiences across institutions may mitigate these fears; however, the geographic distance between schools would likely inhibit such observations.

Study Rationale

Acknowledging the importance of peer observation, and recognizing that peer observation perhaps happens most often between peers in the same institution, the authors used videoconferencing technology to bring together undergraduate music education peers from two different music teacher education programs allowing for a greater diversity of observation experiences beyond local school settings (Pickering & Walsh, 2011; Reese, 2015). The following research questions guided this study:

Research Question 1: How do these preservice music educators perceive peer observation and dialogue with regard to their development as teachers?
Research Question 2: How are these experiences different from or similar to observing peers at the same institution?
Research Question 3: How does a videoconferencing observation compare with a traditional in-person experience?
Research Question 4: How might the experience of the observer differ from the experience of the observed?

Method

Settings and Participants

Benton. Benton College[1] is a private liberal arts college with approximately 300 undergraduate music education majors located in a predominantly white, middle-class suburban community in the northeastern region of the United States. Five instrumental (band) music education majors at Benton College took part in this study. These participants were in their junior year and had completed secondary instrumental methods courses as well as 100 hours of required observation conducted in person at local area schools. As part of a class within their music education degree program, Benton participants taught weekly 30-minute one-on-one instrumental music lessons to elementary school students for an entire academic year. Each week, Benton music education faculty supervised these lessons and provided feedback and support to the student teachers before and after each lesson. The elementary school students also received weekly instruction from a full-time music teacher at their schools.

Riley. Riley University is a large state university with approximately 100 undergraduate music education majors located in a major city with a racially diverse population and high-poverty rates in the northeastern region of the United States. The Riley students who participated in this study ($n = 4$) were enrolled in an undergraduate woodwind methods course composed of nine students. Riley participants were music education students in their sophomore year and were composed of both instrumental and vocal majors. As part of their semester-long methods class, Riley participants viewed a total of five instrumental music lessons delivered by different Benton participants in real time, and then dialogued with each Benton participant the following week about what they saw. One Benton student, Brian, was observed twice.

Observation Structure. Because Riley participants were observation-seeking sophomores and woodwind methods students, we paired them with Benton College junior student teachers who were currently teaching young woodwind players. To hopefully form a virtual community of learners (Compton & Davis, 2010; Pickering & Walsh, 2011), we used the Skype service because it was free, available for multiple platforms, and most undergraduate students were already familiar with this technology. Through the use of Skype, Riley participants collected observation experiences relevant to their woodwind methods studies, while Benton participants engaged in reflective discussions and responded to questions about their practice.

Participation in peer observations was required, but participation in the subsequent interviews for this study was optional; students willing to be interviewed for this study completed institutional review board-approved consent forms. Because five Riley students declined to participate in the interviews, a total of nine interview participants (five from Benton and four from Riley) constituted a convenience sample (Patton, 2015) in that their selection was based on their availability, schedules, and interest in participating in the study (see Table 1).

Table 1. Study Participants.

Name	School	Role	Primary instrument	Year in school
Amy	Benton	Observed	Trombone	Junior
Brian	Benton	Observed	Saxophone	Junior
Colleen	Benton	Observed	Oboe	Junior
Denise	Benton	Observed	Saxophone	Junior
Evan	Benton	Observed	Trumpet	Junior
Aaron	Riley	Observer	Trombone	Sophomore
Caleb	Riley	Observer	Clarinet	Sophomore
Kelly	Riley	Observer	Voice	Sophomore
Susan	Riley	Observer	Voice	Sophomore

Research Design

We used a case study design (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Patton, 2015; Stake, 2010; Yin, 2009). According to Stake (2010), case studies allow researchers to develop greater understanding of complexity, and Yin (2009) notes they are the preferred strategy for exploring *how* and *why* questions. In particular, this study is considered an *intrinsic* case study (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Stake, 1995), in which the focus was on the case itself and chosen for its uniqueness where the unit of analysis was the phenomenon of cross-institutional, peer-to-peer observation mediated by videoconferencing technology used to connect students from two different music teacher education programs. Since Creswell and Poth (2017) note that case studies are explored over time and involve multiple data sources, the researchers used guided observation notes, cross-institutional dialogue sessions, researcher journals, and semistructured participant interviews as major data sources.

