

Observing Teaching in Higher Education

Expectations:

When we visit another instructor's class, it is important to define the purpose. Are you there for a formal evaluation or an informal visit? Are you there to help a peer with feedback? Are you there to look at a peer's methods for your own information? Defining the purpose is an important step and will help the process be more productive.

Defining our assumptions and expectations is also an important step. So often, we have our own ideas of what is "effective" teaching. We can think about our individual assumptions in comparison to our context. What are the department's and the university's expectations? What are the expectations in our discipline? What are the expectations outlined in the educational literature? For example, for some, effective teaching means that the physical grouping of students is orderly and that students ask questions in good order. For others, effective teaching challenges students with multiple activities that seem disorderly, even chaotic (whether face-to-face or Online synchronous). These different approaches to teaching call for understanding the context and purposes of the class session.

Further, we can explore whether the discipline has a signature pedagogy (standard method of teaching), and whether there are new signature approaches being adopted that might be unfamiliar to some? For example, mathematics has a signature pedagogy of demonstrating problem-solving, for which the instructor writes the steps to solving a sample problem on the board. A newer signature pedagogy in math combines a teacher's modeling of problem-solving with student group work, which student groups share with the class (through digital projection or white boards). We can look to the literature for a discussion of effective teaching, including evidence-based practices. The following are some resources:

- <http://archive.carnegiefoundation.org/publications> lists publications on signature pedagogies for a variety of disciplines.
- <http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/philosophy-of-teaching/nine-characteristics-of-a-great-teacher/> discusses what aspects to look for
- *How the Best College Teachers Teach* by Ken Bains is an interesting study of effective teachers.

Emerging Issues

In 2008, Daniel Bernstein notes several emerging issues in relation to peer evaluations of teaching. The last, and most crucial here, is the potential lack of validity when observations are done by untrained peer faculty for summative evaluation. This may be self-explanatory, but one-time observations should meet several criteria outlined by Carl Weiman (2015): being fair, practical, meaningful and valid, as well as focused not just on reporting but also on improvement.

Fairness and validity issues are gaining attention nationally and internationally, as data has emerged over the last several decades regarding how students react to and learn from faculty of color, women faculty, and younger faculty. Departments should be informed of these conversations as they proceed. HERI: Higher Education Research Institution is one source of information.

Observations are very helpful in the context of self-development and when given appropriate weight (not overweighed) in an evaluation context. Some argue that it is difficult to separate formative and summative practices, so defining the purpose is important, especially if there are dual purposes.

Observational Protocols

There are many available protocols, such as the Teaching Direct Observation Protocol (TDOP), the RTOP (Reformed Teaching Observation Protocol) and PORTAAL (Practical Observation Rubric To Assess Active Learning for evidence-based teaching). Both RTOP and PORTAAL are focused on STEM courses. Protocols allow more accurate documentation because of their structure and the training for their use. A protocol assists in documenting teaching and learning behaviors, and many, like the TDOP, record observations every two minutes, for accuracy. Even if a protocol is not used, faculty observers can educate themselves on the types of teacher behaviors and student behaviors to look for in a visit by reviewing a few common protocols for higher education.

Online courses can also be visited; the teaching observation can occur in a synchronous course. With asynchronous courses, the “observation” is more of an evaluation of the online course structure and the interactions online.

If not using a protocol, faculty are strongly advised to keep observational notes of their visit, to facilitate discussion afterwards. A simple observational sheet can help as well as a checklist of teaching behaviors (a list of teaching competencies is included below).

1. Keep linear notes of what is happening in the classroom when you visit (observable behaviors by students and instructor) and
2. Finish the observation with checking off what is observed with a protocol or other list of teaching and learning behaviors.

Be advised that protocols as well as observational notes do not tell whether teaching is effective or not. An instructor may use only one or two pedagogical methods and be highly effective or use a multiplicity of methods and not be effective—and vice versa. Simply having more activity does not guarantee “engagement” and learning. Lecturing may fail to retain students’ attention—or may capture attention much better than group learning. It just depends on the context and the instructor’s skill with the pedagogy.

When looking at teaching, however, most foundational elements should be present to ensure rapport (creating the climate for trust and interaction) between teacher and student. The instructor should also ensure that the class is organized from the student’s perspective.

For suggested guidelines and templates, see the **Suggestions for Teaching Observations**, with observational forms.

Schedule

Follow this suggested outline for doing an observation.

1. Preparation for a class visit
 - a. Meet with the faculty member to get oriented to class
 - b. Review syllabus, learning outcomes, and lesson plans for the class you are observing (whether face-to-face or reviewing online)
 - c. Discuss concerns and ask about strengths to watch for

2. Observation notes during a class visit
 - a. Remember to sit in the back and avoid interruptions. Just observe.
 - b. Take notes on visible behaviors, concrete details, and evidence of learning. Reviewing the content delivered during the class can happen as well but is not the primary focus.
 - c. Note the time periodically (every 5-10 minutes) as you take notes
 - d. Draw a diagram of where people are during class. Note how many students talk / ask questions and note if the instructor moves around the room (as much as is possible)
 - e. Record what you see as if you were 'in the field' (which you are, in a sense!) How does everyone interact? What are people doing? What can you observe?

3. Follow-up from a class visit
 - a. Write-up the visit in the form of a summary of your notes
 - b. Meet with the person you observed
 - c. Gather input from the faculty member. How did they think class went? Was it typical?
 - d. Discuss areas of observation (using a formal protocol or other guideline)

You may want to have more than one visit and more than one conversation. Peer observations work best in a climate of exchange, where the department and college are engaged and open. Given the complexity of teaching and learning, we know that sometimes what happens in class is not in the instructor's control, so a second visit may be needed.

If a protocol or check list is not in place, you may use the competencies below to build a structure.

Clemson 360 Teaching Competencies:

- (1) Plan (design), prepare, deliver, and evaluate instruction, incorporating:
 - a. learner's needs for clarity, organization, and strong student-teacher rapport,
 - b. learning outcomes of the discipline and educational institution,
 - c. attention to retention and transfer of knowledge and skills.
- (2) Communicate clearly, through oral (e.g. lecture, instructions), and written (e.g. course assignments, instructions) means, including facilitation skills of group dialogue.
- (3) Manage the learning environment to foster learning, using group management skills, developing student group skills, using new knowledge on learning, and using technologies to enhance communication and learning.
- (4) Demonstrate ethical and professional behavior in line with content area discipline, educational institution, and inclusive practices, demonstrating respect for others.
- (5) Assess student learning effectively, in both formative and summative ways, and engage students in assessment processes with the goal of developing independent learning skills.
- (6) Learn about, engage, and motivate all learners through inclusive means and with enthusiasm for student learning of content area(s) and development of student character in democratic institutions.
- (7) Participate in ongoing educational (professional) development (e.g. new teaching methods and new research on learning and diverse learners; updating content, educational materials for the content, and educational technology use; updating accessible and inclusive practices in education; and engaging in scholarship of teaching and learning).

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