Guidelines for Formative Peer Observation Process for Online Teaching Enhancement

The following guidelines were prepared so that instructors\(^1\) at the University of Victoria (UVic) can confidently and easily provide a well-structured and detailed teaching observation of a peer for the peer-review process for awards or for an instructor’s teaching dossier. These guidelines are to be used for formative peer review teaching observations to improve teaching and student learning. For guidelines about summative peer review for promotion and tenure, please see Guidelines for Summative Peer Observation Process for Online Teaching Enhancement.

To ensure consistency and fairness, all observers are invited to attend a two-hour workshop (titled: Peer-review for teaching enhancement) facilitated by the Director of Teaching Excellence at the Division of Learning and Teaching Support and Innovation (LTSI). Once complete, observers’ names will be listed in our directory of trained observers. At any time, faculty members, Deans, or Chairs seeking trained observers may contact ltsioffice@uvic.ca to attain a list of trained observers in their department or Faculty.

A formative peer observation is for developmental purposes with a focus to enhance the individual being observed teaching practice to support student learning. As a self-developmental approach, it is active, reflective, benefits the peer observing and peer teaching, and is intended to provide non-judgmental feedback (Cosh, 1998).

Objectives of the peer observation process:
- To enhance teaching
- To encourage reflection on one’s teaching
- To improve student learning

Attributes:
Effective teaching practices are frequently identified as including:
- strong and supportive student-teacher relations;
- student-centered pedagogies, such as interactive and or collaborative teaching methods;
- pedagogies that ensure student engagement in the learning process;
- clear intended learning objectives or outcomes;
- expert and inspiring knowledge of one’s discipline and subject;
- strong organizational skills, evident in class structure;
- strong explanatory skills, evident in clarity and student learning;
- appropriate and varied assessment and timely provision of feedback;
- integration of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) into course design;

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\(^1\) For the purposes of this document, the term instructor will be used to encompass anyone in a position at the University of Victoria who teaches in their role.
• culturally respectful teaching practices that take into consideration diversity, equity, and inclusion of students; and
• commitment to personal pedagogic self-reflection and professional development.

Process:
There is general agreement within the higher education professional development literature (e.g., Cosh, 1998; Gosling, 2000; McMahon, Barrett, & O’Neill, 2007) that there are five stages to a peer observation process: planning, a pre-observation meeting, conducting a teaching observation, a post-observation meeting, and submission of a written report. Throughout the process, it is important that the instructor being observed be in control of the following: choice of an observer, focus of the observation, form and method of feedback, resultant data-flow, and subsequent steps (McMahon, Barrett, & O’Neill, 2007). This focus on instructor control results in “improvement of practice rather than demonstration of existing good practice” (McMahon, Barrett, & O’Neill, 2007, 509). With these factors in mind, the recommended stages are as follows.

Stage 1: Planning
There are two levels to planning: the departmental level and the individual level.
a. At the academic unit level, it is beneficial to have a discussion regarding the peer observation process so that faculty have an opportunity to bring up issues or concerns, such as how the process will be arranged within the department, confidentiality, whom to contact if problems occur, and the role of professional development in the department.
b. At the individual level, the instructor will need to be aware of how to go about selecting a peer (observer) to conduct the peer observation, how to appropriately time the process, how long the process will take, and requirements and expectations of the process (see below). It is recommended that these guidelines are followed:

i) The faculty member to be observed typically initiates peer observations.

ii) It is important that the instructor select a trained observer, such as a peer who has experience conducting online peer observations or one that has completed the LTSI workshop, to ensure that the instructor receives ample and specific feedback. It is important for the observer to have a critical yet constructive perspective so that the instructor receives feedback that is not just complimentary but also provides suggestions to enhance teaching.

iii) It is not appropriate to ask a graduate student to conduct a peer observation. In addition, it is not advisable to ask a colleague who is a friend.

iv) In the online environment, you are not restricted by location and therefore, may decide to ask instructors at other institutions to observe your course.

v) It takes preparation and experience to become an astute observer who can help develop the skills necessary to conduct online teaching observations. The Division of Learning and Teaching Support and Innovation (LTSI) provides workshops to help instructors know what to expect and to support the development of peer observation skills, such as how to write peer observation letters. Please check Learning Central for dates and times of these workshops.

Stage 2: Pre-observation meeting
Once the instructor has determined who will be conducting the online peer observation, the instructor will be required to set up the pre-observation meeting. There may be different purposes for this meeting for the instructor and the observer, but the overall goal for both is to meet the broad objectives stated above.

