Observers' Experiences of Remote Observations of Teaching Practice in a College Context

Colin Christie
University of Aberdeen

Abstract
This small-scale case study examines the use of remote lesson observations and lesson feedback in the Teaching Qualification in Further Education (TQFE) course at a university in the North of Scotland. Successful completion of the course by lecturers working in Colleges of Further Education enables them to register with the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS), which is a requirement.

The remote observations were introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic when it was impossible to undertake face-to-face visits. In the main, these comprised joining synchronous online sessions or watching asynchronous recordings. Feedback discussions took place online at a mutually convenient time.

Data collection tools comprised a questionnaire and focus groups with university tutors and college co-tutors. Data was analysed using a thematic coding approach and discussed in terms of benefits and drawbacks. Drawbacks included an inability to 'get a feel' for learning, see learners' reactions and also make informal connections in the institution. Benefits included efficiencies in terms of travel time and cost and the ability to schedule flexibly, as well as a perceived increased openness, honesty and depth of reflection in the post-lesson discussion. Suggestions are made for consideration of possible hybrid models for future observations and discussions.

Keywords
Remote observations; post-lesson discussions; COVID-19.

Introduction
This paper focuses on the changes to the mode of lesson observations during the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. These shifted from face-to-face to being entirely online. The context for the observations is the Teaching Qualification for Further Education (TQFE) at a university in the North-East of Scotland. The qualification is for further education college lecturers working in a number of different colleges across Scotland. The TQFE is a programme of study accredited by the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS), part of which requires successful completion of two observations of teaching practice in a college setting.

The COVID-19 pandemic changed the mode of teaching and learning in both the university and the college settings and was characterised as an emergency situation (Quezada, Talbot and Quezada-Parker, 2020; Osman, 2020). Many classes shifted to synchronous online formats, or blended learning with a mix of formats. This had an impact on the delivery of the TQFE, both for the sessions facilitated by university sessions and the college-based observations. Whilst in the past observations were almost without exception completed in person at a college site, in 2020-21 arrangements were made for a range of options, including synchronous and asynchronous online remote observations.

Previous research into remote observation of synchronous classes suggested that this was a viable alternative to face-to-face observation for the assessment of teaching practice (Dyke et al., 2008). Indeed, in some cases evidence suggested that the same helpful feedback and insights resulted from

online observations as from face-to face ones (Ault *et al.*, 2019) as well as comparable evaluations of practice (Dymond et al., 2008). In other cases, it was evident that the online observations did not provide the full experience that face-to-face ones (Chilton and McCracken, 2017). As a depth of empirical evidence from the experiences of observers across a range of remote observation approaches is currently lacking, it is hoped that this case study will add further to the picture.

This small-scale case study research explores the experiences of college and university observers of teaching practice in colleges, focusing on the TQFE programme. It seeks to provide evidence to inform future practice in colleges and universities offering similar programmes. It is an interpretative qualitative study and takes an exploratory approach to provide descriptions of the remote observation process and the observers' perspectives of these. The project is underpinned by a shared vision within the TQFE team of equity-oriented pedagogy (Kukulska-Hulme *et al.*, 2021). It is focused on the research question: What are observers' perceptions of the experiences of remote observation of teaching practice in a college context?

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a rapid switch to online learning, with ongoing physical restrictions in classrooms and local lockdowns resulting in a challenge to find a suitable, pragmatic alternative to face-to-face, in-person observations in the physical college classroom or workshop. In addition, the ongoing changing landscape in further education (FE) meant that more of the vocational education provision was being delivered as online-only learning (Davis, Gough and Taylor, 2019). This called for a response from the university TQFE team to find a system to switch from live, face-to-face observations and feedback discussions to online observations and discussions.

This pragmatic need to adapt practice provided a unique opportunity to meet the professional expectation of engaging with and in research to inform and enhance practice. As teacher educators, each member of the TQFE team maintains their registration with the GTCS so this very much tied in with the professional standard requirement for teachers in Scotland to include a focus on enquiry and research to develop practice (GTCS, 2021). This is also reflected in the Professional Standards for Lecturers in Scotland's Colleges (GTCS, 2018, p.6) which requires engagement with research and collaborative professional enquiry to "enhance the student experience".

