

Peer Observation and Feedback Guidelines

Observing a class

- Before the observation, find out the instructor's goal for the class meeting. It is also helpful to ask the instructor if there are any particular issues they wish to focus on.
- Look over the Classroom Observation Form ahead of time so you know what you are looking for. It is best to take notes on the Observer Notes Form during the observation, and complete the Classroom Observation Form afterward. Capture as much detail as possible on the Observer Notes Form, as this helps to provide specific examples for the instructor.
- Be as unobtrusive as possible during the observation. Arrive before class begins, and sit in the back of the room where you will have a good view of both instructor and students. Be friendly and greet the instructor, but do not otherwise participate in the class.
- If the class is small, it may be helpful for the instructor to acknowledge the presence of an outside observer at the beginning of class. "X is here observing today. We have agreed to sit in on one another's classes."
- As much as possible, try to set aside your own biases about what should happen in class, and be a neutral observer.
- Keep in mind that there may be a variety of ways of accomplishing the goals for the class. In fact, you may learn something through observing.
- Focus on gathering descriptive data, not on evaluation. Your observations will be most valuable if they can help the instructor become aware of the classroom interaction from a new perspective.
- Notice both student and instructor behaviors. You may wish to record sample questions/answers verbatim; make note of how many different students participate and from what parts of the classroom; pay attention to whether students seem to be understanding the material presented/discussed. Take copious notes on the Observer Notes Form.
- Complete the written report as soon after the observation as possible while the experience is still fresh in your memory. Remember to focus on non-judgmental observation. However, the written report need not contain every detail you observed.
- Suggestions for improvement should be recorded separately from observations. In general, it is best to present these after some post-observation discussion. You may wish to revise your suggestions after discussion with the instructor you observed.

Giving post-observation feedback

The goal of the post-observation discussion is to provide the instructor with helpful,

supportive feedback geared toward improvement. Instructors should come away with a sense of what they are doing well, and a small number of things they could work on.

- At the beginning of the session, the instructor is first given an opportunity to describe their own reactions to the class, mentioning what went well and what seemed to need improvement.
- The observer may then share their observations recorded in the Classroom Observation Form.
- The goal here is to help the instructor see their teaching through new eyes.
- Try to relate your observations to the strengths/weaknesses the instructor has identified for themselves. Allow the instructor's interests and concerns to guide the conversation.
- Suggestions for improvement may be presented after some discussion of the observations. Do not present suggestions prescriptively, but with reference to the discussion you have been having.
- Avoid generalizations, focusing instead on specific observed behaviors.

Examples:

- AVOID: You need to work on making class more interesting.
- BETTER: Around 10:15 I noticed students were starting to "tune out." Have you ever noticed that happening? Are there ways you could get them more involved at times like that to re-engage them in the class?
- AVOID: You're asking too many leading questions.
- BETTER: When you asked, "What's the most important point in this article?" what kinds of answers were you expecting to get? [discussion] You might find that more students participate if you asked a more open-ended question.
- AVOID: You're doing a great job of explaining clearly.
- BETTER: When you answered that question about the ____ theory, I noticed a lot of students were writing furiously and saying "oh!", like they suddenly understood. I think the example you used really made it clear to them.
- Remember, it is not your job as an observer to "fix" the instructor's teaching. If you observed a large number of problematic teaching behaviors, it is best to focus your suggestions on one or two you think the instructor could most profitably work on at this time. It is crucial to avoid overwhelming the instructor with a long list of failings.
- Don't hesitate to share with the instructor things you may have learned from watching them that you plan to try in your own class!

Keep in mind these **CHARACTERISTICS OF REFLECTIVE FEEDBACK**

- promotes **reflection** as part of a dialogue between the giver and receiver of feedback. Both parties are involved in observing, thinking, reporting, and responding.
- focuses on observed **behavior** rather than on the person. Refers to what an individual does rather than to what they are.
- is **descriptive** rather than judgmental. Avoiding judgmental language reduces the need for an individual to respond defensively.
- is **specific** rather than general.
- promotes **reflection about strategies** and the students' or observer's responses to a specific strategy.
- is directed toward behavior which the receiver can **change**.
- considers the **needs** of both the receiver and giver of feedback.
- is **solicited** rather than imposed. Feedback is most useful when the receiver actively seeks feedback and is able to discuss it in a supportive environment.
- is **well-timed**. In general, feedback is most useful at the earliest opportunity after the given behavior.
- involves **sharing information** rather than giving advice, leaving the individual free to change in accordance with personal goals and needs.
- considers the **amount of information** the receiver can use rather than the amount the observer would like to give. Overloading an individual with feedback reduces the likelihood that the information will be used effectively.
- requires a **supportive, confidential** relationship built on trust, honesty, and genuine concern.

The Characteristics of Reflective Feedback come from:

Kathleen McEnerney, et al. "Building Community through Peer Observation." American Association for Higher Education, Forum on Faculty Roles and Rewards (San Diego, CA, January 18, 1997).

ALTERNATIVE TYPES OF FEEDBACK

OPINION	DESCRIPTION
"I noticed that most of your questions called for factual responses."	"These are some of the questions you asked. What were you trying to achieve by asking these questions? Do you think the questions accomplished your objective?"
"You presented the assignment in a confusing way."	"I noticed that the students had a lot of questions about...What do you think the problem was?"
"You give nice examples."	"These examples (list) helped me to understand the concept you were explaining."
"Only a few students participated in the discussion you led. Why do you think that is?"	"This was such a wonderful sequence of questions that you asked, that I'd like to explore some ways to get more students involved in the conversation and thinking about the issues you raised."
"Not many people responded."	"Four people responded to questions in this section. The man in the green sweater in the front row responded to 5 questions, half of all the responding."
"You've made a lot of progress since I last observed your class. Well done!"	"I noticed that compared to the last time I observed your class, you have decided to try to wait longer after asking a thought-provoking question. It seemed to me the students have responded to this and your class discussions are less focused on you as the 'all-knowing instructor'. Well done! How do you feel about this change?"
"In my class, I have done..."	I know someone who tried..."
"I don't think your concern about (concern) is important."	"I hear you saying you are concerned about (concern). Why is that? How do you see that issue affecting the class?"
"Why haven't you tried...?"	"Have you considered trying...? How do you think that would work in this class?"

"Yes, we all have that problem. There's not much you can do." [In response to hearing the mentee cite a constraint such as time or pre-determined curriculum as preventing them from trying a different teaching style]

"Lack of time is a common problem. I agree with you that it would be worthwhile to try to incorporate this method. Let's brainstorm ways to work around this constraint..."