**As the observer** – the role is, primarily, to instill trust and to confirm that the purpose of the observation is clear.

**As the one being observed** – the role is to articulate clearly the focus of the peer observation and what the expected goals and outcomes are. Provide the observer with relevant material for the course, such as the syllabus, lesson plan (including intended learning outcomes for the online class being observed), readings, where the course fits into the curriculum, access to relevant educational technologies used in the course (e.g., Brightspace), or anything else that would give the observer contextual background about the course. Ensure that the observer knows the date, time, and if applicable, receives the videoconferencing link for the observation. You will also have to add your observer to Brightspace so that they can view your course. You want to give them student access so that they can see what students see. Confirm with the observer on the day before the observation that they have access to all platforms necessary.

Together – determine the following:
- agree upon a week/unit of the course to review, including discussion forums, or other shared materials, and/or
- the date and time the observer will join the online synchronous videoconference class.

**Stage 3: Conducting the teaching observation**

**Criteria** – For the observer, the focus is on how the teaching practice supports students’ learning and whether there are ways to enhance teaching to potentially improve student learning. Remember that teaching is complex. An observation form is available on the LTSI website that provides criteria common to teaching online that are student-centred/learning-oriented. However, the academic unit or discipline may have additional criteria that are essential to quality teaching that can be added. The observation form is strictly a beginning guide on what to look for and to provide feedback about. Feel free to use and modify to suit the specific context of the academic unit, discipline, course, or instructor. For example, does the instructor use an appropriate blend of synchronous and asynchronous design for the course that provides an optimum learning environment for students?

**Methods** – If the observer is joining a synchronous session of the class, the instructor informs the class of the general purpose of the observation but this is not always necessary (usually depends on the size of the class). The observer will be discreet and will refrain from participating in the session or interacting with students to maintain focus on observing the complete teaching/learning process. It is advisable for the observer to take more rather than fewer notes so that these details are available when conducting the post-observation meeting. In addition to the criteria on the observation form, there may be other points that were established in the pre-observation meeting that the instructor wants addressed. Additionally, discussion patterns can be documented. This may be important if an instructor is actively working to increase participation or wants documentation about communication patterns. Alternatively, this may be something that the observer decides to document to bring notice to the communication patterns occurring in the course, which can highlight issues such as dominating students and students who never contribute. This type of information can be very useful to instructors, who may not be aware of the communication imbalance in their course.

**Stage 4: Post-observation meeting**
After the observation, the observer will need a few days to reflect and to gather relevant thoughts in order to provide a detailed and coherent report to the instructor. It is also important to allow a few days between the observation and the subsequent meeting with the instructor to allow the instructor time to reflect. The observer should have the following prepared: what the instructor did well, three constructive points to consider for improvement (no more than three), and what the instructor should keep on doing.

During the post-observation meeting, it is best if the observer utilizes questions to guide the discussion. The observer can begin the meeting by asking the instructor how the session went, what went well, and what could be improved. The observer can confirm the instructor’s claims of what went well by sharing how they align with what was observed. When it is time to discuss points to consider for improvement, the observer can again build on what the instructor notes could be improved. If the instructor does not bring up any points for improvement, or if the points brought up are different from the points observed and determined to be important, then the observer should ask the instructor a question about the issue. For example, if the instructor’s questions to the students were judged by the observer to be ineffective or poorly designed, then the observer could ask the instructor how effective the questions were. By using this approach, the instructor is identifying and owning the feedback, which will result in an openness to discussion. It is best if the observer finishes the discussion on a positive note by asking the instructor what he or she does well, should keep on doing, and by pointing out any resources that the instructor may want to consider going forward.

**Stage 5: Written report**

Before departing the post-observation meeting, the observer needs to clearly outline what will be included in the letter for the instructor’s teaching dossier or, for example, to an awards committee. It is important for there to be agreement between the observer and the instructor about the letter’s content so that both are comfortable with how this information will be shared. Please see the sample review letters in Appendix 1.

**Conclusion**

The peer observation process can be continued as often as an instructor wants. At the LTSI, we recommend that instructors consider using the process on a continuing basis in order to stimulate reflection on one’s teaching practice and to engage with other perspectives about how to approach one’s teaching. More frequent peer observations also may decrease the stress that an instructor may feel in having an observer.