Insights from Literature
The literature highlights both benefits and issues around remote observations and discussions. The sources explored have their context mainly in remote areas of the United States of America and Australia. Benefits identified fall into two main categories: practical aspects and changes in the quality of the observation and feedback process.

Practical benefits identified are the travel time saved, especially where university tutors previously had to make long journeys to visit student teachers in rural areas (Gruenhagen, McCracken and True, 1999; Kelly and Bishop, 2013; Wash et al., 2014; Van Boxtel, 2017), even needing to allocate an entire day for one observation (Hager, Baird and Spriggs, 2012). It also meant ease of access to more remote placements (Ault et al., 2019). In contrast to previous practice where two observations might have to take place in the same week, online observation meant that these could be spaced out over the semester (Schmidt et al., 2015). In one setting, it meant that students could remain in their home communities for their placement (Gruenhagen, McCracken and True, 1999). Some institutions turned this further to their advantage by using the time saved to add in additional visits (Hager, Baird and Spriggs, 2012) or to use multiple observers for an observation (Heafner et al., 2011; MacMahon et al., 2019). This was particularly the case in the observation of students in rural areas. Observations could be more frequent (Falconer and Lignugaris/Kraft, 2002; MacMahon et al., 2019) and this had the advantage that the focus was not simply on the one observed lesson which meant that what was observed was not just a snapshot of a student's practice (Hager, Baird and Spriggs, 2012). A linked

benefit was that more contact was possible between the tutor and the student as a result of the online nature of the interactions (Gruenhagen, McCracken and True, 1999; Falconer and Lignugaris/Kraft, 2002; Kelly and Bishop, 2013). Murtagh (2021) takes this idea further and talks in terms of an increase in autonomy and agency for both the student teachers and the supervisors through the way they can determine how frequently and flexibly contact between them happens.

In general, the use of online supervision offered greater flexibility and convenience (Van Boxtel, 2017). A further benefit was that time was freed up for tutors to engage in other activities not necessarily related to student teacher supervision but covering, for example other teaching, research and scholarly activities. Clearly, a related practical benefit of online observations and feedback was the advantage that less financial outlay was required by institutions in funding travel and accommodation expenses of tutors (Heafner et al., 2011; Van Boxtel, 2017).

In terms of the quality of the observation and feedback process, the literature notes that the observation experience was less intimidating and less stressful for students overall (Van Boxtel, 2017), less intrusive (Falconer and Lignugaris/Kraft, 2002; Bolton, 2010; Heafner et al., 2011; Liang, 2015). MacMahon et al. (2019) state that student teachers felt that the observation was more natural and authentic and Liang (2015) states that is reduced reactivity. It also resulted in lower student anxiety (Wash et al., 2014; MacMahon et al., 2015) and Falconer and Lignugaris/Kraft (2002) put this down to feeling under more scrutiny during a face-to-face observation. This was linked to the more discrete presence of a camera compared with the physical presence of a tutor in the classroom setting and interns reported forgetting about the presence of the camera and this promoted more real teaching and less of a performance (Heafner et al., 2011). Whilst technology is often seen as a limitation, usually in respect of its non-functioning, as discussed below, it is interesting that here it affords a distinct advantage. Indeed, it is even suggested that for some student teachers their self-confidence was improved as a result of the online observation process (Van Boxtel, 2017). However, Gruenhagen, McCracken and True (1999) counter this advantage by saying that the camera movements were distracting for student teachers. This would clearly only apply where mobile cameras were used. A further advantage to the online supervision process is the stopping, pausing and reviewing of the resultant recording (Marsh and Mitchell, 2014; Van Boxtel, 2017). Furrthermore, student teachers did note that they missed that personal, face-to-face contact with the university supervisor (Gruenhagen, McCracken and True, 1999). As this was in a period before the pandemic, it had, however, been possible to mitigate this with previous on-site contact with the named supervisor.

In respect of the post-lesson discussion, at the minimum the technology allowed for meaningful feedback (Schmidt et al., 2015). Beyond this, more relaxed and thoughtful reflection as a result of the online environment was noted (Murtagh, 2021). This came as a result of one of the factors mentioned above, namely that observation feedback covered more than one lesson and so was more holistic. The conclusion of Van Boxtel (2017) is that the online experience was 'viable, equally effective, and even preferred over face-to-face observations.' (p.188) and Heafner et al. (2011) emphasise how the face-to-face and online observations are comparable with each other. MacMahon et al. (2019) go as far to say that the credibility of the feedback is improved due to the more natural and more authentic observation process and this is supported by Liang (2015) who claims that the reduced reactivity and observer effect in the observation makes the information gathered more accurate and credible.

