



Teaching Toolkit

Gathering Feedback 4

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Gathering Feedback 4: Peer Observation of Teaching

Formative Observation

In *formative* peer observation of teaching lecturers attend and observe their peers in the classroom to assist with the improvement of teaching. This process may be specified by the School as part of developmental activities, or entered into by individual staff members who would like their teaching reviewed by their peers.

Newer staff may have less practical experience of what works in the classroom, and faced with the demand to deliver new modules or research, do not have the devotion to quality research and service. For the more established lecturer, it provides an opportunity for reflection – to prevent complacency, to ensure their ‘tried and tested’ methods are as successful as they’re believed to be, and to ensure new methods, techniques, or technologies are not passing them by.

One side-effect of this process is that, in addition to having a positive impact on teaching quality, it encourages lecturers to discuss their philosophies and approaches to teaching with each other, techniques that have or haven’t been successful, novel approaches to assessment or group work, methods of encouraging participation etc.

Summative Observation

Summative peer observation of teaching (more accurately referred to as third party observation) involves the evaluation of teaching and classroom behaviour to provide information used for merit, promotion, or quality assurance. This can involve either a peer or a panel of committee members. In addition to the performance aspect of teaching attention is paid to all teaching materials too (i.e., course materials, syllabi, exams, teaching aides, student evaluations, student advising records, and even face-to-face talks with students to get a complete picture of teaching before they enter the classroom).

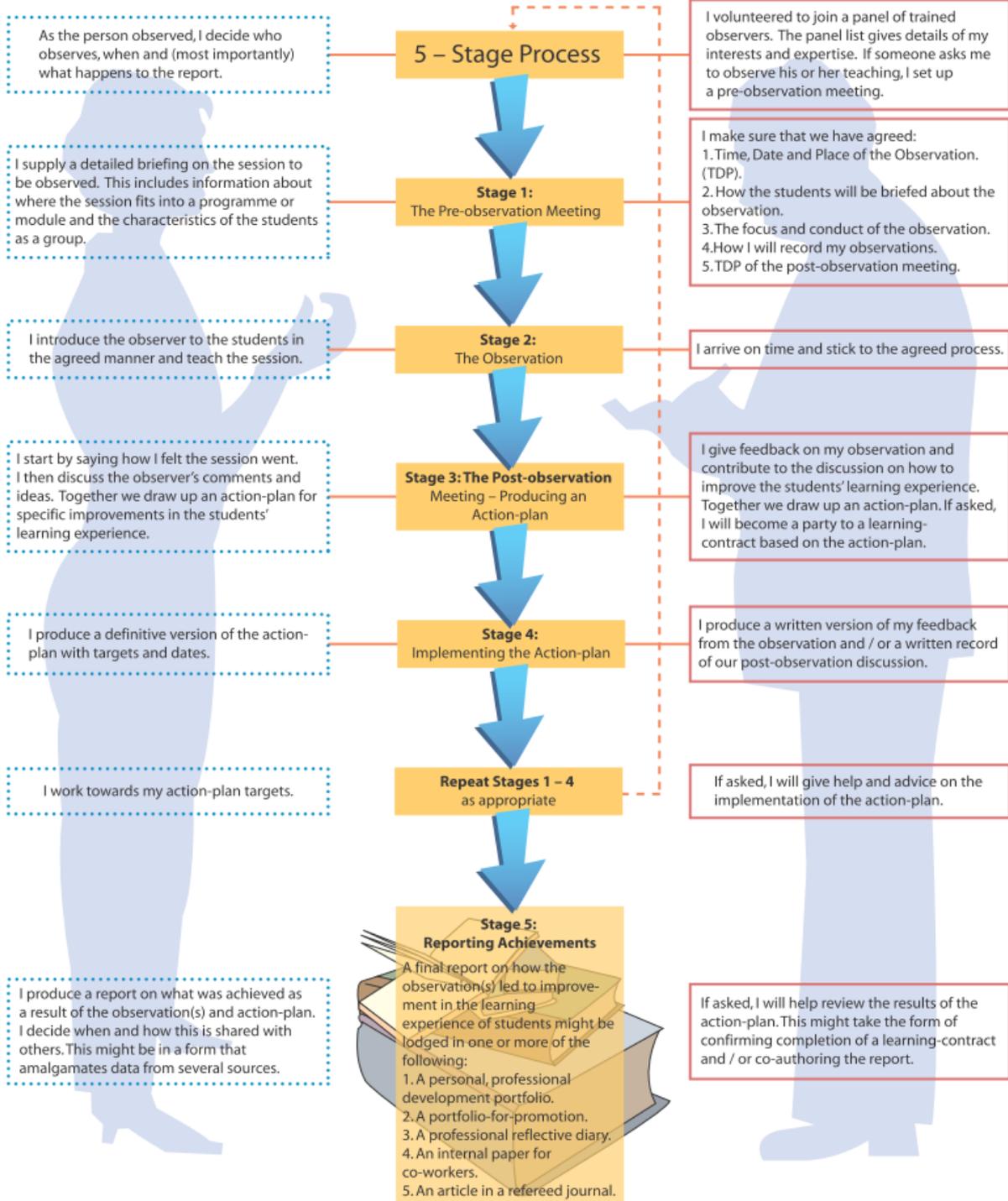
The UCD Model of Genuine Peer Observation

UCD Teaching and Learning has designed a five-stage genuine peer-observation of teaching process which can be used as a development tool for reflective practice. The full process is outlined on the following page.



