Creating a System for Peer Observation of Teaching

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Introduction

The goal of peer observation of teaching is to enhance, refine and improve classroom instruction. This requires a focus not only on what the faculty member says and does but also on the ways in which students take in, process and apply information and course concepts. Peer observation of teaching can be a component of a broader faculty mentoring program or viewed as a separate process that emphasizes classroom instruction.

While some teaching skills can be directly observed, others may be best explored through one-to-one conversations that focus on crafting a course syllabus, refining one's philosophy of teaching and creating alignment between course goals, student learning outcomes and assessment of student competencies. Providing faculty with opportunities to observe other instructors can also be a valuable way to develop new strategies and approaches to teaching.

We created this handbook to offer ways in which peer observers/mentors can provide meaningful feedback to faculty on instructional strategies, student engagement, assessment and learning. Given the diversity of our curriculum, approaches to teaching and individual departmental goals, our focus in this handbook is on broad domains of teaching, with varied examples of possible teaching strategies. Some examples are most applicable to particular kinds of classroom environments, Similarly, some examples may be a good fit for certain disciplines but not others. What is presented here is an overarching model of the peer observation process; each department or program will naturally modify the process to meet its own goals.

Logistics and Practical Considerations

Peer observations of teaching are, by their nature, labor intensive. Each department or program will need to decide who will conduct the observations, how often they will occur and how and when pre and post-observation meetings between the faculty member and observer/mentor are best conducted. These decisions will depend on departmental goals as well as which faculty will observe their peers.

Peer Observation of Teaching: A Three-Step Process

Step 1: **Meeting to clarify and articulate goals**
Step 2: **Conducting the** observation
Step 3: **Providing feedback** to faculty

Step 1: Meeting to Clarify and Articulate Goals

Prior to a classroom observation, framing the experience can help to ensure a meaningful outcome. A meeting between the peer observer and the faculty member is a critical first step that sets the stage for future mentoring and constructive feedback.

The focus of an initial meeting is to clarify the purpose and intended outcome of the classroom observation. This meeting provides an opportunity for the faculty member to discuss what s/he hopes to gain from the observation and provides the observer with background information on how the course is structured.

For example, the faculty member may want feedback or suggestions on

- Specific skills or teaching strategies;
- Ways to further engage students or increase class participation;
- Strategies for using new technology;
- Examples of in-class exercises or small group activities;
- Ways to lead effective class discussions;
- Managing student expectations;
- Creating course assignments;
- Structuring a course session to reflect different teaching methodologies;
- Working with an individual student who is experiencing difficulty;
- Working with a Teaching Assistant

The peer observer can use the meeting to gather background information on

- When and where the class meets;
- Length of class: block class or 75 minute session;
- Student composition: Graduate, Undergraduate or both;
- Number of students in the class;
- General class format, e.g., lecture, seminar, lab;
- Summary profile of students, e.g., how diverse is the group in terms of background knowledge and experience with course content?

This initial discussion can also address logistical considerations including:

- Where the peer observer will sit;
- If and how the observer will be introduced to the class;
- How long the observation will last;
- If the instructor can meet briefly after the session for summary feedback.

What to tell students will depend on the comfort level of the faculty member. Students might be told that the peer observer is attending class to learn more about the topic or that s/he is there to gather and provide feedback to the instructor. Another alternative is to simply introduce the observer as a 'guest'.

Determining the length of the observation depends on several variables:

- Does the faculty member want feedback on the general flow of the session or on a specific teaching strategy or class exercise?
- Is there a specific problem for which the faculty member wants feedback, e.g., students who dominate the discussions or ways to involve more students in discussions?

There are advantages to observing the entire session: one can see the way the session is framed at the start and (as appropriate) summarized at the end. Being present at the entire session also potentially provides an opportunity to observe multiple instructional strategies and to provide feedback on transitions, flow of information and student engagement. If it is not possible to attend the entire session, it can help to talk at the initial meeting about what the observer can expect to see and what will happen before s/he arrives or after s/he leaves.

There are also practical considerations in determining the length of a given observation. Peer observations are by their nature labor intensive. Therefore, the more specifically observation goals can be defined, the easier it will be to determine the amount of time needed. This pre-planning can make the process more efficient.

Self-Reflection and Self-Evaluation

Self-reflection and self-evaluation are key components of the pre-observation process. The more insightful the faculty members are about their teaching, the more likely the observation will provide meaningful and useful feedback. Such self-reflection requires us to look at our teaching with a critical eye to determine what is going well, where we need help and what we would like to evaluate or change. Often we might feel vulnerable by examining our teaching in this way. Therefore, the initial meeting between peer observer and instructor requires an atmosphere of trust and of mutual respect.