As for issues, or drawbacks, these also centred around two main areas: the inability to replicate the face-to-face situation and issues with the technology. One main issue with the way in which the online setting cannot replicate the face-to-face setting is the difficulty of gauging the atmosphere in the classroom (Gruenhagen, McCracken and True, 1999; Falconer and Lignugaris/Kraft, 2002; Dyke et al., 2008; Marsh and Mitchell, 2014). This is clearly something which is not only observed but physically felt and sensed, so it would be clear that this would be impossible to perceive online. Another element

of this is the failure to be able to pick up clues about the whole school setting and any issues with the school environment which might have an impact on a student's placement experience (Dyke et al., 2008; Chilton and McCracken, 2017). Spontaneous meetings did not happen. Whilst this might not directly affect the student's observation experience, it may be something which would impact negatively on the supervisor's ability to make connections and draw on the expertise of others (MacMahon et al., 2019).

Issues with the functioning of the technology were also highlighted, perhaps inevitably. One such was a period of adjustment required to get used to the equipment (Gruenhagen, McCracken and True, 1999). This issue could, however, be overcome through exposure to the technology and with good technical support in place. More specific issues, such as the uploading of the videos were also highlighted (Van Boxtel, 2017).

Research Approach
The project took the form of a case study due to the fact that it focused on one course and it was intended to capture a rich variety of descriptive material (Bassey, 1999, p.23), even if on a small scale. Focus groups were selected as an important research tool due to usefulness for generating data quickly and in particular on attitudes, values and opinions (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, p.436). Whilst it is difficult to generalise from a case study, this form "does not preclude some kind of generalizability beyond the specific setting studied." (Robson, 2002, p.177). Indeed, recommendations are made at the end of this paper and the case study is an appropriate form for a 'step to action' (Bassey, 1999, p.23). The research consisted firstly of analysis of the observation modes, based on the observation report forms. Secondly, questionnaires were sent to university and college tutors, with a mixture of closed and more open-ended questions. There were follow-up focus groups with college tutors and university tutors. One element which was missing was the student perspective. Unfortunately, this was not possible due to ethical approval not being available for work with students whilst they were still completing a qualification.

The overall study sought to establish the following:

- the approaches to remote observation that have been experienced
- the benefits of remote observation for observers
- the problems that observers have encountered when undertaking remote observation
- suggestions for the development of practice in conducting professional conversations about teaching practice online
- how experiences of remote observation compare with face to face

Analysis made use of the process of reflexive thematic analysis constant comparison of qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2022) to reveal key insights. This began with familiarisation with the data and subsequent coding of data led to the generation of initial themes. The latter were developed, refined and reviewed in preparation for writing up of the findings and are detailed in the findings section below.

Ethical approval for the project was gained through the institutional approval process. Participants were informed of the details of the project orally and via a consent sheet. Participants were asked for their informed consent in writing and had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. They were also able to ask any questions about the research. Responses were anonymised and stored securely on the university server. Only the researcher had access to this space.

Findings
The following different types of observation were carried out by tutors in the following contexts:

1. Teaching synchronous face to face on campus (observer joins online or in person)
2. Teaching synchronous online (observer joined online group)
3. Asynchronous recording made by lecturer of a synchronous face to face session on campus (observer views recording)
4. Asynchronous recording made by lecturer of a synchronous online session (observer views recording)
5. Synchronous face to face on campus with students joining remotely (observer joins in person on campus) (Blended approach).

An analysis of the types of observation undertaken revealed the following:

Table 1. Analysis of the types of observation undertaken**.**

Total number of observations undertaken	263
1: teaching synchronous face to face on campus (observer joins online or in person)	23 (8.7%)
2: teaching synchronous online (observer joined online group)	117 (44.4%)
3: asynchronous recording made by lecturer of a synchronous face to face session on campus (observer views recording)	54 (20.5%)
4: asynchronous recording made by lecturer of a synchronous online session (observer views recording)	64 (24.3%)
5: synchronous face to face on campus with students joining remotely (observer joins in person on campus) (Blended approach).	2 (0.8%)
9: mode not documented	3 (1.2%)

In addition, two college co-tutors undertook 'blended' observations involving both online and face to face students at the same time – a category that was not on our original list.

