



AN INTRODUCTION TO PEER OBSERVATION OF TEACHING

The key objectives of this endeavour are to:

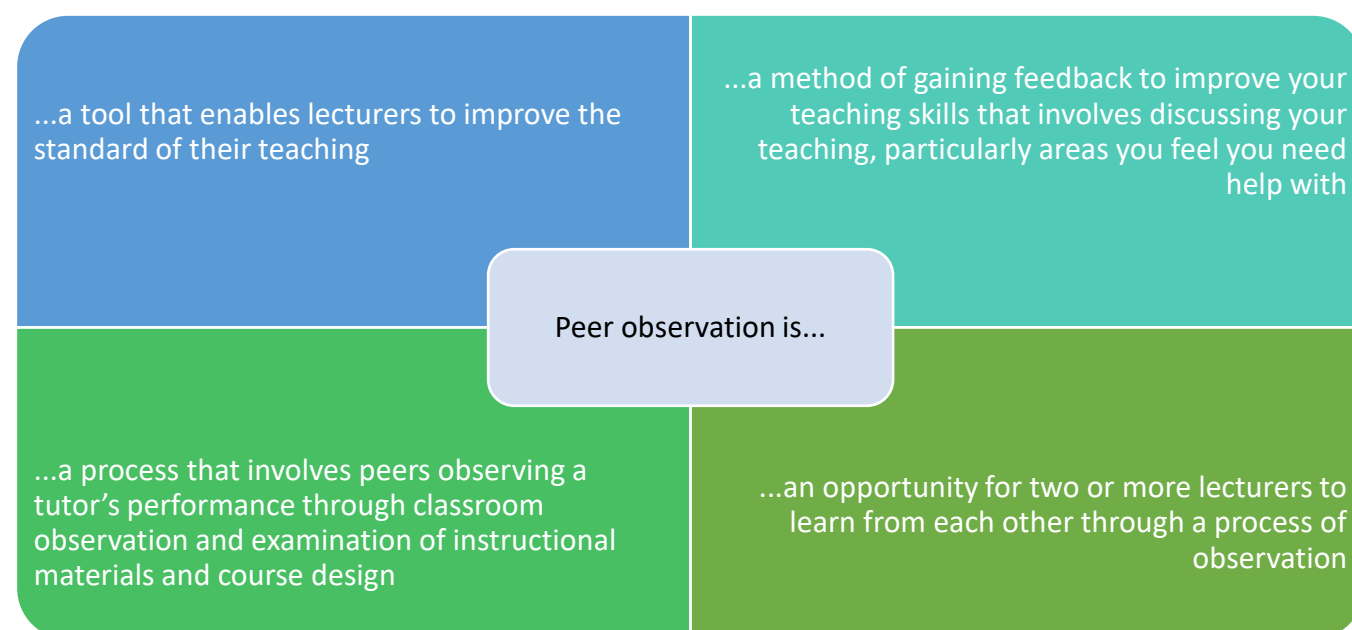
1. Prepare documents containing the information necessary for a peer observer to understand the purpose of class/es to be observed e.g. a comprehensive session plan
2. Plan and arrange a series of meetings that will facilitate the model of peer-observations (in use within this module).
3. Gather feedback from a peer observer to aid in critically reviewing your teaching.
4. Demonstrate an approach to enhance the teaching and learning experience of your students.
5. Produce documentary evidence that may support your practice portfolio.

Overview

Observation of teaching has become a feature in our universities since the millennium. The application of these social learning principles became common in the USA in the 1960s. Student-generated reviews of teaching staff led to professional development programmes and peer observation was an integral part of this process (D'Andrea, 2002). The practice has been increasingly developed throughout the UK, but didn't become widespread until the 1990s (Shortland, 2004). It took an additional ten years to infiltrate third-level education in Ireland.

What is Peer observation?

Peer observation is regarded by academics and educational developers as a tool for personal and professional development.



Gosling (2002) considers the topic by deconstructing the individual terms in the title.

‘PEER’

Many learning theories see learning as a social process (for example, the social constructivism that underlies student-centred learning or a PBL approach to teaching/learning). Webb (1996) states that since learning cannot be abstracted from the social relations within which it occurs, the peer will have an impact merely by being involved in the process regardless of their status.

A ‘peer’ can be taken to mean a variety of things – a colleague from the same School, different School, similar status, above or below your own grade, same age or experience etc. The nature of this relationship may change depending on why the observation is occurring.