Guided Observation Notes. Since preservice music teachers report observation experiences to be most valuable when properly facilitated by a music teacher educator (Conway, 2002), and to foster an environment of learning rather than assessment, we followed the model recommended by Showers and Joyce (1996) whereby we asked Riley participants to simply note their observations without offering judgment or critique. While Benton participants taught, Riley participants shared their observations with each other in real time using a guided observation template on Google Docs. They recorded what they saw, what they heard, and questions they had for the Benton participant teachers; templates also were used to help guide conversation.

Cross-Institutional Dialogue Sessions. During the week following each 30-minute lesson observation, teacher participants from Benton met virtually with observer participants from Riley via Skype to discuss the observations. The instructor-researchers at Benton College and Riley University were present for these dialogue sessions and provided prompts when necessary to generate discussion. Riley participants drew from their

guided observation notes (Benton participants were not privy to these notes), pointing out what they observed in the teaching episodes and sometimes asking the Benton student teachers questions about their teaching. The cross-institutional dialogue was perhaps the richest experience from which participants at both institutions would draw when interviewed.

Semistructured Participant Interviews. Researchers at both Riley University and Benton College maintained journals of what they observed, listed curiosities, and recorded thoughts about the cross-institutional observations and dialogue sessions, which were then used, in part, to prepare questions for the semistructured participant interviews. The researchers first independently reviewed the recorded observations and subsequent dialogue sessions. The researchers then reread their own journals as well as the participants' real-time guided observation reflections. The guided observation notes, dialogue sessions, and researcher journals provided a framework for developing an interview guide aimed at exploring the unit of analysis. Researchers interviewed all five student teachers from Benton individually about their experience being observed and interacting with peers from Riley. Researchers then interviewed four participants from Riley individually about their experiences observing and interacting with peers from Benton.

Data Analysis

All interviews were in-person, recorded, and transcribed verbatim, and served as the primary source of findings reported in this article. Our analysis of the interview data followed Creswell and Poth's (2017) three-part approach for case studies: within-case analysis, cross-case analysis, and assertions. First, the researchers independently listened to all interviews and made coding notes within each transcript based on the research questions. The researchers then compared notes to identify salient codes, rename ambiguous codes, and eliminate redundant codes until consensus was reached. The researchers then returned to the transcripts to apply the following 11 codes across cases: opening eyes, seeing the other, understanding beyond the local, questioning own assumptions, ego, confidence, pride, feeling like a teacher, identity, expertise, and community. Finally, the researchers independently searched all data sets and met to identify and discuss emergent themes.

Trustworthiness. The primary techniques used to address the trustworthiness of study findings were data collection triangulation (Stake, 2010), rich, thick description of the case (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), member checks (Creswell & Poth, 2017), adequate engagement in the field over the course of a semester, and attention to investigator expertise (Patton, 2015). The interview data were triangulated with researcher journals and cross-institutional dialogue sessions. The data were also triangulated through multiple rounds of independent researcher coding prior to developing themes and reporting the findings. Rich, thick description was constructed with enough detail for the reader to determine whether the findings are transferrable to similar music teacher

education contexts. Findings were then sent to the participants for their comment and clarification. Corrections, clarifications, and additions were made to the final narrative based on these member checks. Finally, as researchers, we had sufficient background in instrumental music teacher education and developed relationships with the participants to establish rapport and depth in our interview approach.

However, we were aware that our role as researchers was possibly confounded by our dual role as these participants' teachers. Since we were present at all five observation experiences, facilitated the dialogue sessions, and conducted the semistructured interviews, our presence may have influenced the responses, if participants wanted to please the instructor-researchers who facilitated the experience. We encourage readers to interpret the findings with this in mind.

Findings and Discussion

The themes that emerged from our analysis included the following: (a) technology as a tool for diverse experiences, (b) self-reflection and questioning assumptions, and (c) evolving identities. Each theme is followed by a brief discussion.

Technology as a Tool for Diverse Experiences

Participants from Riley expressed appreciation for the opportunity to observe participants from Benton via Skype. This was in part because they were required to obtain a certain number of observation hours, and the opportunity to observe without having to travel was seen as a convenience. Caleb mentioned,

> We are in class during the times of regular school and that makes it hard for us to go out and do these observations while having class. With the Skype sessions, it makes it a lot more convenient.