Data from the questionnaire and focus groups were analysed and coded, as stated above, in order to identify emerging themes. The initial analysis showed that 'benefits', 'challenges' and 'associated emotions' were overarching themes for further examination. These were then developed and refined to the following: the very practical benefits and challenges (for example regarding time, travel, use of technology); benefits and challenges which impacted the quality of the observation itself (for example concerning the ability to capture the classroom interactions and the mood); benefits and challenges which impacted the quality of the post-lesson discussion (for example around the setting, the focus and nature of the discussion); and finally associated emotions and personal qualities, particularly in the context of the discussion.

Firstly, looking at findings from the questionnaire, benefits mirrored the two main categories reflected in the literature, namely practical ones and ones about the quality of the experience. In terms of practical benefits, respondents noted that observations were easier to arrange and schedule because, in the case of recordings, they did not have to be at a mutually convenient time. They also drew out how both time and expense were saved due to the fact that there was no need to travel and more sessions could be fitted in. Linked to these practical benefits, there was also reference made to the idea of increased agency and autonomy in Murtagh's (2021) article as students had greater flexibility to choose the class for the observation. Some felt that recordings were beneficial in that these allowed

both the observer and the observee to watch these back to improve their insight but also to strengthen reflection in preparation for the post-lesson discussion.

The observations themselves, also as mentioned in the literature, were felt to be less intrusive on the one hand. This was due to the way in which the observer could be 'truly non-participant' and discreetly. This does, however, contrast with one response which stated that the observer felt more integrated into the taught session as a result of joining breakout rooms. Another response states as follows:

> *I was surprised how involved I felt in the lesson even though it was online, especially in the breakout groups.*

It suggests that the observers in these cases see themselves in more of a participant role than an objective observer. In each case, the suggestion is that the online environment enabled the observer to adopt the role which they would have done in the live, face-to-face classroom. This is backed up by another comment that an observer felt able to replicate the face-to-face experience 'in most respects.' Indeed, the theme of how the face-to-face context could *not* be reproduced also came across as questionnaire returns echoed the issue raised in the literature, namely the fact that it was 'challenging to get a 'feel' for the learning' and that the view of the classroom was less than optimal due to the camera angle or the sound quality.

As regards the post-lesson discussion aspect of the online experience, respondents felt that there was more time for this as the time was more convenient. This suggests that the discussion did not have to be curtailed early but could run its natural course due to the lack of a time constraint. It was felt that there was still a good level of reflection and engagement in the discussion and also a 'good personal connection.' This latter comment shows that the fact that a discussion is online does not mean that a rapport cannot be established and that the exchange needs to be impoverished.

Some comments were made about the overall experience of the online context. It was noted how they were different from the face-to-face experience but still every bit as valuable. One person saw it as a learning experience as they adapted to the new setting. One of the questionnaire questions asked respondents for advice for the future. These fell into several different categories and reflected previous categories, covering practical issues but also those affecting rapport and quality of the discussion. In terms of practicalities, some said it was important to be prepared for things to go wrong with technology and accept that this will be the case. Furthermore, another recommended using the advantage of online observation in one's own space to type up observations notes as the observation was in progress. Preparation was commented upon, as some respondents emphasised the importance of watching any recordings not too long before the feedback session and to use this time to plan the discussion. On the more affective side, some recommended keeping calm and enjoying the experience and also meeting the observee in advance in order to offer reassurance. Another highlighted how this affective side was just as important to the online setting as it had been in the face-to-face one:

> *No change from pre-Covid: be kind & make the candidate feel at ease for more productive [feedback] discussion*

Three final and interesting points are ones which come up again in the focus group discussions and which are quite isolated in terms of the questionnaire responses but which are themes which recur in the focus group discussions. Firstly, one comment emphasises the need to tease out the context of the lesson:

> *Take adequate time early in the professional conversation to discuss the context of the lesson*

This is then taken up again in the focus groups as both a negative and a positive aspect of online observation. Another comment focuses on the subject of the discussion in the online setting as potentially drifting from the traditional focus of pedagogy to the technology, given that the latter is such a key aspect during the COVID period. The respondent is underlining the need to still make the pedagogy the mainstay of the discussion:

The discussion can still focus on the key elements of pedagogy not just the technology.

