



## The Harriet W. Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning



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*Classroom observation is a productive way for faculty to learn from each other and an essential mechanism for senior faculty to mentor junior faculty. Constructive feedback at all levels is important for growth and evaluation. Included below are some suggestions for how to conduct such observations.*

### CONDUCTING EFFECTIVE CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS OF COLLEAGUES

#### BEFORE THE OBSERVATION

The faculty member conducting the observation (observer) should provide the faculty member being observed (observee) with advance notice of the observation. An observer may wish to consult the observee about which course and/or class session would be optimal for observation.

The observee should provide the observer with the following:

- ♦ a copy of the syllabus for the course, and
- ♦ a written account of the desired learning outcomes and strategies for the specific class to be observed and of their relationship to the pedagogical goals for the course as a whole.

*These materials help the observer understand the context for the specific class and enable him/her to evaluate, among other things, how effectively the observee meets his/her stated goals. The observee should explain both what (content) he/she plans to teach and how (pedagogy) he/she plans to teach it. The observee may wish to let the observer know if the class is representative of other classes during the semester or if the observee is trying something new/different that he/she would like the observer to comment on. The observee may also wish to let the observer know if there are particular aspects of his/her teaching that he/she would like the observer to comment on.*

*For more information about pedagogical goals and objectives, see the section on “Course Aims and Objectives” in the Sheridan Center handbook *Constructing a Syllabus*, available online at [http://www.brown.edu/sheridan\\_center/publications/syllabus.htm#course](http://www.brown.edu/sheridan_center/publications/syllabus.htm#course) and in hard copy at the Center.*

#### DURING THE OBSERVATION

The categories outlined in the Sheridan Center Teaching Tip “*Elements of an Effective Teaching Style*,” included on the next page, can be helpful in assessing the effectiveness of teaching strategies for meeting the stated goals for a specific class session.

### *Learning Environment and Course Goals and Objectives*

- ◆ Are the desired learning outcomes for the course/session clearly expressed and stated in the materials the observee submitted before the observation?
- ◆ Do the goals and objectives established for the course/session enable students to achieve the stated learning outcomes?
- ◆ What is the classroom environment like (e.g. competitive, collaborative)?
- ◆ Are students set up in this class/presentation to learn effectively?
  - Is the instructor well prepared and organized?
  - Does all information introduced, including handouts, relate clearly to the course goals and objectives?
- ◆ Is the information given out structured so that students can absorb it well?
  - Does the instructor have to rush to cover material by end of class?
  - Does the instructor accommodate diverse learning styles?
  - Is there sufficient and effective use of visual reinforcement: board/overheads/slides? If used, are they adequately explained?
  - How does the instructor reinforce the learning process (visual/auditory aids)?
  - Does the instructor encourage active learning (collaborative, co-curricular)?
- ◆ Do both the course syllabus and the instructor give explicit instructions, and address courtesy issues and deadlines?

### *Presentation Style*

- ◆ Does the instructor engage the students?
- ◆ Is the style of delivering information appropriate to the goals for the specific class session?
  - Distracting mannerisms?
  - Talk to board rather than audience?
  - Read verbatim from text, notes?
  - Talk too quickly/slowly?
- ◆ Does the instructor ask questions without waiting for answers?
- ◆ Does the instructor demonstrate respect for the class ( e.g. avoid embarrassing students in public settings)?

### *Teaching Tools*

- ◆ Does use of visual aids and/or auditory aids enhance learning about the topic?
  - Does all information introduced, including handouts, relate clearly to the course goals and objectives?
  - Is visual/auditory reinforcement clearly organized and explained?

## **AFTER THE OBSERVATION**

The observee and observer should arrange a meeting within two weeks of the session to discuss the classroom observation and any recommendations the observer may wish to make.

The observer customarily writes a report of the classroom observation, especially when it has been done for the purposes of tenure and promotion.

Writing a report and later discussing it with the observee requires thoughtfulness and tact. It is helpful to distinguish between observations that are concrete and neutral, and comments and suggestions that explain the observer's inferences about the effectiveness of the event, behavior, or teaching strategy being observed for reaching course goals.

It is a good idea for an observer to begin the meeting with positive observations and proceed cautiously.

It can be helpful for an observer to begin with a question related to an observation: "When you do X, what is your intention...?", and then offer a disclaimer, "This is my observation, and may not apply to your students, but..."

The following "*Tips for Sharing Feedback & Criticism*", compiled by Nancy Dunbar and Barbara Tannenbaum of the Department of Theatre, Speech & Dance, can be helpful for an observer giving feedback to an observee.

*"Own" your messages*

State your reactions with "I" rather than "you" statements that generalize for all listeners. Audience reactions vary. By owning your own reactions, you allow for the possibility of different responses. (You might invite other reactions as well).

Examples: "I appreciated the way you connected your speech to last week's class discussion." "I was confused when you said...because..."

*Be specific and concrete.*

While it might be nice to know that someone liked my introduction, it doesn't tell me very much. Instead, one could say, for example, "I liked the concrete illustrations of the theory X.", "I liked the way you included your own background and interest in the introduction."

*Focus on behaviors, not on personality characteristics and judgments.*

For example, say "I would have liked more eye contact" rather than "It's clear you're really not interested in us since you never look at us." Also, limit comments to behaviors that are changeable. Distracting gestures can be brought under control. Calling attention to a stutter, for example, is probably not helpful in a public setting.

*Distinguish between observations, inferences, and judgments.*

All of these have some role in evaluation but they are quite different.

- ♦ Observations have to do with what we see and hear; inferences and conclusions we reach based on those observations and judgments and/or evaluative response.
- ♦ Listeners observe differently, and, more important, draw different inferences and judgments from what they see and hear. Therefore, start by reporting your observations and then explain what you inferred from them.
- ♦ Speakers can hear a great deal of feedback on observations. Inferences and judgments are better received when they are based on clear observations. For example, "I noticed that you made eye contact with the students, which made me feel that you were genuinely trying to engage their attention."

*Balance positive and negative comments.*

Try to emphasize the positive things which the presenter might work on constructively in the future.