

# Peer Observation of Teaching

*UTDC Guidelines*



Improving Teaching and Learning

# **Peer Observation of Teaching**

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## Peer Observation of Teaching

While peer review of research has traditionally been part of academic culture as a way of ensuring discussion and critique of scholarly ideas, the other key role of academics—teaching—has, until recently, remained a private one. Recent changes in the way education and the role of the academic are viewed have meant that the quality of teaching in the University is now coming under closer scrutiny. There is, for example, significant pressure from government, universities and students to improve the quality of teaching and the accountability of academics. Research into learning and teaching also indicates that a change is needed from an information transmission approach to one focused on enhancing the quality of student learning. Peer review is being increasingly used as a way of improving teaching and demonstrating accountability.

Much of the literature on the use of peer review to enhance teaching and learning comes from an American Association of Higher Education (AAHE, 1998) teaching initiative. This project arose out of a climate of “redefining scholarship in ways that allow the scholarly aspects of teaching to be documented and rewarded” (Quinlan, 1996/7, p. 1). More and more universities began “recommending or mandating the peer review of teaching as a way of ... improving teaching and learning ... and responding to the need for more rigorous quality assurance” (ibid). In these institutions, peer review has become another important indicator in the evaluation of quality, alongside student evaluations.

### 1. What is peer review of teaching?

Peer review of teaching can be viewed as the assessment of *all* aspects of teaching – course design, classroom practice

and student learning (Bowser, 1997) – and the literature indicates that there are two possible purposes for this strategy – summative or formative evaluation (Quinlan, 1996/7; England et al., 1996; Bowser, 1997).

Summative peer evaluations of teaching or papers are often used to supplement student evaluations. The information collected for the evaluation by the University of Adelaide, for example, includes effectiveness, scholarship in teaching, organisational quality, assessment of student learning, contribution to departmental planning, and so on.

Collaborative, systematic formative peer evaluations are more useful than summative in terms of improving the quality of teaching and learning. Academics receive feedback, as for summative evaluations, but also reflect on their own teaching practice, consider the feedback received, and make changes to improve teaching.

## **2. Why peer review teaching?**

There are several compelling reasons to use a peer review of teaching process:

To improve the quality of teaching and learning through open discussion and systematic critique.

To help cultivate a collegial atmosphere through dialogue about common issues of concern.

To provide a more comprehensive evaluation of teaching by examining aspects not covered by student evaluations, such as currency of content, balance and breadth of the curriculum.

To increase accountability of academics and the institution.

To provide data for promotion, probation and appraisal purposes.

### **3. Peer Observation of Teaching**

A common element in the peer review process is the observation of teaching. Peer observation should not be seen as a replacement to student evaluation. Students can reliably comment on a number of aspects of course delivery, not only because they are the intended participants in the teaching learning process but they also are involved in all sections of the paper. Nevertheless, with careful preparation, colleagues can provide a alternative perspective to that given by students. Unfortunately, poor planning and the involvement of uninformed peers can cause reliability problems (van Note Chism, 1999).

These guidelines are designed to assist university teachers to obtain systematic feedback from their colleague on aspects of their teaching. Peer observation is likely to be of greatest benefit if the arrangement is a reciprocal one. A key principle of peer observation is that the person who asks for and receives the feedback must remain in control of the process of peer observation. Constructive feedback at all stages is therefore paramount.

Below are some suggestions for setting up a peer observation agreement. In addition, an organising framework is provided to assist with the observation.

#### **3.1 Getting Started**

Identify a colleague who you respect and trust. Depending on the kind of feedback you are seeking, this person may not need to teach in your field. There are several advantages of selecting someone from outside your speciality, apart from increasing the number of potential observers. Firstly the focus will be primarily on the teaching rather than the content. Secondly, this



may serve to reduce anxiety levels and increase confidentiality.

Arrange a pre-observational meeting which should consider the following points.

Before addressing the specifics of the observation visits, allow time to consider fundamental issues that have an impact on teaching. These include beliefs about the role of teaching, indicators of success and failure, expectations of students and so on.

Discuss the learning goals for the course and the particular goals for the class session to be visited. Identify the resources the students have and the preparation they are expected to have done for this class. Decide whether your colleague will need to undertake any preparatory work.

Decide what aspects of teaching the observational feedback should cover (see Appendix A for suggestions). For example:

- Are the students engaged?
- How do students respond to questions?
- What are the class dynamics?
- Are there time segments during which students react differently to the instructor?

Agree on the date and time of the session(s) to be observed. Preferably the visits should be within a day or two of each other. It is important to ensure that the instructor and the class behave in a normal fashion. Thus, it is necessary to attend the whole class when it is up to 50 minutes long. For longer classes, an hour-long segment should be sufficient.