If peer observation is being used throughout a School it’s vital that all staff members are regarded as genuine peers and that there is real mutuality and respect for the participants, regardless of their status.

‘OBSERVATION’

What are we actually observing? There’s an ostensible emphasis on the ‘performance’ aspect of teaching, and of moving teaching from a private, to a more public activity. Perspective is an important consideration, since those involved in the observation don’t just ‘see’ the teaching behaviours – they interpret them. Their views are shaped by their own interpretation or idea of what a lecture, innovative teaching, or traditional lecturing involves, and so the experience and expertise of the observer influences what is seen and what is missed, and what is thought to be important.

To avoid a vague, anecdotal observation/feedback, it is suggested that some form of checklist/proforma is used. However, since most genuine peer observation is developmental in nature, the checklist approach to data collection can be limiting and it is suggested that a more open, informal recording measure should also be incorporated. This ensures that the observer isn’t merely relying on memory & interpretation without any evidence, while at the same time not being limited to the strict format of a checklist.

One option for capturing as much data as possible is the use of recording equipment (either audio or video). While this can be a very powerful tool, the presence of a video camera can have an undesirable influence, particularly if the class is small.

The process of observation then is not simply a neutral, objective process. Rather, the observer, method of observation, and instruments used will all impact on the information obtained from the session.

‘TEACHING’

The emphasis on ‘teaching’ can often cause us to overlook the fact that the main purpose of teaching is to promote student learning. Consequently, we may have to broaden our perspectives, or reassess our conception of what we understand teaching to be and what evidence should be collected accordingly.

The assumptions we make about teaching will influence what is observed, since we often have different ideas of what constitutes teaching. Aspects that tend to receive less focus include tutorials,

supervision, lab or studio work that may involve one-to-one conversations etc., or anything that happens outside the traditional arena of learning (i.e., the lecture theatre/classroom).

UCD Model of Peer Observation

UCD Teaching and Learning has designed a five-stage peer-observation of the teaching process which can be used as a development tool for reflective practice. The key elements of this model are outlined below.

Key feature of the first three stages of the UCD model of peer observation

Pre-Observation Meeting	Post-Observation	Feedback Meeting
The person to be observed indicates they would gain from the observation	The observer acts in an unobtrusive manner	Conducted in private and comfortable settings with sufficient time allocated.
The observed briefs the observer on the intentions of the session and the chosen teaching strategy	The observer observes both teacher and learners (is aware of the context of the class/the learning)	The observed should give their appraisal of the session first.
The observed supplies a lesson plan and copies of resources to be used	The observer discusses their observation notes. This <u>isn't</u> judgemental or summative	The observer gives feedback, drawing on the evidence they gathered
Both parties agree a recording system and an action plan structure	Observer makes comments on and records specific incidents that seem important	The observer leads a discussion on what can be learned from the observations and encourages the observed to identify issues for an action plan

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 ensure that all parties involved are appropriately trained and aware of key issues and principles that may adversely impact on the effectiveness or smooth-running of the observation process. These include:

- Clarifying the role and responsibilities of the observer and the observed
- Ensuring issues of confidentiality and control have been addressed and resolved to the satisfaction of the participants
- Emphasising the purpose of the process
- Identifying, discussing, and agreeing on the controversial issues identified earlier

Roles of Observed & Observer in Preparing for the Observation

Observer	Observed
Set up pre-observation meeting if requested/selected by observer	Decide who observes & what happens to the report

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

Topics the meeting should include

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
- 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 (note taking, video/audio recording etc)

Preparing the Students

It can be disconcerting for students 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 he or she will be “evaluating” the teacher not the students

Evaluation component of the session

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.

Roles of Observed & Observer in the Pre-Observation Meeting

Observer	Observed
Confirm the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 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 	Supply a detailed briefing on session to be observed Include info on how the session fits into programme & characteristics of students

THE OBSERVATION

Although criteria vary from session to session (depending on focus and purpose etc), some common features exist across almost all learning situations and these can be used to provide feedback.

1. Openings and closings

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.

2. Planning and organisation

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.

3. Methods/approach

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.

4. Delivery and Pace

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.

5. Content

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

6. Student Participation

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

7. Use of appropriate learning resources

Are learning resources carried, interesting and appropriate

8. Use of accommodation and equipment

Is the accommodation and equipment well utilised; is the room suitable for the type of learning activity being undertaken; are seating arrangements are effective

9. Overall style and ambience

Can the tutor 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

10. Acknowledgement of students special needs

Where students have special needs or disabilities are these taken into account?