**Resources**


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Appendix 1 – Sample Peer Observation Letter

Name of Instructor
Teaching Observation for Name of Course (Synchronous and asynchronous instruction)
Date, time, and location

Total students registered: 45
Total students in synchronous session: 40

Thank you so much for allowing me to observe Name of Course. When we met prior to the observation, you indicated that you wanted general feedback about how you designed the learning experience in CourseSpaces and on Zoom, since this was your first time teaching online. I will begin with observations about the learning environment you created, then proceed to specifics about your teaching style, and conclude with student interactions.

The learning environment you created for your students in both venues was done well. In CourseSpaces, I was impressed with your clear navigation instructions, user-friendly units, and your welcome image and message. I immediately felt like you had opened the door and welcomed me into your classroom. This is so important for students to experience when they first access the course. You nicely provided guidance to the online learning environment, including where to seek help for the various platforms students would be using. You had your expectations clearly stated, including netiquette guidelines. Each unit had learning outcomes and resources visibly outlined. Throughout you used a range of activities to support student learning. What I did not see was clear indication as to when you were present on CourseSpaces. I know that the class meets for one hour on Zoom but it would help students know how often you were responding to posts on the discussion forum and confirm your presence on the platform. It is essential that your presence is obvious and well structured, so that students understand that you are maintaining high expectations and available to support them when needed.

For the Zoom session, you began class in a very organized manner by starting on time and administering the Readiness Assessment Test. It was obvious that students were enculturated into the class routine and the format of the test, but even so, throughout the individual and group portion of the test, you provided clear instructions and time frames for each segment of the test process. You seamlessly had students add their responses to the whiteboard function in Zoom and in the chat function. I thought that this was an effective way to begin. It helped students warm up to the topic, gave students immediate formative feedback, and provided you with a diagnostic about the knowledge level of students.

As well, I noticed how respectful you were of students, as you thanked them for their input, ideas, and interactions. Overall, the learning environment you created was inclusive, safe, respectful, well structured, with clear goals and learning outcomes, creative, and included active learning. I particularly loved how you ended with students singing a song together that connected to the lesson content and maintained everyone’s energy until you ended right on time. It was obvious that students were highly engaged and enjoyed this wrap-up activity. A suggestion related to wrapping up a lesson, make sure that you provide an opportunity to find out if students have met your learning outcomes for the class. This is done with what is called Classroom Assessment Techniques (CATs). For example, you could ask students to respond to a quick poll related to the subject material or have students reflect on what they learned and hand in to you. With either method, you will be able to assess whether students have attained the level of knowledge about the learning outcomes you intended for that lesson.

Your teaching style is student-centred and relaxed but organized and directed. Throughout the class, you did an excellent job of referencing previous material and assignments. I particularly liked how you had students define
terms and concepts when other students requested clarification. It is so important to draw on students’ knowledge for them to teach other students. It instills confidence, creates rapport within the student group, and solidifies their learning. You nicely appended their contributions with concrete examples that helped flush out the concept for the whole class. Sometimes when you did this, you referenced specific page numbers in the text to help students locate the information. I thought this was an effective way to direct students to the knowledge base they needed. It was obvious that you had a command of the subject, as you spoke in a clear voice at a good pace. You transitioned nicely from conversation to presentation and questioning modes. I also noticed that you used your body language very effectively, which is difficult to do on a videoconference platform. You often encouraged students to continue talking by nodding your head, which confirmed their understanding and contribution. You also used your hands well when speaking, which helped illustrate your words. I observed that you managed the discussion expertly by making sure points were clear, that students understood, and kept the conversation directed to the material. Throughout the class, you intermingled and connected your personal stories to the concepts, making the material very engaging for students.

Students were very comfortable and actively interacting. I found that students responded quickly to your and other students’ questions. However, as in all classes, not all students were speaking or contributing to the chat box. You may want to consider using the breakout room capability in Zoom so that students are put in a smaller room to discuss a question or topic. In this way, all students are given the opportunity to contribute. Each small group could assign a reporter and when you bring the group back together, reporters explain the key points from their discussion.

Once again, I thank you for inviting me to review your course, both in Zoom and on CourseSpaces. I observed a very caring, respectful instructor that had students invested and engaged in their learning. This began with the concerted effort near the beginning of class to have the students reflect about the assignment that took place that day and on the material explored. The class was well paced and included a variety of activities that not only critically engaged the students but also had them thoroughly enjoying the experience. Overall, the course was appropriately balanced between synchronous and asynchronous activities for students to attain your course learning outcomes. Well done!

Sincerely,

Your name
Department
Email