Genuine Peer - Observation of Teaching

Project: to develop a peer-observation system that is genuinely an interaction between equals and will demonstrably lead to improvements in the learning experience of students.



This model produces genuine peer-observation by equalising the power relationship between the observer and the person observed. Because control of all derived data remains with the latter, the threat to career prospects inherent in situations where the results of observations might be communicated to managers disappears; and so does the temptation to simply showcase existing strengths. The imperative is switched to one where teachers actively seek the help of colleagues in improving the learning experience of students.

Conducting Peer Observation using the UCD Model

Preparation

The planning stage of the observation is one of the most important, and similarly most overlooked, aspects of the process.

Poor planning will lead to confusion and misunderstanding, a lack of focus, and potential breakdown in communication and relationships.

Establish key principles

Before the pre-observation meeting occurs between the observed and the observer, care should be taken to make sure that the person instigating the observation has considered each requirement beforehand and knows exactly what they would like to happen in the session. Before you meet your observer you address the following issues:

- The purpose of the process (formative or summative)
- The role and responsibilities of the observer and the observed
- Sensitive topics such as confidentiality and control of data
- The relationship between this POT and other evaluative or appraisal process (though ideally each should be mutually exclusive)
- The involvement of participating staff (want to ensure an atmosphere of mutuality, trust, and respect)
- Any issues that may be controversial or specific to your personal case

Roles of Observed & Observer in Preparing for the Observation

Observer

Volunteer to join panel of trained observers
Set up pre-observation meeting with the observed

Observed

Consider key principles before meeting observer
Select observer

Stage 1: Pre-Observation Meeting

The initial pre-observation meeting is essential to the success of the process. If you cannot physically meet beforehand, there should at least be an exchange via e-mail or telephone conversation. It's important to use this meeting to develop a sense of trust and to resolve any anxieties or concerns before the observation begins.

This meeting should also be used to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the observer and the observed. It's important to establish these parameters at this stage to avoid confusion or difficulties during the observation, or as part of the post-observation meeting/action plan production

During the course of the meeting the following issues should be discussed & resolved:

- Necessary admin details – the where & when etc.
- The location of the observer in the classroom
- How their presence will be explained to the students
- The level of activity/data collection methods expected (note taking, video/audio recording etc)
- The teaching approach being observed, learning outcomes, anticipated student activities, time plan for session (a lesson plan may contain all of this information)
- The context of the class (how it fits into the curriculum/programme of study)
- How the observation is to be conducted (time of arrival and departure, focus of the observation, seating location, specific ways data will be collected, any special requests on behalf of either party)
- Identification of any particular areas of concern or areas /aspects to focus on
- How students will be involved or incorporated into the observation
- How data will be recorded (checklists, rating scales, or written analysis)

Preparing the Students

It can be disconcerting for students, particularly when in tutorial or seminar groups, to have someone else attend the class without warning. It is, therefore, sensible and proper for you to explain to them, in advance:

- that a colleague will be attending the class
- who that colleague is and their status in the institution
- that he or she will be there to help you with your teaching
- that he or she will play no part in the class proceedings (unless a participative observation strategy is agreed)
- that the focus of the observation is the lecturer, not the students

It should be firmly established (again!) that the observer is not there to assess your teaching. They have been asked to provide feedback to enable you to assess your own teaching. It is not about making summative judgements about teaching quality. Any outcomes of observations, whether spoken or written, are confidential between pairs of participants, unless both agree to make some or all of the outcomes public.

Focus of the Observation

Although the focus will vary according to the session and the individual's requirements, some common focal features are listed below.

<i>Openings and closings</i>	Focuses on whether sessions have a clear introduction indicating the aims and learning outcomes of the session and time plan; conclusion or summing-up; summary of learning outcomes achieved and setting of work/reading for students to complete their study time.
<i>Planning and organisation</i>	Does the class begin and end on time; planned activities occur within the time allowed; is there evidence of planning of student learning; does the tutor address the learning outcomes that students are expected to achieve; are these related to the overall aims and objectives of the unit/course; and these outcomes are communicated to the students?
<i>Methods/approach</i>	Are approaches to organising and stimulating student learning suitable to achieving the learning objectives set; methods adopted justifiable in comparison with alternative approaches which may be taken; approach ensure adequate planned student participation?

