



Observing Teaching in Higher Education

Expectations:

When we visit another instructor's class, it's 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 teaching is trouble-free, that the physical group of students is orderly and that students have few questions. For others, effective teaching challenges students with activities that are disorderly, even chaotic. These are very different approaches to teaching.

Further, we can explore whether our discipline has a signature pedagogy (standard method of teaching), and if there are new signature approaches being adopted? For example, mathematics has a signature pedagogy of problem-solving demonstration, as the teacher writes the steps of solving on the board. A newer signature pedagogy is to combine a teacher's modeling of problem-solving with student group work, which is also posted for 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 in teaching.
- *What the Best College Teachers Do* by Ken Bain is an interesting study of effective teachers.
- [Evidence-based Teaching Strategies](#): a top 10 list of strategies that have the most impact on student learning, on the OTEI website.
- Resources for evaluating teaching ("Review of Teaching") on the [OTEI resource page](#).
- New study of model teaching, coming from work by the American Psychological Association. *An Evidence-based Guide to College and University Teaching* (Richmond, Boyesen, & Gurung, 2016) and [companion website](#) by Regan Gurung.

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 some type of their visit, to facilitate discussion afterwards. A simple observational sheet can help, if your college has one, find one online, or use the worksheet 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 rapport) between teacher and student. The instructor should also ensure that the class is organized from the student's perspective.

For further information and checklists, see other [OTEI resources](#) under "Teaching Review"

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 the process, discuss any concerns the instructor has and ask about strengths to watch for in the visit.

2. Observation notes during a class visit
Use the Observational Cover Sheet and Worksheet included below
 - 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. If you have a teaching behaviors checklist, mark that
 - c. Meet with the person you observed
 - d. Gather input from the faculty member. How did they think class went? Was it typical?
 - e. Discuss areas of observation
 - f. Review your notes particularly for accuracy

4. Complete and submit your final evaluation, usually a letter, with a copy to the instructor.

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.

Observational Cover Sheet

Please fill in contextual information below. Some of this information requires a meeting/interview with the observed instructor, which is optional but recommended.

Observer name:

Date and time of observation:

Instructor name:

Appointment type:

Years teaching this course:

Course Characteristics

Class name and level:

Department:

Course/Session Goals and plans

- 1) Goals for the observed class:
 - 2) Planned activities for the observed class:
 - 3) How the class fits into the larger course (e.g., exams, special activities):
 - 4) How instructor uses data, if at all, to refine and/or inform teaching:
- Please describe the physical layout of the room (e.g., type of student seating, technology directly accessible by students, instructor on dais, number of projection screens and their positioning, etc.) or attach a diagram (see below)

A quiet reminder - Remember that what you as a reviewer are doing in the classroom has the potential to trigger behaviors by students during the class period. Please be thoughtful of that point and stay as silent as possible during class.

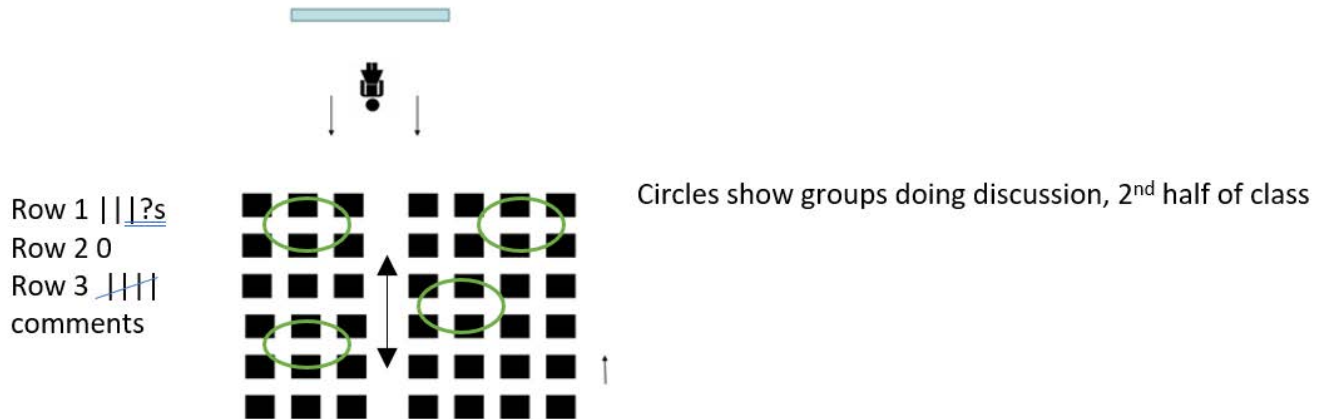
Student Engagement

VHI Very High: More than 75% of the students in the immediate area of the observer are either (a) actively taking notes, or (b) looking at the instructor/course materials or (c) involved in an activity

HI High: Between 50% and 75% of the students in the immediate area of the observer are either (a) actively taking notes, or (b) looking at the instructor or (c) involved in an activity

MED Medium: Between 25% and 50% of the students in the immediate area of the observer are either (a) actively taking notes, or (b) looking at the instructor or (c) involved in an activity

LO Low: Less than 25% of the students in the immediate area of the observer are either (a) actively taking notes, or (b) looking at the instructor or (c) involved in an activity



EXAMPLE of a class diagram. Circles, check or tick marks how student activity. Arrows to show where instructor walks.

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Reporting out:

A peer observation is like a research project, with the hypothesis that the instructor is conducting an effective class. How do you help the instructor show this? Your observational notes and your analysis are used to create a short letter or report. The records you keep can be shared with the instructor if that person wishes and at least should be kept with your office records.

Before writing your letter, meet with the instructor to review your draft, check for accuracy, and discuss assumptions. This meeting can help an instructor improve but it is suggested that practices to improve should be noted officially only if they are hindering student learning. The summary letter could include bullet points or a chart on strong practices you noted.

Post-observation

These questions can be used before the observation and following it, in discussion with the instructor. Use the syllabus and other materials as well to inform your conversation.

1. How well-prepared is the instructor for this session?
2. How does the instructor demonstrate a firm knowledge of the subject? And is the content appropriate, accurate and correct? Does the instructor provide effective reasoning for difficult concepts and check understanding?
3. How does the session reflect some aspect of the course objectives? Are learning activities reflective of and tied to course content and learning objectives?
4. How are instructional activities and methods employed to engage students in their learning process? Do these reinforce active engaged learning? And does the instructor use activities, resources, illustrations, and examples (such as worked examples) effectively?
5. How does the instructor seem to demonstrate a respectful attitude toward the students? And how does the instructor recognize student confusion?
6. How does the instructor provide appropriate guidance, feedback and positive reinforcement (including student assignments or presentations)?
7. To what degree do the students appear to be actively engaged in class? Do students frequently ask questions in class to clarify learning? And to what degree do students stay on task?

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