Agree on observer behaviour in class (participant or silent observer). Consider whether it is appropriate for the observer to be introduced and if so how this will be done.

Decide on a feedback method (e.g., written, length, form, timing). Regardless of the form of feedback agreed upon it is likely that the observer will need to take notes during the class session (see 3.2 below for details).

Arrange a post-observation meeting as soon as possible after the class.

Ensure that confidentiality of feedback and discussions is agreed upon between participants.

### 3.2 The Observation

The observer should sit in an unobtrusive position but where they have a good view of everything that takes place. If agreed, the lecturer should introduce the observer but avoid further comment which may alter the behaviour of the students.

A range of techniques are available for notemaking (e.g. a holistic approach followed by a narrative report, an analytical approach that uses a checklist or rating form, videotaping etc). Whatever technique you use it is important to remain descriptive rather than judgemental. The following example illustrates how a judgemental observation can be rephrased in a way that is both descriptive and specific.

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*'Poor use of the OHP' (judgemental)*

*'Frequently stands in front of the OHP screen, e.g., when explaining. the difference between norm and criterion referenced assessment' (descriptive)*

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A number of inventories and checklists have been developed to assist notemaking. The UTDC can provide examples on request.

If the observer has to leave during the class, ensure this is done in an unobtrusive fashion. Ideally, choose a natural class break.

### **3.3 The Follow-Up Meeting**

A 'debriefing' meeting should take place as soon as possible after the class session. Ideally, this should take place somewhere neutral.

It is important that this session is both enjoyable and constructive and allows plenty of input from the teacher. You may wish to begin by allocating time for the teacher to reflect on how the class went before the observer comments or makes suggestions. Appendix D provides some suggested questions to stimulate reflection.

Ensure that the feedback is constructive (see Appendix C).

Move beyond comments about the legibility, audibility or complaints about students to deal with broader issues.

Allow time (either in the follow-up meeting or subsequently) to plan improvements.

## Appendix A - Peer Observation Form

To increase the reliability of peer observations, observers must try to focus on the same elements of teaching. This form, based on generic dimensions of instruction, is intended to be used as a framework for the observation. The observers should discuss these categories prior to their classroom visits to insure that they are in agreement about the definitions and the meaning of the 'cue questions' under each category. This form is not intended to function as a checklist, but rather as an organizing framework for the observation itself and the (jointly-written) report on the observation. The cueing questions are neither exhaustive nor prescriptive; depending upon the course and the teaching method, some questions may not apply or additional questions might be necessary. The observation team and the teacher being observed should decide if modifications are required. In practice, the observers should look for specific evidence of performance under each category, with the understanding that they may not be able to observe all of these elements in the two classes they visit. Some of these questions relate to course materials that the observations teams should obtain from the instructor.

### I. **Subject Matter**

Is the depth and breadth of the material appropriate for the level of the course and the students?

Does the course appear to be intellectually rigorous?

Does the instructor emphasize a conceptual grasp of the material?

Do the instructor's goals emphasize higher-order learning and critical thinking?

Does the instructor incorporate recent developments, ideas, or approaches to the subject?

How well does the material relate to other courses in the curriculum?

## **II. Instruction**

Method:

Does the method of teaching seem appropriate for the material?

Is the method being used effectively?

Organization:

Is the overall organization of the class session logical?

Is the material appropriately sequenced and paced?

Outcomes:

How well does the instruction match the teacher's goals for the lesson?

Are the goals at an appropriate level for the lesson?

Is it clear how the teacher intends to evaluate what students learn in the lesson?

## **III. Style**

Does the instructor appear to be enthusiastic about teaching?

Does the instructor appear to be enthusiastic about the subject matter?

Are the instructor's interactions with students conducive to learning?

How effectively does the instructor respond to questions?

Does the instructor show interest in students and their learning?

**Student Behavior**

How are the students reacting to the lesson? (Are they attentive, engaged, prepared, actively involved, confused, angry?)

What are the implications of the observed student behaviors for the instructor's approach to teaching?

**Classroom Facilities**

Are there inadequacies in the physical surroundings (e.g., lighting, acoustics, seating, media equipment, etc.) that might adversely affect teaching in this particular classroom?

## **Appendix B – Characteristics of Effective Observers**

The primary characteristics of effective peer observers are closely related to characteristics of good teachers. A good observer:

1. Has sensitivity; can empathize with the person being observed.
2. Sees teaching improvement as an important objective of the observation process.
3. Is reflective about his/her own teaching.
4. Is a good listener.
5. Has the ability to give advice; gives constructive feedback.
6. Takes the observation process seriously and carefully prepares for the observation.
7. Accepts the validity of different teaching methods and styles, even when they differ from his/her own.

