**Guide to formative teaching observation**

Teaching observation is a tool to improve teaching through critical reflection and idea-sharing. The goals are many and can include:

* Providing concrete evidence to the teacher being observed to enable “a personal exploration of practice.” (Donnelly 2007).
* Serving as a learning opportunity for the observer, who might “alter understanding and enhance self-awareness” in their own instruction (Thomas et. al. 2014).
* Fostering reflective, iterative teaching practice at the individual and institutional levels (Drew and Klopper 2014).

It differs from evaluative observation in that the goal is *not* to make decisions in hiring or promotion, but to foster growth.

**Implement observational rather than evaluative feedback.**

*Providing judgement about whether a teaching strategy is “good” or “bad” can limit in-depth discussion about teaching choices and their effects. Such judgements are also subject to the biases and experiences of the observer, who might have a preferred style of instruction.*

* Clarify ahead of time with the instructor that the process is not meant to be evaluative.
* When conducting observations, note down actions taken by the instructor and how studentsreact rather than your personal reaction. Consider concrete categories like pacing, learning activities, and assessment of learning.
* Frame your feedback in the same concrete terms paired with reflective questions, e.g. “I noticed that when you invited students to get into small groups, some students in the class didn’t move. Could you share why you think that happened?”
* When appropriate, offer suggestions that draw from other evidence (your own teaching practice or research on teaching, for example), e.g. “When I am conducting small group work, I often assign groups ahead of time to facilitate everyone’s participation.”

**Provide space for the instructor to articulate their own goals.**

*Feedback is most useful when the recipient is able to use it to work toward a specific goal. Planning and debriefing observations should consider what the instructor hopes to accomplish*.

* Before observing another instructor, provide space for them to state the goals they have for teaching in the near and far term (e.g. include more diverse learning activities; discuss identity in the classroom more often; become more confident as a speaker).
* Plan to discuss specific goals for the observation. Ask the instructor if they have any particular areas they would like feedback on (e.g. encouraging student participation).

**Plan for in-depth discussion after the observation; let the instructor drive the conversation.**

*Provide space for a conversation about the observation that enables the instructor to ask questions, air concerns, and consider the feedback in a comfortable environment.*

* Invite the instructor to share their own thoughts about the observed class *before you give any advice*. Offer a reflective question: “What do you feel went well in that lesson? Why?
* Identify major points for discussion ahead of time based on your notes; go through them slowly, allowing time for questions and conversation.
* Do not provide any comprehensive documentation or notes until the end of the conversation; they often prove a distraction.

**Plan next steps**

*The goal of observations is ultimately to shape teaching practice through reflection. Help the instructor to plan concrete next steps based on their experience*.

* Ask the instructor to identify concrete things they would do next time teaching a class; encourage them to list anything, even if it is small (e.g. learning all student names; incorporating at least one moment of active learning per class).
* Discuss what evidence they can use to know if they have met their goal.

**Consider doing a pre-reflection as an observer:**

* What is the instructor’s context (e.g., if the instructor is a TA, were they able to choose their lesson design/learning goals, or were those assigned by a faculty member)?
* What instructional expectations might a supervisor or chair have placed on an instructor that shaped how they conducted this class?
* What are my instructional preferences? What do I think of as effective teaching and why?

**Citations**

Donnelly, R. (2007). Perceived impact of peer observation of teaching in higher education*. International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 19, 117-129

Drew, S., & Klopper, C. (2014). Evaluating faculty pedagogic practices to inform strategic academic professional development: a case of cases. *Higher Education*, 67, 349-367. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-013-9657-1>

Thomas, S., Chie, Q. T., Abraham, M., Raj, S. J., & Beh, L.-S. (2014). A Qualitative Review of Literature on Peer Review of Teaching in Higher Education: An Application of the SWOT Framework. *Review of Educational Research*, *84*(1), 112–159. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24434230.