Finally, there is a comment which looks ahead, as we shall do in the discussion, to reframing the whole model of observation. This echoes the view in the literature that a positive aspect of online is the ability to move beyond the snapshot of one observed lesson. Whilst this opportunity was not taken in the context of this research, the below is a pointer that this might be something to consider for the future:

Our traditional one-hour whole class observation model will not always be the best approach

The co-tutor focus group brought out multiple benefits and challenges of the online observations and discussions. As in the literature and the questionnaire, the very practical aspects were highlighted. Participants talked about how the post-lesson discussion was easier to arrange online as a quiet space did not have to be found and calendar time could be blocked out. Implicit here is that once an online meeting is scheduled and in progress, it is much harder for an external, work interruption to take place. This might be in contrast to the college setting where someone could need to access a room or come in to ask an urgent question.

In terms of the feedback, the private, personal nature of the discussion came through strongly:

It was a proper private conversation

The way that the online environment provided an informal, safe space was stressed, in contrast to the more 'professional' feeling of the on-campus setting. One respondent described how the informal setting at home, including the contextual aspects of knocks at the door, pets being around and even a more relaxed posture in the chair set the scene for a removal of barriers which leads in turn to a more open and reflective discussion. This private nature of the conversation was linked clearly to the improved quality of the reflection:

Making it a private experience helped the quality of the discussion because it was a trusted place, a trusted discussion

The improved quality of the discussion was described in terms of being more thought-provoking, more in-depth than previously, more reflective and also honest. This enhanced discussion is described in terms which were quite marked and which suggest a more holistic, therapeutic aspect:

There was the air of a confessional to the feedback discussions

The more relaxed situation almost made [the feedback sessions] be more cathartic and relaxed… [they were] less of an assessment… an unburdening

One could show emotion by bursting into tears. [That] would not have happened on campus but it did at home in the living room with a cup of tea

These comments link to the feeling that the building of a relationship with the observee was still very possible in the online context. One participant said they had had reservations about the ability to build a rapport online but that rapport had been just as good as in the face-to-face situation. Connected to the theme of trust and honesty is the fact that observees did not 'cherry pick' the recorded sessions they shared with their observer but were happy to share as required.

Some respondents focused on how online observations allowed the possibility of scheduling the feedback session at a time more removed from the observation. This gave more time to organise the feedback and collate meaningful ideas. A benefit unique to the context of the emergency switch to online learning is the way that the observer as well as the observe felt that they were learning about this new online environment:

Technology was a great leveller… the observer was not the expert in the same way

It was thought that the observer was learning too, from the ideas brought by the observee, and sharing them round. This cross-fertilisation meant that the observer did not need to be a 'guru.' As such, it was a 'two-way process.' One participant said that they felt humble as a result of also having problems with the technology. Challenges around the online context focused firstly on the fact that online work takes a lot of concentration and energy. It can be draining and it is harder to maintain focus.

In respect of the observation experience itself, there was discussion about the experience of observing online breakout rooms. Respondents had reservations about being in the breakout rooms virtually with students, saying that it 'was awkward', 'created a false situation', that it was 'hard to hide as an observer', that they 'felt like an intruder' or that it 'felt a bit wrong to be in breakout rooms' or 'felt like spying.' One respondent summarised that the concentration required and the nature of being an intruder in the breakout rooms actually changed the nature of the observation. There were also familiar comments made about the limitations of the camera angle and the inability to see the whole class in recordings of on-campus sessions. It was also felt that the recordings were not as good as the live sessions.

It was noted how the discussion often had a different focus. Talking about connectivity or the technology in general shifted the focus of the feedback and made it more difficult to keep the talk on practice. There were also other ways in which the discussion took a different turn from previously. It was noted that the discussion had to focus on areas not formerly so important due to the online learning environment. One example was questioning and why this elicited a lack of response from students online, something which would have been quite unlikely in the face-to-face setting. One respondent said that these points did not necessarily diminish the quality of the discussion but meant it was simply different:

It had a different focus but not [less] quality, just a different quality

The university tutor focus group showed benefits which have merged from the literature and from previous responses. The process was seen as a very efficient one compared to the face-to-face one. As previously identified, the online discussions felt less 'squeezed in' timewise than the on-campus ones. Even the lack of need to move between rooms after the observation was seen as an advantage.