<i>Delivery and Pace</i>	In a tutor led session: is the pace and delivery appropriate for the students present; sufficient time given to explain key concepts? In student led activities: are explanations to students of activities well paced; sufficient time allowed for student activities?
<i>Content</i>	Does the tutor demonstrate a good command of the subject being taught; is the content appropriate to the level being taught, up-to-date and accurate; can the tutor respond to students' questions; is the class intellectually stimulating?
<i>Student Participation</i>	Do students have opportunities to participate in the learning process in an active way that promotes their understanding; do they have opportunities to ask questions?
<i>Learning resources</i>	Are learning resources carried, interesting and appropriate?
<i>Accommodation and equipment</i>	Is the accommodation and equipment well utilised; is the room suitable for the type of learning activity being undertaken; are seating arrangements are effective?
<i>Overall style and ambience</i>	Can the tutor can be heard and understood clearly; does the tutor communicate an enthusiasm for the subject; are explanations given at the appropriate level in clear language; is student diversity respected; is there a good rapport with students?
<i>Acknowledgement of special needs</i>	Where students have special needs or disabilities are these taken into account?

Roles of Observed & Observer in the Pre-Observation Meeting

Observer

Confirm the following:

- Time, date, & place of observation
- How the students will be briefed
- Focus and conduct of study
- How observations will be recorded
- Post-observation meeting details

Observed

Supply a detailed briefing on session to be observed

Include info on how the session fits into programme & characteristics of students

Decide on the focus of the POT

Stage 2: The Observation

During the observation there should be no surprises or unanswered questions. Both the Observed and the Observer should know exactly what is expected of them and what they should and should not be doing on the day. The aim is to deliver the class in the usual manner

Many feel that because they are being observed they should be trying some new method or approach. Unless this is the purpose of the POT (i.e., to established whether a new methods or technology is suitable) the class should be delivered as normal. Failure to do so will result in feedback on behaviour that is atypical and therefore of limited use in terms of development.

Roles of Observed & Observer in the Observation

Observer

In addition to the role clarified with the observed the observer should:

- Be discreet and diplomatic
- Be located in an unobtrusive position
- Take notes when necessary which relate to teaching and learning, not about the actual subject matter
- Observe the methodologies employed, 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
- Share in a reflective

Observed

Prepare the students for the presence of the observer

Teach the students as normal, ignoring the presence of the observer

Begin the class with the observer present

Student

Students have to be informed about the observation in advance and should be aware:

That 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

That the observer will not participate in the session

That they are not being assessed or evaluated in any way

Stage 3a: Post-Observation Meeting

In addition to a brief feedback session following the class (if possible), a post-observation meeting should be held, ideally within one week of the session. This meeting will involve the observer providing confidential feedback to the observed in a sensitive and constructive manner.

The nature and format of this feedback depend on the parameters agreed by both parties at the outset of the process. Any information imparted at this meeting should be done respectfully, sensitively and constructively. The structure and content of the meeting is illustrated below in Figure 5.

