



Tips for you, and your students: peer observation

- 1 *Think about why you might want to get involved in peer observation.* Research shows it's a really positive practice for both the observer and the observee and can help you reflect on what comprises teaching. In some institutions, it is a contractual expectation. Whatever your reasons, you can get more out of it by being clear about your rationale.
- 2 *Listen to and value feedback from your colleagues.* We all try to gather feedback from students and adjust our teaching accordingly, but feedback from colleagues can be even more useful, as they can bring their own expertise and share different approaches in a collaborative way, learning from what you do particularly well, expanding your repertoire, helping you to get better at what you do and, at your request, helping to identify any problems and remediate them.
- 3 *When you're observing, keep watching the learners to see what they are doing.* When you are actually teaching, you can only do this to a limited extent. Reflecting on how learners react to what your colleague is doing can help you to think deeply about how your own learners react to things you do. Watch out for things that really work with learners, and things which lose them.
- 4 *Make observing and being observed a normal part of life, rather than a special occasion.* This implies doing it regularly and informally. When teaching observation is a familiar part of our routine, it is much less scary when visitors from outside are in our classrooms, for example during inspections or when a professional body is checking up on how teaching is actually working.
- 5 *Being observed can be really good practice for conferences.* Getting feedback on teaching can help you think about what works really well for you so when it comes to conference presentations you can play to your strengths and be all the more confident, thereby helping increase your reputation in your field.
- 6 Make good use of opportunities to learn how best to observe and be observed, for example within PG Certs in HE, or in staff development programmes. Using different techniques for observing and being observed will help you find the ones that are most comfortable (or indeed most challenging) for you. Regular observations can help you become accustomed to the experience of other people watching your teaching performance, and can build your confidence at handling such situations.
- 7 *When observing colleagues new to teaching, don't go in too hard too early.* The nature and level of detail of the feedback on observation should match experience levels. While experienced colleagues may request and welcome robust critique as part of a process of continuous self-improvement, colleagues just starting out can have their confidence badly undermined by heavy-handed criticism. When pairing for observation purposes with a new colleague, it may help to let them watch you first and ask them for their comments in a structured and non-judgemental way, which will reassure them that you will adopt a similar approach when you do your observation.
- 8 *Remind yourself that in everyday teaching, students do see you in action, but don't really observe you.* Having a peer in observing you can help you think about some of the things that students might now comment on. While it is possible that some students might pass comment on your teaching approaches (keep away from Rate My Prof, for example, unless you are feeling very strong!) your students are more likely to be focused on their own needs rather than your performance. So when you're alerted by the person observing you of aspects of your teaching that could benefit from being changed, don't assume that students will necessarily be thinking along the same lines.
- 9 *Observation is a good defence against 'getting into a rut'.* When anyone has been teaching a particular topic for a considerable time, it is entirely possible to go onto autopilot and teach unreflectively, thereby being less aware of what actual learning is happening during your teaching sessions. Teaching observation can act as a powerful aid to re-energizing your teaching approaches.

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- 10 *Make the most of team teaching opportunities where you can be watched and watch others teach informally.* You are likely to benefit as much from these occasions as from scheduled teaching observation sessions. When, for example in team teaching contexts, you are regularly in the position of watching how your colleagues approach particular topics or skills development, a considerable amount of automatic staff development occurs as you learn from each other's diverse approaches. For example, you could see how they use digital technologies with which you may be unfamiliar.
- 11 *Getting feedback on your teaching need not be a lengthy process.* If you have a chat in advance and ask your observer to concentrate on two or three aspects of what you are doing (for example, 'Can you concentrate on how I ask and answer questions? Could you keep a watching brief on how well students are picking up unfamiliar concepts?'), these can form the basis of a short post-observation debrief. Getting such thoughtful comments on your teaching can be just about the most powerful staff development you can get.
- 12 *When you've observed someone else teach, always focus on the most successful aspects first.* Help to put the colleague you have observed at ease by talking initially about the most successful aspects of the session, which is likely to make them more open to any comments you might have about potential improvements. It may well be even better to ask them to start talking about the session first, as we often are aware of shortcomings ourselves ('I really got the timing wrong in that session and had to hurry at the end'), which then opens up the possibility of productive dialogue without you having to sound negative.
- 13 *Try to offer more positive than negative remarks at the outset.* If colleagues have to listen to a lot of negative remarks, they may turn off from the process or become hostile and then fail to listen to your constructive suggestions. Even when there is much to comment on adversely, it is important to give sufficient good news early on to help them remain receptive.
- 14 *When you are being observed, treat it almost as free consultancy.* Teaching can in some ways be a private and lonely task and it isn't always possible to make realistic judgements about how you are doing without a fairly neutral sounding board. Observations can provide real opportunities to have an informed educational conversation about a really important aspect of your professional life.
- 15 *Practise gently drawing out feedback from your observers if they are inexperienced at doing it.* Gain skills in getting your observer to clarify their thinking and expand on it when necessary. You might ask: 'Thinking about the session you've watched as a whole, can you identify the points in the class where I best held the students' attention and where I lost them?', 'Are there any aspects of my teaching you would suggest I try to change?', 'What do you consider the best thing about the way I am handling such-and-such?' and so on.
- 16 *Be prepared to receive positive feedback without shrugging it off.* In many cultures, there can be a sense of embarrassment about receiving praise without self-deprecation. This can lead to failing to take on board what your colleagues really value about what you do. It is important to acknowledge it, and thank the people who commend your practices, before entering discussions about potential enhancements. The majority of people who have had their teaching observed are delighted with the feedback they receive, and often surprised at how positive it was.
- 17 *Regard any criticism you receive as useful feedback.* Avoid the temptation to justify your position, or to make excuses for things that were found to be sub-optimal. When critical feedback is felt to have been openly received and noted, the observer tends to be much more satisfied that their job has been done effectively and is likely to continue to be a source of information that can be helpful to you.
- 18 If you receive criticism that you feel is unjustified, listen to it, probe the reasons behind it and park your negative feelings until you have a chance to think it through further in private. Chances are that there is an element of truth in what you are hearing, and even if this is not the case, you are unlikely to change the mind of your observer by arguing back on the spot.