Once again, the improved quality of the post-lesson discussion came through very strongly. This was described as open and honest, and the online discussions were described as more relaxed. As identified by the co-tutor focus group, it was considered that the informality of the conversations gave the discussion a more honest feel and more of the nature of a chat. The discussions were also 'deeper and more focused', and one respondent noted how a difficult conversation was easier to have online.

An advantage of online recordings was the ability to pause these. The downsides to this were also seen, however. One tutor said that the whole process took longer due to the pausing and rewinding of the observation. There was also the fact that a university tutor might be less focused in giving feedback if they switched their work to the online discussion, fitting it around other work they were doing. Indeed, one tutor said they blocked two 1-hour sessions (observation and feedback) to replicate the face-to-face situation and maintain focus.

Challenges identified were the loss of context, atmosphere and associations in the classroom. This was, however, also seen as a positive. The very lack of context in the observation itself gave more of a 'way in' to the discussion. The observer could ask questions about the context which were a good starting point for the observee to open up and this would potentially bring issues relating to the individual class or group to the fore. In terms of the observer's feedback, making the context more explicit and hearing about it from the observee avoided some assumptions being made.

Discussion
Findings from the questionnaires, college co-tutor and university focus groups throw up some key, common themes. Firstly, that online observation brings with it efficiencies in terms of time spent travelling and the cost which this incurs. It also means that rooms do not have to be found in the institution where feedback can take place. This aligns strongly with the literature (for example). A course can choose to use these savings to offer additional observation opportunities to student teachers and this can have the advantage that tutors gain more of an overview of practice rather than a single snapshot (Dymond et al., 2008; Hager, Baird and Spriggs, 2012). The fact that a feedback session does not happen on campus can have the advantage that it feels less 'squeezed in' and opens up the possibility of a richer feedback experience. The possibility of scheduling this at a later time is also an advantage and, although this was the case with only a small number of tutors in this study, also means observers and observees can replay and review a videoed session (Marsh and Mitchell, 2014). There might, however, be drawbacks to this as it might be tempting for an observing tutor to fit observations and feedback around other work and lose their focus on the observation and feedback process itself. This is an interesting angle which did not arise in the literature reviewed.

The observation process itself did come with benefits but these do not seem to be as clear cut as the purely practical ones around travel and finance. One benefit to would appear to depend on one's view of the role of the observer and to what extent the observer is a participant observer. Whilst one respondent saw it as a negative that being online enable them to be less involved in the lesson, most felt the opposite, namely that they were not as unobtrusive as they would normally like to be in an observation setting. This was particularly the case in the breakout rooms where it was less possible to eavesdrop at the side as one might do in the traditional face-to-face setting. Even though one could have one's camera and microphone switched off, it still felt as if one were a participant in the discussion or activity in the breakout room. The literature reviewed emphasises how reactivity in the remote setting is greatly reduced for students (Falconer and Lignugaris/Kraft, 2002; Chilton and McCracken, 2017; Ault et al., 2019; MacMahon, O' Grádaigh and Ní Ghuidhir, 2019) and for observees (Heafner, Petty and Hartshorne, 2011; Wash, Bradley and Beck, 2014) but does not give detail on the observer's perception. The fact that observers in this study felt the experience was more obtrusive might be due to the fact that most observations were via an online setting rather than remotely via a camara located in a physical classroom setting.

It comes across very strongly how the very nature of an online discussion and feedback session change the nature of that session overall. It seems that the private space of a one-to-one conversation created the conditions for a more open and honest discussion. A result of this it was also a deeper and more meaningful reflection. This echoes the findings of Murtagh (2021, p.8) that the remote observation

experience (implying that the feedback element is included) was 'more relaxed and thoughtful' with the tutor role moving from ''evaluator' to that of 'listener and questioner''. It appears that the shifting of the conversation from a professional to a personal space had implications for the nature of the discussion. Observees perhaps felt more relaxed in their own personal space than they might have done in the professional, more institutional college space. Personal possessions, such as one's own sofa or comfortable chair and the presence of pets possibly served to reinforce this feeling of being at ease and fed into to the responses given. This would tie in with observers' comments on the feelings generated in them and the observees in the feedback discussions, namely the sentiment of being in a confessional, having the feeling that an observee was unburdening and the case where one observee felt able to burst into tears.