Participant observers from Riley liked using Google Docs because they could "see other people's thoughts in real time" (Hayley). In contrast to in-person observations in the schools, Hayley stated, "I don't see other peoples' notes" and felt that the Google Doc was "an interesting way for me to see things I might have missed otherwise." Since Riley students were muted during the observations as not to disturb the lessons, they were able to "speak directly to the professor whenever you like" (Aaron). Caleb mentioned, "it gives us opportunities to ask questions when we may not otherwise be able to." Kelly mentioned, "[Our teacher] knows all the questions that need to be asked [and will] open up online for more discussion. That will make the experience that much more enriched when we don't know what questions to ask ourselves." Susan compared the online observation experience with the in-person observation experience:

> I like just being able to see how the teacher interacted with the student where there are no distractions around you. You just focus on the screen. When I observe a lesson in an actual school setting there are people walking the hallway. I'm kind of looking around;

> my mind kind of wanders. But I noticed I am very engaged when I am watching a Skype observation rather than being in a classroom.

In researcher journals, the authors noted that the first few observations and dialogue sessions were a bit awkward with not much dialogue between schools. Participants from Riley tended to ask very surface-level questions and participants from Benton often replied with short yes-and-no answers. In each of the five observations, there were many observers from Riley and only one participant being observed from Benton. This may have contributed to the awkwardness of the initial conversations. Colleen, a Benton participant, described how she was nervous the first time she was observed:

> Like I hadn't talked to them at all. I didn't know what they looked like. The second time I was observed by them I was a little more comfortable because I knew where they were coming from. I could see people my age. It was more of an experience. More like a peer observing me.

Participants from both schools reported learning from each other either through observations or postobservation dialogue. Caleb, a Riley participant, mentioned, "it was interesting to pick at their brains to understand what they were thinking in the lesson" and "it was interesting for me to see what they did in common or different and what they put into practice in lessons." The observed participants from Benton appreciated the opportunity to get feedback from the observing participants at Riley noting that their opinions and approaches are different from those they would receive from teachers and peers at their own institution:

> I think that it has been helpful because we obviously have a different style here. Every school has a different style. And I don't know much about what they take and how it's set up, so it's interesting to see what they focus on and what we focus on. Either or, one is not better than the other. Just different things we are focusing on, and that is beneficial. (Denise, a Benton College participant)

Discussion. Virtual observation and videoconferencing technology were designed to overcome limitations of face-to-face meetings and on-site observation. However, some participants reported difficulties in hearing and seeing parts of the lesson because of shortcomings in Skype technology and Internet speeds. The researchers also noted that initial discussions were awkward and not reflective of a community where individuals interacted comfortably with one another. It is difficult to determine if this was a function of technology serving as an artificial barrier to normal in-person interaction or simply that the observers and observed did not have adequate time to build relationships and trust prior to the first observation.

The use of this technology reduced travel costs, saved time, and maximized the potential for collaboration and discussion. Interactive Google Docs allowed observers to consider multiple perspectives in real time, while technology allowed the partnership to transcend geographical constraints. And while there are many studies of virtual

observation experiences, especially of students observing master teachers (Compton & Davis, 2010; Pickering & Walsh, 2011; Reese, 2015), this may be among the first to combine virtual observation with interactive online field notes, and for the observation to occur between peers at different institutions. The use of videoconferencing technology afforded Riley participants opportunities to converse with one another as well as their professor while the lesson was happening, allowing for a richer and more guided observation experience than might typically be possible with in-person observations. This outcome supports Conway's (2002) finding that observation experiences are most valuable when properly facilitated by a music teacher educator with a protocol that focuses on specific questions. As well, technology allowed for the observing, questioning, interacting, and sharing of practice among peers with different backgrounds, experiences, and assumptions that would not otherwise be available to students within the same institution.

