

Issue 50 July 2010 £6

Leader

The Education Leader Magazine

ASCL Association
of School and
College Leaders



Look and learn

Using students effectively in lesson observation



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new law on staff
access to training

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Leader, the magazine of the Association of School and College Leaders, is published nine times a year.

Leader is available online at: www.leadermagazine.co.uk

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Leading figures

11%

schools rated 'outstanding' under the new framework

SOURCE: OFSTED 2010

42%

schools rated 'good' under the new framework

SOURCE: OFSTED 2010

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Looking to the future

This is a golden milestone for ASCL: the 50th edition of *Leader*, which was born as an amalgamation of the termly magazine, *Headlines*, and monthly newsletter, *SHA Penned*.

Leader made its debut in March 2005 and since then the association has seen many changes, not least a new name in January

2006 (even now we're occasionally referred to as SHA), another 3,000 members and a new government.

Throughout the changes, one constant has been the steady, focused and dedicated leadership of John Dunford. It is coincidental but completely fitting that the 50th edition is also John's last.

All the ASCL staff wish

him the very best in his new adventures and hope his retirement is somewhat less hectic but just as exciting as his last 12 years at ASCL.



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Energy savings

It has attracted controversy but, for some schools, using students to observe and feed back on lessons has led to improved teaching. The key is getting staff on board. **Liz Lightfoot** reports.

FRESH

PERSPECTIVES

addressed. Students were given a code of conduct, trained through role play in giving positive feedback and told of the importance of confidentiality. They were also given a set of principles within which to operate.

Under the new, successful scheme, the departments choose the students, now called researchers. The students work in the departments on schemes of work and lesson observations and the findings are confidential to that department.

Confidential findings

Student observation is also in its fifth year at a very different school, Beauchamp College, a large 14-19 leading edge upper school in Leicester, where over half the

In 2006, when lesson observations began, the students were drawn from years 12 and 13 and staff were only included if they volunteered to take part. Now the Insted teams are made up of volunteer students from years 10 to 13 who apply through a teacher, and all staff are involved.

"All the teachers are really into it. They come up to me in the corridor and ask to be observed," says Charlotte Fox, year 13, the Insted coordinator.

"We have always involved our students because we value their opinion and we want them to be involved," Gill says. "Feedback from staff has been very positive because students give a different kind of perspective."

Liz Taylor, a Beauchamp textiles teacher has been observed twice. "It

Student voice in the appointment of new staff is no longer unusual but some schools are taking it further and using students to formally evaluate and comment on what happens in the classroom.

The idea that students can be allowed to pass judgment on the adults teaching them is controversial. At least one of the teacher unions expressed fears at its annual conference this year that student voice risked undermining the authority of staff and their ability to keep discipline.

Schools pioneering the observations do admit to initial reluctance from at least some of the staff and the need for careful handling. But get it right, they say, and the rewards are considerable in terms of both improved classroom teaching and increased student involvement in their learning.

The challenge for leaders is to make the school community understand that the use of students is not a threat but a tremendous opportunity, says Annabel Kay, the deputy head of Lawrence Sheriff School, a boys'

school in Rugby which introduced student inspections five years ago.

The school has attached student 'researchers' to each subject department who undertake lesson observation as part of their remit.

The scheme got off to a shaky start, Annabel admits. In the early days there was resistance in the staffroom to expanding the school's well-established student democracy into the classroom.

"I used a group of year 8 students to help me review the impact of the new Key Stage 3 curriculum. We embarked upon an intensive programme of observations, the students wrote a very insightful report and I presented the findings back to the staff," she says.

"Their response, to put it mildly, was not as positive as I had hoped. The line of attack chosen was that students were not trained to undertake such observations and were unable to assess what was taking place in the classroom."

There was also concern from staff that the same students were volunteering and that some of them bore a grudge, she adds.

She put together a formal programme for students and went through it with staff to ensure their concerns were

students are from many different ethnic minorities. Over the last year their scheme has been expanded and titled Insted. In February students from the Insted team conducted 150 lesson observations.

