Guidelines for Peer Observation of Learning and Teaching[1]

Peer observation

Peer observation is a voluntary system of professional support that can help teachers at any stage in their career gain valuable insights about their teaching performance in a confidential, trusting and formative climate. It simply involves inviting a colleague into a lecture or tutorial and asking them to give you their insights about the delivery of material, the student experience, and other important teaching related factors including clarity, pace, learning outcomes, ideas and suggestions.

In order for peer observation to be successful, it is important that three key stages are followed throughout the process:

1. Pre-observation meeting/discussion
2. Observation – teaching and learning
3. Post-observation feedback meeting

1. Pre-observation meeting/discussion

The pre-observation discussion between the observer and colleague whose teaching is being observed is essential to the success of the whole process. An important function of this meeting is to *establish trust, deal with any anxieties* felt by any of the parties, and *give reassurance*. The pre-observation discussion should cover the following:

- the specific learning objectives for this session (e.g. knowledge and understanding, key (transferable) skills, cognitive skills and subject specific, including practical/professional skills)
- the teaching approach to be adopted, anticipated student activities, approximate time plan for the session
- the context of the teaching (the status and history of the student group, any particular constraints or opportunities)
- how the observation is to be conducted (time of joining and leaving, any focus to the observation, where you will sit (if face to face session), any specific ways in which data will be collected)
- the time and place of the observation and feedback
- the content and its place within the curriculum of the unit and the programme of study
- any potential difficulties or areas of concern
- the way in which the students will be informed and incorporated into the observation
- any particular aspects that the tutor wishes to have observed
- any particular concerns that either the observer or the observed might have about undertaking the observation

2. Observing learning and teaching

The observed (teacher) needs to:

- prepare the students for the presence of the observer and share the purpose of the observation is to assist in the development of professional skills, and the focus of the observation will be the work of the tutor, not on the students; the observer will not participate in the session as this changes the focus of the activity and reduces the observer's capacity to comment on process
- work effectively with the learning group, ignoring the presence of the observer

The observer needs to:

- be discreet and diplomatic in the learning group
- sit where they are not in the overt line of vision for the tutor or the group, but at the same time they need to be able to see both the tutor and the group or leave camera off in the case of online observation.
- take brief notes when necessary, and ensure that these notes relate to the teaching and learning taking place rather than comment on the content of the session

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[1] http://escalate.ac.uk/resources/peerobservation/index.html

- carefully observe the methodologies employed, the responses and interactive processes used, the ability of the tutor to effectively achieve their aims, and the areas of successful and less-successful achievement in the session
- be able to share with the tutor a reflective feedback process at the end of the session

Note: The observer should not participate in the session as this may change the focus of the activity and can impede the observer's capacity to comment on the process.

3. Post-observation feedback meeting

As soon as practically possible after the class has been observed, and at most within a week, the observer should meet with the observed to provide confidential feedback. This is essential to the success of the process and must be handled sensitively.

In such a meeting there is a joint responsibility to keep the feedback focused and constructive, and to emphasise that the role of the observer is not to be a judge, supervisor or superior, but rather to *encourage reflection* on the session observed. To this end the observer needs to be aware of the tone of voice, language and body language, to ensure that the feedback is not perceived as confrontational or judgmental. On the other hand, real issues where they are perceived to exist must be raised and not avoided for the sake of a quiet life.

Good feedback will:
- allow the tutor to describe the class and say how they felt the lesson went before the observer makes any further comment. The tutor might reflect on whether the observation process had affected the session in any way, for example, in his/her behaviour or that of the students
- positively state what the observer considers the tutor to have done with skill, insight, competence, etc. The observer will provide evidence or instances of any claims made
- identify what did not appear to be so successful, or any areas in which some difficulties were observed. Again it is important that specific instances are cited as evidence for any comment about what did not go so well. Rather provide the opportunity to discuss the issues raised.
- not apportion blame, but provide adequate opportunity to discuss any matters of concern to the tutor about the lesson or about the observation process
- provide an opportunity to identify constructive solutions to any agreed difficulties, including sources of professional development and support
- focus on particular issues rather than allow generalised description or evaluation.

The observer will type up the feedback (after this meeting) and so the observed will receive a written account of the observation which will also summarise the feedback discussion. The observer will then send a signed copy of this written report to the observed.