Self-Reflection and Questioning Assumptions

The theme that was most apparent across all data sets was self-reflection. Participants expressed they became more self-aware, began to see beyond their local institutions, and started to identify and question their own assumptions about music education. Much of this self-reflection was inspired by differences in the pedagogy and curricula of the two music teacher education programs. The sense among the participants was that it was helpful to see different approaches and compare them with the approaches they receive from faculty and peers at their respective institutions. Denise, a Benton participant, explained,

> They had a lot of specific questions that really made me think about why I was doing certain things. Perhaps at [Riley] they focus on other things that at [Benton] we might not focus on or vice versa.

Being questioned by the observing participants from Riley made the observed participants from Benton more aware of what they were or were not doing. Colleen mentioned, "One student said, 'well why didn't you use the metronome?' and I was like 'why *didn't* I use a metronome?' So, the next lesson I went back and taught using a metronome." Brian mentioned, "the next week, I did a lot embouchure exercises with my student and I don't think I would have thought about it as much, if it weren't for the Skype sessions with Riley." This line of questioning helped the observed participants examine their tacit knowledge and compelled them to approach teaching with more intention.

The observations and dialogue sessions revealed to participants from both institutions previously unexamined assumptions about music teaching and learning. For instance, participants at Riley did not realize that pullout lessons are part of the school day in many states. Conversely, participants from Benton did not realize that many other states do not implement pullout lessons. Denise mentioned that it was beneficial to "get outside what I have known" and to "think about other approaches." Evan mentioned,

> I didn't realize I was playing a song while my students were packing up. I just did it because that is what I've been taught. For them to point that out, I thought it was just something you were supposed to do.

This cross-fertilization between participants from both institutions was often an affirmative experience. Aaron mentioned, "I think the opportunity to see other students teach from different schools is great because you get to really evaluate what they do and catch some similarities in your own teaching." Participants from Riley talked about how it was nice to see participants from Benton incorporate techniques into their teaching that they had been taught at their institution such as using popular music and keeping students actively engaged. Participants from Riley also mentioned that they planned on borrowing ideas from the Benton participants they observed:

> There was one moment this girl was teaching and as a reward for the student, she taught her a song she knew the student would be interested in. She was learning music as a reward for learning music, so I'll definitely borrow that. (Hayley)

While the observation and subsequent dialogue compelled participants from Benton to think about what they were doing because they knew they would be asked about it, the experience was a bit stressful at times. Evan noted, "I think it's good every once in a while, but if it was for every lesson, I might go crazy. The stress level would be a little bit higher."

Discussion. Similar to Smith's (1998) findings that we learn vicariously through observing and interacting with peers whom we wish to emulate, the findings in the current study suggest that participants believed the experience to be uniquely valuable, especially when compared with traditional observations of peers within their own institutions. While the roles of observer and observed were fixed, all participants became more self-aware through questioning and discussion. As with Burton's (2011) study, participants in the current study reexamined assumptions about teaching and learning and considered how their respective institutions were rooted in specific philosophies of education that may be different at other schools. Similar to Barry's (1996) findings, Benton participants reported being more intentional in their teaching, and being more self-aware of what they were doing and why. Both Riley and Benton participants experienced a balance of affirmation and challenge.

Evolving Identities

While self-reflection was evident in both observing participants and observed participants, teacher-identity developed mainly in the observed participants. Observed participants from Benton reported feeling like a teacher, gaining confidence, and developing a sense of pride. While the researchers' intentions were to foster dialogue between *peers* from different institutions, the fact that one group was observed and the other group was observers may have fostered a sense of expertise among the observed.

Moreover, Benton participants were a year older and were completing their field experience, which put them slightly ahead of their Riley counterparts. Colleen, a Benton participant, talked about how "It was really cool to talk to the *next generation* of teachers" and it "was really interesting to receive feedback from people who are actually younger than me."

Benton participants enjoyed being observed and dialoguing with the Riley participants afterward. Colleen expressed feeling like she was "contributing to a cause." Brian reported that knowing he was being observed by participants from a different institution inspired in him a sense of pride in his school and music education program:

> Whenever I knew I had a Skype conference, I had to have a really great plan and make sure it looked really nice. Like in the saxophone lesson, I really thought that through to make sure I represented [Benton] really well. It's like pride; we have a really great program and I want to show we are rockin' over here.