The perceived criticism is that students will make inappropriate comments, such as personal remarks about teachers' appearance or demeanour, says Gill Greany, the assistant principal. To guard against it, the students are trained in lesson observation which keeps them focused on teaching and learning, she says. Gill, who is Ofsted-trained, prepares the students to be lesson observers.

"The training we give our students is very important. They work to a grid which asks them such things as: Are the students working at a challenging pace? Are the students becoming independent learners? What makes the learning good in the lesson?"

"They would not say something negative, such as the teacher is dominating the lesson. They might make a comment that some students are contributing more than others or suggest that there might perhaps be more group discussions where everyone is involved."

didn't faze me at all. I think it is a lovely thing to do. The fact they are students brings up some very interesting angles on our job," she says.

When students discover things that work they can spread the word to other teachers and departments, Liz says. "I have a little board where people write their names when they want help. In a busy class the quiet ones don't always get dealt with fairly but they are happy to put their names down on the board and it means I get to see them. The students picked it out as a good idea which could be used in other practical subjects."

Professional feedback

Chemistry teacher Philippa Clare says she has been observed by thousands of students over the years through her normal teaching. "It seems a bit strange that it was only last year that I received my first formal feedback from one of my 'customers' as part of the Insted process.

"The feedback session was carried out just as professionally as those run by the scores of adults who have advised me over the years. [The student] made a really useful suggestion about a tactic that might >>>



The challenge for leaders is to make the school community understand that the use of students is not a threat but a tremendous opportunity...



At Beauchamp College, Gill Greany, Assistant Principal (left) works with the student Insted team to ensure they are trained to conduct lesson observations and feed back comments to teachers.



Liz Lightfoot is a freelance writer specialising in education.

» encourage a couple of reticent students to take a more active role. I tried it and it did seem to give them more confidence," she says. Students feel involved because the observers are drawn from a range of different walks of life, believes Laura Whitehouse, 16, an Insted team leader. "It would be very easy to draw them from a list of A* students, but that doesn't happen." Student observations are also embedded at Moor End Technology College, a smaller 11-16 secondary in Huddersfield, Kirklees, which has a high free school meal eligibility and where a majority of students have English as a second language. Debra Awty, the deputy head, says she has no doubt the school's student voice contributed to the

achievement of its outstanding grade in a recent Ofsted inspection. When staff were asked if they would be happy for students to observe them, only two declined. Debra attributes the staff support to the excellent training students received from an external 'expert' and the fact that the scheme is voluntary. Students play a part as 'evaluators' to identify the factors that contribute to good learning at Wildern School, a large 11-16 comprehensive in Southampton. Toni Sambrook, the assistant head, says the scheme came out of an action research programme carried out by a member of staff for a master's thesis. "It fed into what we think is important about students having responsibility for their learning," she says.

A pilot was carried out using year 8 students as observers. "After the pilot it was a very slow process. We talked to staff first about what they might gain from it and trialled it with a group of volunteer teachers who found the feedback really worthwhile." **Improving practice** Student evaluators do not undermine staff at all, Toni says. "But one thing I always say is that you have to be really explicit with staff about the training students have and where the information is going. The evaluation form goes only to the member of staff who has been observed. "Over the last five years it has become an integral part of our professional development programme. But it is not something I would recommend to a

school with no culture of involving students in their learning." All four schools say the students have raised important issues which are being addressed. Inconsistent use of the school's virtual learning environment, Moodle – which some teachers hardly used in lessons or for homework – was raised by students at Beauchamp. "We took it on board and this year's Insted review shows departments have addressed it," says Gill. At Lawrence Sheriff, year 12 student Robert Cockell says the lesson observers have suggested that competitions, such as those provided by maths teachers, could improve motivation in other subjects. Students at Moor End raised the inconsistent use of the school's credit stamp: some teachers gave

out very few of the sought-after credits which go toward certificates and vouchers to pay for the year 11 prom, school photographs or exam stationery in school, or which can be exchanged at WH Smith. At Wildern the students raised issues about teachers talking through silent time, not maintaining discipline and the number of times students are praised in a lesson. Finally, student observation not only contributes to school improvement, it also brings personal benefits for the student inspectors, say the schools. Working as a team, understanding the factors which contribute to good learning and mastering the art of diplomacy will look good on any CV or UCAS form. **ASCL**