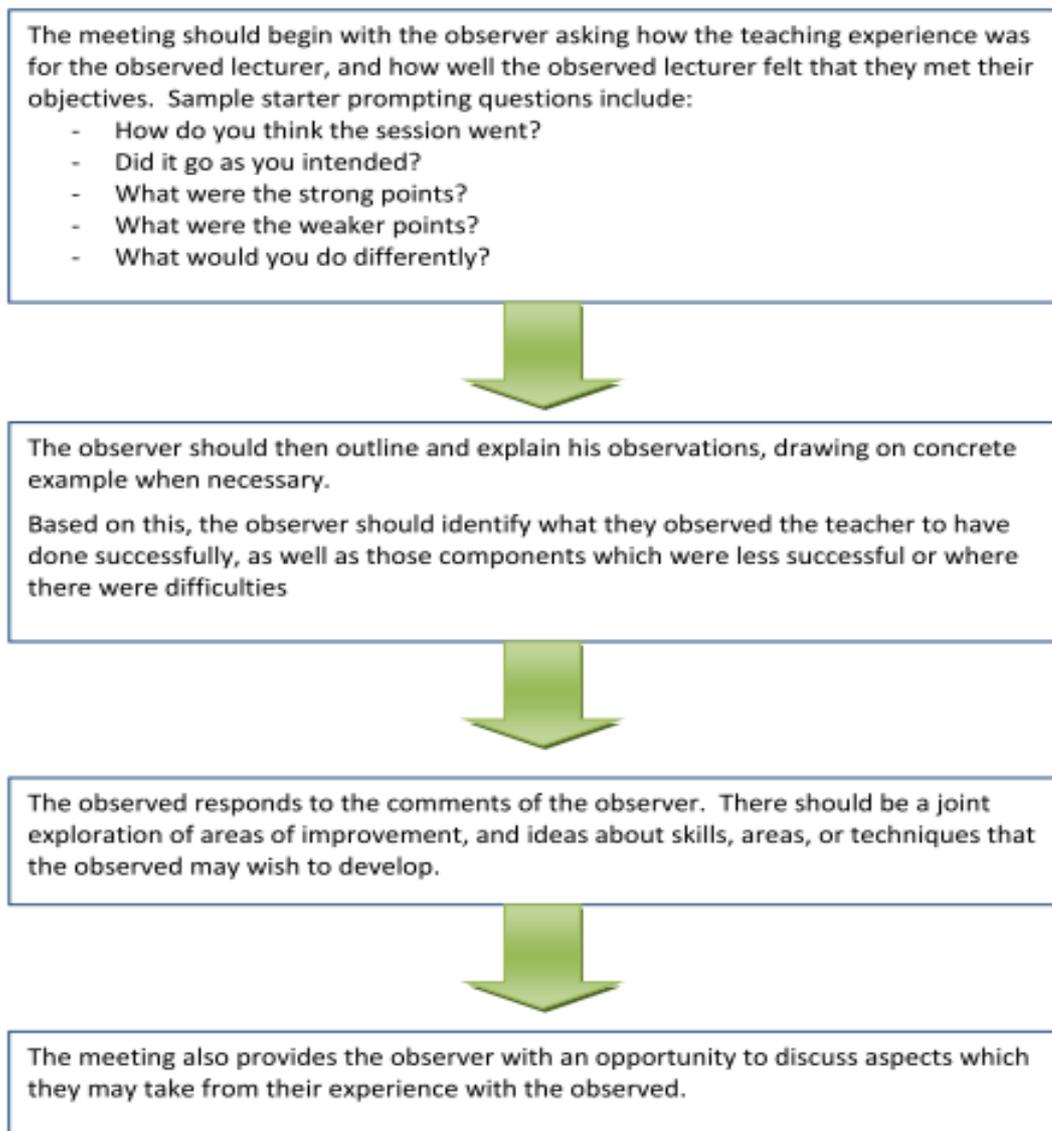


Figure 5: Steps in the Post-Observation Meetings

Stage 3b: Producing an Action Plan

After particular issues have been identified, the required action to be taken is often formalised in a Learning Contract. This is simply a written agreement between two parties that a particular activity will be undertaken in order to achieve specified learning goals.

It also indicates what will be produced as evidence that the goals were met. The learning contract is designed to be a flexible document based upon discussion and shared decision making. Ideally, the contract should be open to re-negotiation if circumstances change.

The role of the observer in the negotiation of a learning contract is to help the observed lecturer to establish an action-plan with specific targets for skills and/or knowledge development. Examples of contractual targets are:

- trying out new approaches to teaching
- practising specific teaching techniques with a view to improving personal mastery
- investigating what research says about particular teaching strategies or techniques, applying this knowledge in the classroom and evaluating the results
- producing new or improving existing learning materials
- developing new curriculum content or processes
- trying out new ways of assessing learning

It is important that the targets set are manageable within the time-frame. Remember, even very small changes in the practice of teaching can produce large scale improvements in the quality of learning.

Roles of Observed & Observer in Post-Observation Meeting and Planning

Observer

Encourage reflection on the session
Identify issues to be addressed
Provide structured and constructive feedback
Contribute to discussion on how to improve students' learning experience
Help draw up action plan

Observed

Start by commenting on how you felt session went. Be reflective
Discuss observer's comments & ideas. Be open to constructive comments
Draw up an action plan for specific improvements in students' learning experience with observer
Agree on action plan/learning contract

Stage 4: Implement the Action Plan

While participating in the observation is an important step, the activities that result from it are arguably more important. Without reflecting, identifying, and redressing the issues, the whole process becomes a pointless paper exercise.

The Action plan is developed to address areas that the observed and observer identified as being weaker, and responsibility for its completion and implementation ultimately lies with the observed lecturer.

Stage 5: Reporting Achievements

This stage involves the production of a final report on how the observation(s) led to improvement in the learning experience of students. This may be included in:

- A personal or professional development portfolio
- A professional reflective diary
- An internal paper for co-workers
- An article in a referred journal
- A contribution to a departmental summary

Depending on the purpose of this report it will take different formats. Key elements that should be included are:

- Acknowledgement that observation is only one small sample of your teaching, and that it's only a small representation of the more complex process of the students' learning experience
- A descriptive account of the sessions observed
- Examples of strengths and good practice, as well as some 'points for consideration'
- Suggestions from observer that the individual or School should reflect on and consider whether there are grounds for development in relation to these wider issues