The observed participants seemed to want to impress the participants from Riley indicating, "it made me try to teach on a higher level" and "I looked at it like I can show off" (Evan). Brian, who was observed twice, reported wanting to showcase his improvement from one observation to the next, stating, "[I] really showed a lot of growth in that short amount of time and I think that was something I really noticed and I hope they noticed too."

Many participants who were observed indicated that the act of being observed changed their perspective. For instance, Evan talked about how, "It's kind of cool to be in the seat of being observed because it makes you think about different things than when you are actually observing." Colleen, a Benton participant, described how the process made her humbler:

> Just not take myself so seriously and think I'm all high and mighty. We're all that personality type we want to do something the first time right and right every time we do it. But it's learning to step back and having the humility to say that's a valid thing they are telling me to do, so that was a big thing too.

It was evident that participants from both institutions began to broaden their perspective of themselves in relation to others. For some participants, it was the first time they considered the music education community outside of their institution. A Riley participant, Aaron explained,

> The value is that we are getting the chance to see how people from other schools are doing things so we're not just secluding ourselves to what goes on at [Riley]. We're getting outside views. Being able to see how other people are doing things. The techniques we can use in our own teaching that we wouldn't normally get here.

Discussion. Similar to the findings of Haston and Russell (2012), participants in the current study, notably Benton participants, reported the impact their peers had on them, growing in confidence, and developing a teacher identity. They indicated that

they felt a sense of responsibility to the participants who were observing them much the way a mentor would feel toward a mentee. Similarly, they wanted to represent their school well in the eyes of others and took pride in the education they felt they had received. It seems that serving in the role of the observed increased their confidence and helped them identify more as teachers than as students. Riley participants, however, serving in the role of the observer, did not report the same growth in confidence, pride, and teacher identity. Instead, Riley participants reported an increased understanding that the profession is larger and more diverse than they had realized and extended beyond what they had experienced or previously considered. Affirming Rauch's and Whittaker's (1999) findings that student teachers value the opportunity to put themselves in their colleague's position and consider how they might handle particular situations in relation to their peers, it seems that growth for Riley participants was in imagining themselves in a similar phase of development in the near future and envisioning themselves as future teachers. Development of a teacher identity, for Riley participants, got one step closer and just a bit more tangible.

Implications for Music Teacher Education

While we certainly do not discount the importance of students observing exemplary in-service teachers and receiving feedback on their teaching from professionals, we agree with Smith (1998) that there is also value in peers observing peers—both from the perspective of the observer and the observed. Because peer interaction afforded Benton participants the opportunity to see themselves as teachers and Riley participants the opportunity to more clearly envision themselves in that role, we suggest that virtual peer observation and interaction across institutions might be a helpful supplement to traditional observation experiences. As the landscape of technology and online collaboration continues to evolve, we envision leveraging technology to deterritorialize learning spaces (Cremata & Powell, 2017) not only out of necessity or convenience but perhaps more importantly, to provide broader, richer, and more diverse experiences to students previously confined by location.

Conclusion

Similar to findings by Searby and Ewers (1997), participants in the current study felt peer observation affected the way they thought about approaching their future careers, reflected on their own preparation, and conceptualized promising practices with a larger network of music educators. Similar to Reese (2015), the partnership in the current study fostered a virtual community of learners that considered multiple perspectives on music teaching and learning, which we suggest helped increase participants' self-awareness and ability to question assumptions, as well as boost their self-confidence and help them further develop their teacher identities. However, these benefits may have more to do with the positioning of the participants as observer and observed than the nature of cross-institutional peer interaction or the technology that made such interaction possible. Originally, we envisioned a cross-fertilization among

peers from different backgrounds and experiences where participants from both schools would grow in similar ways. However, positioning Benton participants as the observed and Riley participants as the observers perhaps led to more of a hierarchical structure than an egalitarian community of learners we envisioned. It was within this structure, however, that we uncovered different experiences within the fixed roles of the observer and the observed. While all participants reported growth in self-awareness and ability to question assumptions, the observed developed stronger teacher identities and the observers learned vicariously through peers they wished to emulate. While we designated participants within each institution as either "the observers" or the "observed," others may find it equally or more beneficial to have students function in both roles.

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