Roles of Observed & Observer in the Observation

Observer	Observed	Student
<p>In addition to the role clarified with the observed the observer should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 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 feedback process with the tutor at the end of the session 	<p>Prepare the students for the presence of the observer</p> <p>Teach the students as normal, ignoring the presence of the observer</p> <p>Begin the class with the observer present</p>	<p>Students have to be informed about the observation in advance and should be aware:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 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

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.

Structure of the meeting - Steps in the Post-Observation Meeting

- The meeting should begin with the observer asking how the teaching experience was for the observed lecturer, and how well the observed lecturer felt that they met their objectives. Sample starter prompting questions include:
 - How do you think the session went?
 - Did it go as you intended?
 - What were the strong points?
 - What were the weaker points?
 - What would you do differently?
- The observer should then outline and explain his observations, drawing on concrete example when necessary.
- Based on this, the observer should identify what they observed the teacher to have done successfully, as well as those components which were less successful or where there were difficulties
- The observed responds to the comments of the observer. There should be a joint exploration of areas of improvement, and ideas about skills, areas, or techniques that the observed may wish to develop.
- The meeting also provides the observer with an opportunity to discuss aspects which they may take from their experience with the observed.

Feedback

Receiving feedback can be a nerve-wracking experience. It's suggested, therefore, that feedback should be:

- As immediate as possible
- Delivered as informally as possible
- Kept to the areas you were asked to comment on

It has been established at this stage that the observer is not being asked to assess teaching competence. Despite this, the observed lecturer may want to know what judgements the observer made about the observed session. The extent of the evaluative judgements you are willing to provide should have been discussed and agreed upon in the initial pre-observation meetings.

Where judgmental comments are made, keep in mind the subjectivity of the task you have been involved in. Therefore, it's suggested that phrases such as "It seemed to me ..." or "I felt that ..." are more appropriate than "This was bad ..." or "You didn't succeed in ...". Because of the importance of feedback in the observation process (since it is the feedback that encourages and enables the observed lecturer to identify and develop weaker elements of their teaching), some tips on giving and receiving feedback are presented in the table below.

Giving feedback
<p>The impulsive response when providing feedback is to either report what you would've done in a similar situation, or highlight the weaknesses at the expense of the strengths. <i>Neither is constructive or helpful.</i></p> <p>Steps that can be taken to provide constructive, useful feedback include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confidence building (e.g., comment on some positive aspect of the session) • Limiting comments to aspects the lecturer can control or develop • Being specific in identifying problem areas - vague generalisations are of little help • Displaying sensitivity to the goals of your colleague • Making a concerted effort not to be judgemental • Balancing the proportion of positive and negative feedback - too much of either isn't constructive and is unlikely to lead to a change for the better • Being prompt, since delay reduces impact

Receiving feedback
<p>Natural, opposing responses to receiving feedback are either to accept whatever you're told as fact and follow all advice without question, or ignore everything. Neither will lead to successful developments or a trusting, respectful relationship.</p> <p>To gain the most from feedback, the receiver should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be prepared to consider comments which may challenge your own perceptions. • Have established from the outset exactly what you want your feedback to include • Be aware of how you're receiving the info, both intellectually and emotionally • listen to what is being said rather than trying to explain or justify yourself • Be clear about what your colleague is saying and about the points they are trying to make

PRODUCING AN ACTION PLAN

After particular issues have been identified one action may be produce an action plan or learning contract. This may involve a verbal or written agreement based on an issue identified through the observation that details how a particular activity will be undertaken in order to achieve specified learning goals, and what will be produced as evidence that the goals were met.

The role of the observer in this process is to help the observed party identify issues and to develop an action-plan with specific targets. Examples include:

- 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.

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

Observer	Observed
Encourage reflection on the session	Start by commenting on how you felt session went. Be reflective
Identify issues to be addressed	Discuss observer's comments & ideas. Be open to constructive comments
Provide structured and constructive feedback	Draw up an action plan for specific improvements in students' learning experience with observer
Contribute to discussion on how to improve students' learning experience	Agree on action plan/learning contract
Help draw up action plan	

Implementing the Action Plan

While participating in the observation is an important step, the activities that result from it are arguably more important. Without benefiting from the observations made, or implementing some aspect, the process becomes a pointless paper exercise.

Reporting Achievements

This stage involves the production of some type of report on how the observation led to improvement in the observed party's teaching and the learning experience of students. Commonly this will include reflections on strengths and weaknesses, and suggestions for changes or improvements to some aspect of your teaching.

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