Self-reflection can be supported through a series of questions; these can either be given to the faculty member to consider prior to the meeting or discussed during the meeting. For example:

- ***What do you view as your strengths***: e.g. leading class discussions; extending student thinking; aligning course assignments with student learning outcomes; engaging students; being clear regarding student expectations?
- ***Where would you like to make changes***, e.g. grading system or course policies; uses of technology; revamping the course syllabus; locating new readings and resources; re-designing course assignments; trying out new teaching methodologies?
- ***What new skills do you want to explore,*** e.g. navigating difficult conversations in the classroom; organizing debates; learning new technologies; using on-line blogs, creating in-class small group exercises?
- ***Are there specific problems you want to address,*** e.g. students who seem disengaged; an individual student who is experiencing difficulty; an assignment or assessment that is not providing the data you need to evaluate student competency; students who dominate the conversation and others who are reluctant to participate?

Session Schedule, Goals and Format

Another critical piece of information for the peer observer is an overview of the plan for the class session. Specifically:

- Session goals and content;
- How content connects to previous course sessions;
- Readings students were expected to have completed prior to the session;
- General format for the session, e.g. lecture, lecture/discussion, hands-on exercises.

Syllabus Review

The course syllabus can provide useful information that creates a context for the observation and may provide information about how the faculty member nteracts with students. For example, to what extent does the syllabus clearly state

- Course goals and student learning outcomes;
- Alignment between course goals, student learning outcomes and assessment;
- Course policies, procedures and expectations e.g. guidelines for student participation
- Readings and assignments;
- Grading policy;
- Class schedule;
- How to contact the faculty member and scheduled office hours.

The course syllabus can also be an entrée into a faculty member's philosophy of teaching and how s/he communicates interest in and experience with the content area, e.g. does the syllabus convey the faculty member's enthusiasm for his/her subject and include a description of overall course goals?

Step 2: Conducting the Observation

It is important to note that observers will not see every domain of teaching in every session that they observe. The goal is to see if the faculty member's learning outcomes for the session are met; i.e. does the teaching methodology lend itself to meeting these outcomes? For example, if a faculty member is using technology such as Poll Everywhere to gauge student understanding, is this strategy providing faculty with the hoped for data?

The following domains of teaching are included in the Sample Peer Observation Form on page 10.

Methods of Instruction

This category focuses on the different instructional methods that the faculty member uses to convey course information. Observing a class session will let you know whether and to what extent these teaching strategies seem to fit the course content. For example, if a faculty member divides students into smaller groups for discussion, are the conversations meaningful? Does the instructor clearly state what students need to do and how this activity will impact their understanding of a topic? Has the instructor articulated the goal of the exercise; e.g. to enhance multiple perspectives or to enable students to create a joint solution to a stated problem? If the primary methodology is a lecture, is the faculty member engaging? Are there opportunities for students to ask questions? Does the instructor speak clearly and at an appropriate speed and can s/he be heard throughout the room? Are there connections between the lecture, the readings and follow up assignments?

If there is variety in the types of teaching strategies used, does the instructor explain how these methods match his/her learning goals? For example, if students are working in teams, is collaboration a student learning outcome? If you are observing a lab session, is it clear to students what they need to accomplish and how to proceed if they need help?

Here are some examples of what you might look for/see that relates to method of instruction:

- **Course format**: lecture, lecture with discussion, "mini-lectures", small group discussions and/or exercises, films, drill and practice, experiments, video clips as discussion starters, guest speakers, reflection/journal writing, quizzes, sample problems;
- **Instructional strategies**: visual aids (includes writing on the board), modeling problem solving, facilitating a discussion, posing questions/problems, demonstrations.

Student Engagement

Faculty may define this category in multiple ways, e.g., does engagement focus solely on what happens within the classroom or does it extend to how students engage with the material, classmates and the faculty member outside of class? The types and degree of student engagement will also relate to teaching methodologies, e.g. small group discussion and exercises often provide a context for questions and conversation.

Here are some examples of what you might see as indications of student engagement:

- **Students:** Do they ask questions for clarification; take notes; brainstorm in pairs; meet in small groups to solve a problem; conduct an experiment; offer their opinions; analyze a problem; cite readings in their comments; abstain from using lap tops or cell phones unless such use is part of a class exercise?

- **Faculty Member:** Does s/he respond to student questions; allow time for students to process/think (wait time); solicit questions or responses; ask for examples from the readings; pose problems or challenges; call on students by name, especially in smaller classes; greet students as they enter class; walk around during lectures or small group exercises and comment on student work; ensure that a small group of students do not dominate the discussion; model experiments; remind students of office hours?

Promoting Critical Thinking

This category focuses on specific teaching strategies and methodologies that help an instructor answer critical questions about student learning, e.g., are students making connections between different course concepts; do teaching strategies align with student learning outcomes and assessment; can students apply the skills and knowledge to new problems?

