**What, no form?**

(Phil Race)

This short paper is not really about ‘peer observation’, but something far better – simply sitting in someone else’s session, and having someone else sitting in yours. There are huge benefits to be obtained on both sides – particularly in watching how other people go about making learning happen, and seeing what works well for learners themselves – and what doesn’t.

First let me explain why I’m not just writing yet another piece about ‘peer observation’. There are problems with both words.

**Peer** is so often not just a real peer – it’s too often about a power imbalance. Sometimes it’s ‘inspectorial’ with someone with authority looking at someone with less experience. Sometimes it may be about strangers. Or sometimes it may be about mates, who are both going through the motions to give each other an easy time. It can be ‘expert’ versus novice. No harm in that, of course, if various things are in place.
A problem can be that the ‘peer’ who ‘observes’ comes in armed with a form (hence, the title of this little paper). Such a form may lay down an official observation agenda, to be filled in by the observer, and perhaps handed to someone else, or lodged in a system of some kind. This restricted agenda can kill most of the benefits which could otherwise have been realised by the session (not least that anything not on the form might go unnoticed.

**Observation** can also be interpreted in an inspectorial way. ‘Peer observation’ is even more threatening – it suggests that the ‘peer’ will be ‘observed’ very thoroughly. Just the best way, isn’t it, of bringing out the best? Hardly! And what of the learners themselves? It may be a change from the subject to see their teacher under stress. If they already like the teacher, they may feel sympathy and empathy. If they don’t like the teacher, they may feel a little joy. But neither of these are the intended learning outcomes of them sitting there. Now I’m not actually suggesting that no observation should occur – far from it – but that much more important things should be *noticed* than the peer. Actually, the verb *noticing* is far wider, deeper than merely ‘observing’, and far more socially acceptable among fellow-humans.

So this paper isn’t about peer observation – but more important, it isn’t about the ‘forms’ which often accompany such processes. In early 2016 there was a productive flurry on the SEDA mailbase about peer observation **forms,** and it’s to divert you from such forms that I’m writing this paper. I plead guilty to having written and edited a fair bit about such forms in the past, but now that I’m older and wiser I’m trying to atone for this misdemeanour. Put it down to the benefits of hindsight and experience.

**The benefits**

The ‘person sitting in’ (not to use the term ‘observer’) benefits hugely. They see things that work well in other people’s sessions, and can think ‘I can do this too with my learners’ or ‘I know how I can build on this in my own context’. And they see things that don’t work well, and can think ‘I must remember not to do this’, or ‘I can now see why this doesn’t work’. And these thoughts are before a jot has been made on a form, or online checklist. These benefits accrue to *noticing* what the teacher is doing, but even more important, to what the students are doing. The person sitting in may of course jot down the occasional personal-action-planning note for their own later use.

The benefits are also about *feelings.* It’s ever so useful to be reminded about how students actually feel sitting in learning situations. One can notice what engages students, what bores them, what excites them, what amuses them, what puzzles them – the list is endless. The person sitting-in may also notice how other teachers feel. One may notice their passion, their anxiety, their expertise, their responsiveness, their tricks, their hesitances, their triumphs – another endless list. Yes, these all *could* have been entered onto a form – but what a forbidding endless form that would have been!

**Some things that can work well**

The benefits of sitting in on others sessions can occur in all sorts of circumstances.

**Mutuality and reciprocality** – sitting in alternately on each other’s sessions. I strongly commend this. It should never be one-sided. No-one is so almighty that they don’t need to share with others how they go about what they do – and vice-versa.

**Crossing disciplines** – everything can work better when in someone else’s subject. This avoids the distraction of getting sidetracked about thinking of the subject matter at the expense of *noticing* all those other important things. And it avoids the complication of the teacher feeling that subject expertise is being judged by someone who may be more expert than them in the subject.

**Not just ‘lectures’.** Many peer-observation forms have been developed for this particular context. But a great deal of learning happens in small-group sessions such as tutorials or seminars, and in one-to-one discussions, and online dialogue, field trips, laboratories, tests, debates – another endless list. So why indeed have I been using the term ‘sitting-in’ when it could be walking around? No doubt because of that dreadful historical background that forms are easier to fill in sitting down?

**Feedback and feed-forward**

These are of course among the most important benefits that the person who is being ‘observed’ can derive from each session. In particular, the informal conversation which may occur after the session – and indeed any conversations preceding the session, where expectations may be clarified and shared. In these conversations, there are factors such as tone of voice, encouraging smiles, empathetic recognition of common problems, body language, the ability to clarify using dialogue not monologue, sharing of experiences using stories – and many other things that would never have got themselves onto a piece of paper or an online checklist.

**So what records should be kept?**

Not the forms – there haven’t been any forms (so far). This paper has been about learning and development. How can this be measured? Good question, but as long as it has happened, does it really matter about measuring it? (If you *can* measure it, it probably isn’t it!). Perhaps is could be useful to record who sat in on whose sessions, on what, where and when and how often. Such measurements may be a reasonable proxy for the *potential* development that could have occurred.

**Oh, please, just *one* form?**

Yes. Alright. But one composed entirely by the person running the session. This could list what they would like feedback on, what they would like to be praised, and what they would like help on. This could be long or short. This could have a space for ‘what *else* did you notice?’ This would be different every time during their teaching pathway. This would also be private between them and the person sitting in on their session. It could well be a starting point for the learning conversation to follow, or an aide-memoire to that discussion. It would not be devised for widespread use in a system of peer-observation. Nor would it be filed or archived by anyone other than the person whose session is was about. And above all, keep *noticing.* Keep noticing *learners.*

Don’t let the pieces of paper, or online checklists get in the way of development.