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 he/she wishes you to focus on.
• Look over the report form ahead of time so you know what you are looking for. It is best to take notes on separate sheets of paper during the observation, and complete the form afterward.
• 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.
• It is 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. Make copious notes.
• 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 supportive feedback geared toward improvement. The instructor should come away with a sense of what he/she is doing well, and a small number of things he/she could work on.
• At the beginning of the session, the instructor is first given an opportunity to describe his/her own reactions to the class, mentioning what went well and what seemed to need improvement.
• The observer may then share his/her observations, in the form of a written report accompanied by verbal feedback. The goal here is to help the instructor see his/her teaching through new eyes.
• Try to relate your observations to the strengths/weaknesses the instructor has identified for him/herself. 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:
  o AVOID: You need to work on making class more interesting.
  o 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?
  o AVOID: You’re asking too many leading questions.
  o 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.
  o AVOID: You’re doing a great job of explaining clearly.
When you answered that question about the blah-blah 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 him/her that you plan to try in your own class!

Keep in mind these CHARACTERISTICS OF REFLECTIVE FEEDBACK

- promotes reflection as part of a dialog 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 we think s/he is.
- 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:

Sample observation forms

On the following pages are two examples of observation forms peer observers might use. Either form can be adapted to reflect specific teaching goals for TAs in your department.

Form #1 is a general form, covering most aspects of a discussion-oriented section meeting. It allows for an open-ended observation and feedback session, during which the participating instructors would be free to cover any aspects of instruction they found relevant.

Form #2 gives examples of questions that might be used to focus on a more narrow set of teaching goals. If using a more specific form such as this, keep these guidelines in mind in developing the items:
- Department or TA trainer should identify a small number of teaching behaviors they would like to encourage in all sections. These need not cover all aspects of the TA’s teaching. Focusing an observation on the department’s specific teaching goals will help reinforce their importance.
- The items selected should be things that can be observed in a single class meeting.
- They should be things that can be described in terms of observed behavior, not simply evaluated.
- Observers should make note of instances of the desired teaching behaviors, and report their observations to the instructor. Discussion can focus on mutual problem-solving in areas where observed behavior was less effective.

As a variant of this approach, TAs can be provided a “menu” of teaching goals valued by the department, and each TA can select a sub-set on which he/she wishes to focus. This allows TAs more autonomy in setting the agenda for the observation exercise, and ensures they receive feedback they are ready for.
INSTRUCTIONAL OBSERVATION FORM #1

Instructor_______________________________ Date/Time____________ Location________________
Course No.________ Title________________________________  Level (Fr., So. Etc.)_____________
No. of Students_____  Topic of the Day___________________________________________________
Instruction Method____________________________________________________________________

Please summarize what you observed in the following categories:

THE INSTRUCTOR
Structure: preparation, organization, instructional goals

Instruction: guidance of discussion, clarity of explanations, balance of instructional activities

Style: voice, use of movement, gestures, eye contact, enthusiasm

Interaction: rapport with students, ability to involve students in section

Materials: media/blackboard use, handouts

THE STUDENTS
Student participation / attentiveness (beginning, middle, end)

Student comprehension

GENERAL COMMENTS

On the back of this form, list things you felt the TA did well in the observed class, and one or two suggestions for improvement.
INSTRUCTIONAL OBSERVATION FORM #2

Report how the instructor accomplished the following items during the observed section meeting.

[Sample items. Select/revise as appropriate]

1. Started class with an overview of the day’s lesson plan.

2. Connected section discussion/lab activity to lecture.

3. Explained lab equipment and procedures clearly and thoroughly.

4. Clarified purpose of lab assignment.

5. Encouraged participation of all students.

6. Helped students make connections between theory and application.

7. Guided students toward discovering answers on their own, rather than giving them the answers.

8. Provided varied explanations of material.

9. Asked discussion questions that stimulated higher-level thinking.

10. Used small groups effectively for some portion of class.

11. Attempted to determine whether students were understanding material.