Observing examples of critical thinking can focus on ways that the faculty member

- Facilitates discussions, e.g., ways in which s/he extends student thinking by asking follow up questions; requesting more details or support for student statements; soliciting additional perspectives on an issue or topic;
- Promotes creativity in the way students are challenged to solve a problem, create a new idea or product, represent a concept or theory;
- Uses a lecture to present ideas and concepts and then follows up with assignments and assessments that require students to process the information;
- Encourages students to take 'academic risks' with their thinking by challenging their own assumptions;
- Creates context by connecting this session to previous discussions; summarizing the session at the end and connecting it to future discussions;
- Responds to student confusion or requests for more information.

Classroom Environment/Dynamic

The way a classroom is physically set up, whether or not the instructor calls on students by name (name tags or name plates work for large classes) and how a faculty member responds to incorrect or off-base answers are all indicators of the tone and feel of a classroom environment. Are students comfortable asking questions? Can all students see and hear the faculty member? Does s/he use humor when needed but avoid inappropriate sarcasm and responses that are unclear? How does s/he handle challenging topics or diversity of opinions and ideas? Creating an atmosphere that encourages students to express their ideas, engage in respectful discourse and challenge their thinking can be supported in different ways. For example:

The Environment

- Room is arranged in a way that enables students to see and hear each other;
- Session has a clear beginning and an end;
- Students can critique views without criticizing the speaker;
- The pace of the class is neither too fast nor too slow;
- Time is allotted for questions and answers.

The Instructor

- Admits to not knowing an answer when appropriate;
- Offers to get back to students with an answer;
- Varies from the lesson 'script' when needed;
- Respects diversity of opinion.

Organization and Sequencing

This category relates to the flow and tempo of a class session in ways that provide context and continuity for students. For example:

- If there are multiple instructional strategies used, is it clear to students when one part of the session ends and another begins?
- Are breaks organic (when students need them, as in a block class) or scheduled?
- Does the faculty member summarize concepts for students and/or connect them to what has already been covered in the course?

Uses of Technology

Not all faculty embrace new technologies and not all technology aligns with the faculty member's goals. Discussing these issues prior to the observation will help to clarify whether the colleague being observed would like to explore new technologies and how s/he currently uses them in the classroom. Faculty who would like to explore new technologies can be referred to the many resources on campus for information and technical support, including from CTRL.

For faculty using technology in the classroom, you might observe whether

- The instructor is comfortable with the technology s/he is using;
- The technology matches the instructor's goals;
- The technology enhances student learning.

Following the observation, if time permits, based on the schedule of the observer and faculty member, a brief feedback session can be useful. Questions like the following might be addressed:

- What worked well in today's class session?
- In what ways did you meet your session goals?
- What would you change and why?
- What would be helpful feedback from me?

Step 3: Providing Feedback to Faculty

A written observation summary provides a resource for the faculty member and another chance to reflect on the experience. It is most helpful when the faculty member receives the written document within two weeks of the observation. Once the summary is written, a follow-up meeting between the peer observer and the faculty member is the most effective way to provide feedback.

If the observer/mentor was able to meet briefly with the faculty member immediately after the observation, this follow-up meeting can begin with a very brief overview of what was previously discussed. If this is the first feedback meeting, the questions above offer a starting point. These questions provide a framework for initial feedback from the peer observer focusing on examples that

- Are positive or exemplary;

- Illustrate the instructors' strengths;
- Identify concerns.

Outcomes and follow-up to this meeting will depend on the individual faculty member and departmental or program goals. It can be very helpful to identify one or two areas where the instructor would like to explore new methodologies or changes to his/her teaching strategies and to identify available campus resources. Follow-up mentoring can take many forms and might include

- Arranging for the faculty member to observe the teaching of the mentor or of another faculty member;
- Attending a workshop in-person or on-line to learn about a particular topic or skill;
- Meeting with a mentor to talk about a new strategy;
- Signing up for a CTRL session on a new technology.

CTRL Assistance with the Peer Observation Process

If you have questions about anything in this manual or would like to discuss how to adapt the material to your particular departmental/program needs, please contact

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Sample Classroom Observation Form

Faculty: _________________________________ Observer: __________________________

Course: _________________________ Date: ________ Number of Students: __________

Dimensions of Teaching

Methods of Instruction:

What types of instructional strategies did you observe? To what extent did these strategies match the instructor's goals for the session?

Student Engagement:

What did you observe students saying and doing that indicates their engagement with the information covered in this session?

What are the some of the ways that you observed the instructor engage students during this session?

Promoting Critical Thinking

What are some of the ways in which the instructor extended student learning, challenged students to think creatively or critically and/or reinforced concepts that were central to this class session?

Classroom Environment/Dynamic

How are the chairs/desks arranged? Does the room arrangement support the instructor's goals for the class and this session?

What are examples of ways in which the instructor encourages students to express their views and ask questions that take into account student diversity of thought and perspective?

Organization and Sequencing

Is there a logical flow to how the session is organized? In which ways did the instructor frame the session to add context for students?

Uses of Technology

If technology was used, did it enhance student learning and clearly connect to the session goals? Was the instructor comfortable using the technology tool(s)?