With the switch to online interactions came the worry that the less tangible, more affective aspect of communication with online participants would be lost, with a focus on the more objective and perhaps visual aspects. This was in line with Chilton and McCracken's (2017) noting that supervisors might miss things online. Given the foregoing, however, this does not seem to have been the case. In fact, the connection between the observer and the observee appears to have been strengthened. This may also have been helped, particularly at the beginning of the pandemic with the emergency switch to online learning, by the fact that both observer and observee felt that they were getting to grips with the technology and this common experience was like a bond between them.

Challenges of the online environment were clearly evident, such as a loss of context and feeling for the learning in the observations and an inability to see students on the online platform. This is a theme which also came through strongly in the literature (Gruenhagen, McCracken and true, 1999; Dyke, Harding and Liddon, 2008). There was, however, in this study a sense that rather than seeing this as a negative point it could simply be viewed as a point of difference between a face-to-face and an online observation and that it was important to recognise this. As such, a positive which emerged was how this the very lack of context could be used as a stimulus for questioning the observee about their learners and their context, thus being able to hear the observer's perspective on this more than previously and avoiding making any assumptions.

Wider professional implications of this research are firstly the challenge to professional bodies over the value of online observations. The GTCS had allowed online observations as an emergency measure but is stipulating face-to-face ones going forward. There might be an argument, for example, for an observee to undertake one face-to-face and one online observation. At a time where teaching and learning will inevitably embrace more online components (Bashir et al., 2021), it might indeed be proposed that an online observation (i.e. synchronous with students all online) would be beneficial as the skills of managing this environment differ from those in the face-to-face setting. There might also be a case for giving participants a choice of observation mode, depending on their perceived strengths or indeed areas they wish to develop and the proportion of online versus face-to-face teaching they undertake.

There could also be an exploration of a hybrid format, with the observation taking place in the face-to-face setting and the feedback taking place at a later point online. This would allow the observer to schedule the observation more flexibly or indeed undertake multiple observations in a shorter time frame, perhaps meaning less travelling or use of overnight stays. Whilst the possibility of immediate feedback can be useful in the context of remote observation (Kelly and Bishop, 2013), a different approach is also possible. If scheduling of the discussion takes places after a short time interval, this could allow for a different kind of reflection if both observer and observee have had time to reflect further in the intervening period, seen as a benefit by . This might also combine the benefits of face-to-face observation with the potential benefits of the online discussion. Continued use of online

observations would also challenge the practice of observers to tease out the context of class and the learning through skilful use of questioning.

Finally, the TQFE programme expectations of peer observations and collaborations could be realised more fully and efficiently through use of online collaboration between participants and this could be encouraged further.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This very small-scale study based around one higher education in Scotland and a small sample of college co-tutors and tutors cannot claim to offer an overall evaluation of the effectiveness of online observations and feedback but what it can do is to raise potential areas for further investigation and reflection.

Firstly, it might be beneficial to see online observations as different rather than in deficit compared to the face-to-face model. Whilst some literature notes that face-to-face and remote observations are 'interchangeable processes' (Heafner, Petty and Hartshorne, 2011) or provide the same feedback and insights (Ault et al., 2019), it is important to focus on online observations as a *different* mode. That way they could be used as a deliberate alternative to face-to-face observations which might be appropriate in given circumstances. If they become a choice rather than a necessity, this means they can be used for their benefits and for the options they give. A specific online observation could be helpful in helping the observee develop skills in this mode of delivery. Secondly, the discussions themselves may have a different quality if conducted online due to the fact that they are in a personal, informal space and the perceived change in role of the observer (Murtagh, 2021). If it is possible for these to be conducted online in future, potentially at home, then the reflection and quality of the discussion may well be improved. Finally, there may be a greater openness to online collaboration among participants as part of a course as a result of having worked more online during the pandemic.

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