Introduction
The authors, although a decade apart, both studied law at undergraduate level under the auspices of the traditional didactic teaching method; lectures were given - with varying communication skills - by skilled academics with immense technical expertise, lecture notes were taken zealously and tutorials attended with a mixture of dread and a desire for enlightenment. We both became interested in other teaching and learning methods when we pursued our own careers in academia.

Through engagement with the Centre for Teaching and Learning at the University of Limerick, we learned that while many lecturers in law are continuing to use the didactic method, universities are moving away from traditional methods of teaching and towards a greater emphasis on the learning experience. Increasingly academics are utilising different teaching methods and students are expecting, even demanding, different learning experiences. A seismic change has taken place in terms of student expectations and third level education norms since we graduated in 1988 and ???.

We both wanted to improve our teaching and try to meet those student expectations and so we embarked on a peer observation exercise.

Teaching and Learning
There are many popular approaches to the review of teaching and learning methods. In most universities, facilities for the improvement of teaching, such as observation by a centre for teaching and learning (CTL), are available. Student feedback is another mechanism which is often put forward as a useful tool for quality control. Having utilised a number of those tools for the improvement of teaching, we found peer observation to be the most rewarding and instructive. Some short observations should be made on those other tools;

Student Feedback
Student feedback is very useful for gauging the learning experience of a particular group of students at a particular time. However, we noted that using in engaging with this review method, involved there were a number of drawbacks. First, the time lapse from the provision of feedback to the report being issued can be so long, that the student feedback can be out of date and the module complete. Then the students are dissatisfied, having given their time to the process but not having gained anything from it.

It is also unsatisfactory for the lecturer not to have the opportunity to respond to that group. This being the said, the positive aspects such as anonymity and independence can not be ignored.

CTL Video Observation
One author also engaged in video observation, and again found this useful. However all feedback was capable of being contested on the grounds that the circumstances were so artificial that the teaching was not representative of her usual communication skills. Additionally, the feedback of an expert in the teaching of a language, for example, or any other subject may not be as valuable as the feedback of a lecturer who teaches the same discipline of law.

So, with many of the methods, such as student feedback, there seems to be a lack of objectivity or an availability of grounds on which to contest the findings.
Peer observation is the tool we found most useful in engaging with our teaching and learning. We took part in a pilot scheme for which we volunteered at University of Limerick and found it made a great contribution to our professional experiences.

The process was essentially a three stage one and the role of the facilitator was found to be critical, as was the choice of observing colleague. In the presence of trust between all three, peer observation can be instructive, rewarding and motivating.

1. What is it?

David Gosling identifies three different forms of Peer observation and they are the evaluation, the development and the collaborative models. Gosling describes these three models as follows: the evaluation model is where the observation is carried out by senior staff or auditors, the development model is where observation is carried out by educational experts and the collaborative is carried out by a fellow teacher, a true peer. The one we used in our university was the collaborative model.

2. What does the collaborative method of peer observation involve? The first requirements are to identify the:

a. Facilitator – the selection of a facilitator who is independent of each peer and of the school is important. That is important to ensure the confidentiality of the process. The facilitator must be versed in the risks of peer observation and sensitive to the self-exposure involved but s/he must also be trusted and independent. Any academic can only be meaningfully observed by a trusted colleague. There is a degree of self-revelation involved in peer observation and for that reason, the colleague must be one whose discretion and whose judgment are trusted.

b. Trusted colleague – Any academic can only be meaningfully observed by a trusted colleague. There are particular issues about which you have concerns before the observation can be useful but the results can be surprising too.

c. Issues you have with your teaching. You may seek feedback on your pace, tone or even dependence on notes. Identifying particular issues about which you have concerns before the observation can be useful.

3. How was the process carried out?

We found that another vitally important element to ensure that the Peer Observation is run smoothly is to have a formal process. Our experience involved five separate stages, each of which was invaluable to the procedure.

a. Meeting with Facilitator

As Peer Observation was a new process being introduced in our University, we met with the independent facilitator. The process of Peer Observation was explained, what problems might occur, and how these problems might be overcome. This meeting was vital to ensure that we were all “singing from the

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1 Peer Observation of Teaching, David Gosling, Staff and Educational Development Association, Seda paper 118, page 14.
same hymn sheet”, and it fostered trust between us and the facilitator, and between the two faculty members.

b. Meeting of Observers
While oftentimes, the two individuals involved will know each other very well, and spend time with each other informally, we found that setting aside a formal time to meet was important to the process. At this meeting, each party set out what their aims were, any particular element of their teaching they wanted examined, any worries they might have, and what the subject matter of the lecture was.

c. Observation
Here, each party sat in on the other’s lectures, observing their teaching. A number of points can be made here. First, you are not observing the content of the lecture, rather the manner in which it is being delivered. Secondly, the observer should observe not only the lecturer but also the class: are the students energised by the topic or bored; are they taking notes; do they seem to understand the material. Third, it is important for the observed party to explain to the class that it is the lecturer being scrutinised, and not the students – this is particularly important where students are being asked to volunteer information, so that they are comfortable enough to do so.

d. Second meeting of Observers
It is important that this happen as promptly as possible after the observation exercise. However, a slight time delay, such as a week from the observation exercise is instructive for both parties but once that is achieved, the second meeting should take place while ideas are fresh and the observed is still open to the feedback. At this stage parties feed back on their general impressions of the teaching, and also the particular points raised by the observed.