These characteristics consistently appear in the literature on peer observation, and successful programs emphasize the necessity of keeping them constantly in mind when performing observations. By contrast, poor observers may fall into one or more of the errors listed below:

### **Things to Avoid**

The 'Halo' Effect – allowing one positive factor to outweigh all other aspects of the assessment.



The 'I Don't Like Your Face' Effect – allowing one negative factor to outweigh all others.

Leniency – Being uncritical in order to avoid controversy.

Central Tendency – evaluating everyone as 'average' because it is less trouble.

Tunnel Vision – focusing on only one part of the performance rather than the whole picture.

Going Through The Motions – not taking the evaluation seriously, or making up your mind in advance.

The Expert – using your own teaching performance as criteria for judgment rather than agreed-upon evaluation standards.

Gotcha – using the evaluation for political purposes or personal revenge.

One problem that surfaces consistently in the early stages of peer observation programs is the difficulty in keeping an open mind about teaching styles and methods different from our own. One should be very cautious about absolute statements such as 'you should never use overhead transparencies that way,' or 'Case studies should only be conducted this way.' Our task as observers is to ascertain if the method being used seems to be effective, not whether it conforms to notions of teaching derived from our own experience. There are many ways to be effective.

## Appendix C – Constructive Criticism

What are the Essential Elements of Constructive Criticism?  
Positive phrasing -- provides a positive framework for the message.

Concreteness -- is grounded in specific, observable behavior

Action-orientation -- gives the individual a specific plan of action to follow.

Focus -- provides feedback on behavior that the individual can change.

When providing feedback to the teacher, it is important to follow the principles of constructive criticism. Constructive criticism is descriptive and specific; it focuses on the behavior rather than on the person and it is directed toward behavior that a person can change. Constructive criticism also is affirming in the sense that achievements and efforts toward change should be acknowledged, and suggestions for change should be made in a positive way. When giving constructive criticism one should always check to insure clear communication -- verify that the receiver understands exactly what you are talking about. The examples below exemplify various aspects of constructive feedback.

*'The time and energy you devoted to the preparation of the class discussion questions is clearly well-received by the students; they do the work and are clearly interested in the subject. This is a definite plus. However, you might find that many of the detailed, fact-based questions that you asked in class might be given to the students ahead of time to self-test their comprehension, and emphasize higher-order, integrating questions in class discussion. This tactic would allow you to delve more deeply into the issues with the students.'*

*'The case study discussion seemed to be very productive and most of the students participated with meaningful comments and good answers to your questions. Unfortunately, there didn't seem to be enough time for closure, and I sensed that the students needed to have some resolution of at least the major issues in the case, especially since their mid-term is coming up soon. Since you are trying to keep to your schedule, it is probably impractical to resume the discussion in the next class, but one solution might be to prepare a handout to tie up some of the loose ends that you can give to the students next time.'*

*'Your opening points of the lecture were very interesting and I could see how they were related to the day's topic, but during the lecture the students seemed a bit confused about the connections. Perhaps you could write these points on the board or prepare them ahead of time on an overhead transparency so you could refer to them again during the remainder of the lecture.'*

## **Appendix D – Formative Observations: Questions to Stimulate Reflection**

The following questions are examples of the kind of reflective questions that are often used in developmental observations. There are many other possibilities, but the teacher and the observer should choose questions (or create new ones) that promise to yield the most useful insights into teaching.

1. Did the lesson proceed in the way you had planned it? Why?
2. Did the students react to the lesson in the way you thought they would?
3. What specific things did you do to help the students understand difficult parts of the lesson?
4. Did you do anything that confused the students or made it difficult for them to understand the lesson?
5. How did the students react to your lesson?
6. During the lesson, did you feel confident and enthusiastic? Why?
7. What did you do in the lesson to allow for individual differences in students' learning styles or abilities?
8. Do you think your students learned all that you wanted them to learn in this session? What brings you to this conclusion?
9. What did you do in the lesson to make students feel that they had some control over what they were learning?

10. What did you do to encourage the students to participate actively in the lessons?
11. Did anything in this class reinforce or contradict your beliefs about teaching and learning?
12. What did you learn about teaching from this class?
13. What did you learn about student learning from this class?
14. What targets for improvement have you set yourself for this class, and are they realistic?
15. If you were to teach this lesson again tomorrow, what would you do differently, and why?

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These four appendices were adapted with permission from *UNC Intercampus dialogue on peer review of teaching: Results and recommendations* <http://www.cte.uncwil.edu/et/prev1.htm#app>

## References

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## Notes





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