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## Peer Observation Guidelines and Recommendations

Based on Peter Seldin's *Changing Practices in Evaluating Teaching & Ohio State University Handbook for Instructors*

### Definitions

Formative peer observation assists in the improvement of teaching. Summative peer observation involves the evaluation of teaching effectiveness used for merit, promotion, and/or tenure decisions. Both formative and summative observations can be based on the same observation instruments.

### Rationale/Purpose Statement

- 40% of colleges and universities now use peer classroom observation.
- Observations offer insight regarding the improvement of teaching.
- Higher education settings are currently moving toward multiple observation formats.

### Strengths/ Advantages of Peer Observation

- Gaining new ideas and perspectives about teaching from colleague(s);
- Both observer and observe may improve teaching ability;

### Weaknesses/ Disadvantages of Peer Observation

- Possible bias relating to the observer's own beliefs about teaching;
- Without a systematic approach—including observer training, multiple visits, and use of reliable observation instruments—peer observation is not a valid method for summative evaluation.
- For more on the problems inherent in peer observation and questions to ask when contemplating peer observation, see Rebecca Brent and Richard Felder's [It Takes One to Know One](#).

### Peer Observation Training

If peer observation is to be used for summative purposes, training peer observers is necessary. It helps them focus on specific criteria essential to completing a reliable and valid observation. Training can be completed in a meeting or via a training videotape. A training manual can also be helpful.

### Pre-Observation Conference Guidelines

The purpose of the pre-observation conference is to review the teacher's teaching plan, including the lesson goal, objective, strategies/methodology, and assessment. The following is a list of questions that the observer might ask the teacher:

- What is the main goal of your course?

- What is the main goal of the course session to be observed?
- What is your specific objective for the course session to be observed? In other words, what do you expect the learners to be able to know and do by the end of your session?
- What strategies/ methods will you use to help the learners to reach this objective?
- How will you assess whether the learners reached this objective? In other words, how will they show that they know and can do what you expected of them?
- Do you have any concerns that you would like the observer to address?

See also the University of Minnesota [GRAD 8102 Pre-Observation form \(pdf\)](#). To view this document, you must have the [Adobe Acrobat Reader](#) installed on your computer.

## Peer Observation Guidelines

- The observer should arrive at least 10 minutes before class. "Walking into class late is poor practice and inconsiderate" (Seldin, 1999, p. 81).
- The observer can be briefly introduced to the students, with an equally brief explanation of why the observer is present. Then move on!
- Observers are not to ask questions or participate in activities during class; such behavior can detract from and invalidate the observations.
- An effective observation requires an observation instrument designed to accurately and reliably portray the teacher's behavior.

## Observation Instruments

Planning and implementing a systematic approach to observation reduces bias and unreliability. The three most common instruments are checklists, rating scales, and open-ended narratives (written analysis). Seldin recommends a combination of two instruments. When choosing observation instruments, keep in mind that

- forms and checklists help standardize observations, making the observation more reliable;
- viewing a videotape of one's teaching and then completing an observation instrument is a feasible option;
- the blank sheet observation is not reliable and therefore is not recommended for summative purposes. However, for formative purposes, copious notes about what is taking place during the class can be the most useful prompt for discussion.

## Post-Observation Conference Guidelines

- Schedule this conference within a week of the observation.
- Review results from the completed Classroom Observation Instrument(s).
- Begin the conference with a positive comment (i.e., "I really enjoyed your class...").
- Provide honest, constructive feedback. For the characteristics of useful feedback, see the [GRAD 8102 Guidelines for Useful Feedback](#).

## Observable Characteristics of Effective Teachers

- Begins class promptly and in a well-organized way.
- Treats students with respect and caring.
- Provides the significance/importance of information to be learned.
- Provides clear explanations.
- Holds attention and respect of students, practices effective classroom management.

- Uses active, hands-on student learning.
- Varies his/her instructional techniques.
- Provides clear, specific expectations for assignments.
- Provides frequent and immediate feedback to students on their performance. Praises student answers and uses probing questions to clarify/elaborate answers.
- Provides many concrete, real life, practical examples.
- Draws inferences from examples/models and uses analogies.
- Creates a class environment which is comfortable for student...allows students to speak freely.
- Teaches at an appropriately fast pace, stopping to check student understanding and engagement.
- Communicates at the level of all students in class.
- Has a sense of humor!
- Uses nonverbal behavior, such as gestures, walking around, and eye contact to reinforce his/her comments.
- Presents him/herself in class as "real people."
- Focuses on the class objective and does not let class get sidetracked.
- Uses feedback from students (and others) to assess and improve teaching.
- Reflects on own teaching to improve it

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