First, the observed should give an indication as to how they felt the class went: were they nervous due to the attendance of the peer; were the students affected by the presence of the observer. The observer then feeds back their impressions to the observed. It is important that the language used here is not overtly negative. Indicating what you thought positive about the experience before giving constructive criticism is another tool to make the observed feel comfortable receiving the information.

e. Facilitator meeting independently
Following from the feedback meeting, each person meets with the facilitator independently. Any problems that arose in the process can be discussed, and which can then be resolved by the facilitator.

4. Why did we think it was worthwhile?
   a. Confidence in teaching abilities; As regards the feedback which is positive, the exercise can greatly enhance the confidence of the observed. It is also hugely motivating to receive any feedback.
   b. Can’t ignore those things you know you’re doing wrong; To receive suggestions for improvement of your teaching from a trusted colleague
and fail to act on them seems very foolish and half of the benefit of the exercise would be lost. Having said that, as the observer you still learn because you get ideas from a colleague about their teaching styles.

Peer observation also provides a source of ideas on teaching methods – unless the colleague is a very bad communicator, they are likely to employ some devices which you can emulate and learn from.

c. Another benefit is that faculty hear and know that you are a good teacher and that is something which is otherwise not measurable and little known.

d. The exercise was found to be even more useful by one of the authors when undertaken to assess the success of the introduction of a new method of teaching.

e. We found that we had blind spots in relation to certain aspects of our teaching and were overly self critical in respect of other aspects. There were therefore surprises in the feedback.

5. If someone else is doing it, what would we suggest?

   a. **Choose a trusted colleague who is not**
      i. Sycophantic or
      ii. Overly critical

   b. **Seek the support of Faculty**
      i. Once two people do it, it can then develop into something the rest of faculty do – each department needs a pair of guinea pigs to get started! The other point to bear in mind is that the peer observation does not have to be reciprocal, so one who has already been observed might oblige another colleague by observing them.

   c. **Feedback Form**
      i. Contents – this is the meeting agenda and so the contents are very important.
      ii. How to Use - the instructions are very important because of the time lag between the pre-observation meeting and the final feedback and form filling exercises. The form must capture the mood of the exercise and be carefully worded.
      iii. Be aware of possible uses to which the form may be put in the future. It may be included by you in your teaching portfolio and if there’s an aspect on which you wish to improve, you may decide to repeat the exercise and include the second form too, showing how you improved on the first observation.

Further Possibilities

The peer observation exercise could also be used as part of a 360° review if you wished to add such to your teaching portfolio.

Future pressures on teaching

An increased level of competition in Ireland for access to professional training is obvious in the difficulty students have in securing traineeships at law firms. That is one of the factors which has caused us to review our programmes and to consider
lawyering modules and small group teaching. While that may be commendable, most faculty may have no experience of delivering such teaching and learning methods. The use of Peer Observation could help to build confidence for such developments.

The Bologna process also encourages the use of case studies, active learning and problem-based learning. The move might move that to end.

**Contrasting secondary level education**

The extent to which we needed, as law students, to proactively seek out information was highlighted by a contrast with the secondary level education system. It was that sudden need for independent research and consultation of materials that marked the move to third level education. But the differences are many and the absence of “spoon-feeding” was just one. Others are that at secondary level of education in Ireland teachers receive extensive training in the art of teaching and communication. In addition checks are in place, at secondary level, in the form of schools inspectors etc. At third level neither of these apply and students do not wish lectured “at”, take copious notes and then seek to find and digest materials. Technology may well have shortened attention spans but could also be said to have increased expectations of efficiency, deeper learning and sensory experiences, less passive learning and to have brought an impatience with the purely theoretical. It seems perfectly legitimate for students to therefore want problem-based learning, seminars, student-led learning, moot trials, business law clinics and other learning experiences of a less theoretical variety.

**Conclusion**

Peer observation can make a very positive contribution to your personal experience as an academic. The benefits will accrue to you, to your teaching and to your students. At undergraduate level particularly, when lecturers try to inspire and ignite an interest in law students, those teaching skills are critical.