Guidelines for Summative Peer Observation Process for Online Teaching Enhancement

The following guidelines were prepared so that faculty members at the University of Victoria (UVic) can confidently provide a well-structured and detailed teaching observation of a peer for the peer-review process for departmental tenure and promotion process and an instructor’s teaching dossier.

The summative peer observation is part of a larger peer-review process that takes an evaluative focus and is used for decision making required for tenure and promotion, and accountability. Similar to formative, summative peer-review provides developmental opportunities. For guidelines about formative peer review for promotion and tenure, please see Guidelines for Formative 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.

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;
- 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 is involved in 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 summative 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, if acceptable.

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. It is important for there to be agreement between the observer and the instructor about the letters content so that both are comfortable with how this information will be shared. The letter content will include information from pre- and post-meetings with the faculty member, observation(s) of instruction, and the Peer Observation of Teaching form to develop and structure the final evaluative letter included in the dossier. The sample summative review letter in Appendix 1 shows the type of information required and how to structure a summative letter. The letter should be provided to the faculty member within two weeks of the post-observation meeting.

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 may decrease the stress that an instructor may feel in having an observer, especially when summative.

Resources


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Appendix 1 – SAMPLE SUMMATIVE OBSERVATION REPORT

Summative Peer Observation Letter Summative Observation of Jin Schmin’s Understanding Pies and Tarts
Course Observation

Participant: Jin Schmin
Date(s) of Observation: 7 March 2017
Observer: Adita Bobita
Class Title: PS206: Pies and Tarts I observed a three-hour Pies and Tarts course taught by Jin Schmin on 7 March 2017 on Zoom. Prior to the observation I met with Jin to learn about his goals for the course, for this specific session, and aims regarding student learning outcomes and in-class participation. I also met with him after the observation to discuss his reflections on how the session unfolded.

Overall Learning Goals for This Course

Disciplinary Content: Pies and Tarts is a required theory course for the Pastry and Desserts major. In Jin’s own framing, it is a modernised ‘great pies’ course with additional critiques and expansions of the established literature that intentionally seeks to create conversation and synthesis across diverse authors and theoretical perspectives. A core goal for the course is for students to learn key works within the pastry literature, to understand how those works relate to their historical and national context, and also to be able to critique these highly established theories. Jin aims for students to progress from understanding to critique to original argumentation. In this sense his approach generates both content and skills-based learning.

Research, Writing, and Analytical Skills: Additionally, Jin has carefully designed the course to set students up for success in the capstone. One way he does this is by providing students with the theoretical landscape needed to situate their capstone research relative to established authors and debates. His writing assignments require students to put theoretical works into conversation with each other in preparation for the capstone literature review. Second, by emphasizing critique and letting students determine the topics covered during class, Jin equips students to create their own arguments and define their own research questions.

Intellectual Independence: High participation and active student learning are key to Jin’s teaching. He aims for students to have ownership – to set the agenda, push the conversation forward, and inject their own creativity into the discussion. He sees this as key both to motivating them to learn the course material and to developing analytical skills. The payoff from this student-centred approach was very evident in the quality and volume of student participation during class.

Course Format

Setup and Introduction: Jin began class by having everyone visually present on Zoom. Jin then led with a roughly five-minute overview of the class, situating it within the larger syllabus and outlining key themes from that section of the course, and reminding the students of the day’s format.

Student Presentation: There was an hour-long presentation led by three students. Jin uses these presentations to develop presentation skills and to bring additional context to the class. The student presenters are asked to do additional research beyond the required readings required, which makes them surrogate experts on the topic for the week. It was clear from their body language and subsequent questions that all students paid close attention to the presentation, suggesting that Jin’s goal of developing a culture of active listening and engagement was quite ingrained.

Discussion: When they returned from break, Jin began the discussion by posing an initial question about the arguments employed by the day’s assigned authors. In keeping with the emphasis on student-led discussion, there were long periods (5-10 minutes on average) where Jin did not speak at all and the conversation flowed on


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its own. If the discussion got too off-topic or stuck in minutia Jin would redirect or remind students of the big-picture agenda topics.  

**Conclusion and Wrap Up:** The last five minutes of class allowed Jin to foreshadow next week’s reading and assignments, connect the day’s readings with upcoming literature, and remind students to take advantage of his office hours.

**Achievements of Core Learning Aims**

Jin is achieving all of his core learning goals and deep student learning is quite evident. In keeping with Jin’s goal of inducting students into the Pastry literature, the student-led presentation and subsequent discussion made it clear that the students are learning the key arguments in this literature and how they fit together. For example, the presentation on Martha Stewart explicitly put her work in conversation with Michael Fields. These students could go on to graduate work or pastry-studies related jobs and be well versed in key approaches to pastry sciences.

I also saw considerable evidence that Jin's goal of students learning to analyse and critique is being achieved. The questions students asked of the presenters made it clear that they are learning to probe, analyse, and identify underlying assumptions in assigned readings and each other’s interpretations. This was also evident in the questions students posed to each other during the freeflowing discussion. They suggested questions and pushed each other to be precise in issues of method and to what extent different authors disagreed with each other.

Students are also developing the communication and creative thinking skills Jin has prioritised by giving students so much autonomy over class discussion. Whereas in other classes, students often listen and respond to their professor, I was particularly impressed by how well the students had learned to listen to each other, and to constructively build off-of and even disagree with each other’s contributions. Another rare quality of this class, and significant strength, was students' willingness to disagree with each other, marshalling specific text, logics, and unpacking each other’s underlying assumptions. They identify limits in the assigned work and even suggest improvements or extensions. These are key indicators of the professors’ success in using the course to prepare students for successful capstones.

Lastly, in addition to analytical and communication skills, students are also developing research skills in this class. Students had clearly done the readings and had learned to distinguish the most important points. Students’ knowledge of the readings was very clear from their ability to cite the authors’ primary claims, reference appropriate details and evidence, and connect different works to each other. Students routinely referenced and engaged directly with the text, citing specific pages, and connecting one author to another.

**Additional Achievements**

Through his syllabus design and classroom management, Jin has achieved his core learning goals. There are additional strengths which he brings to the class that I want to briefly mention. First, Jin is dedicated and highly adaptable and attentive to students’ changing needs. In our post-observation conversation, Jin explored a number of possible new exercises he could integrate in order to boost participation even further and bring even more voices into the conversation.

Second, Jin has created a space of inclusive intellectual community. He always names students contribution – e.g. ‘as Teo said’ or ‘would you agree with Sara that…’. Proportionally to the class composition, female students and students representing minority or traditionally marginalised ethnic or racial groups participated as often and energetically as male students and those from more privileged identities. Local and international students also participated equally. Jin allows for long quiet periods after questions which gives students time to consider their thoughts. No one student dominated the discussion and those who were prone to speaking more often would often defer to those who were entering conversation for the first time.

In Jin’s learning management system (LMS) course online, Jin had clear navigation instructions, user-friendly units, and a welcome image and message. It felt like Jin had opened the door and welcomed students into the classroom. This is so important for students to experience when they first access the course. Jin provided
guidance to the online learning environment, including where to seek help for the various platforms students would be using. Jin’s expectations were clearly stated, including netiquette guidelines. Each unit had learning outcomes and resources visibly outlined. Throughout Jin used a range of activities to support student learning.

Areas for Improvement and Experimentation

Student Presentations: One area where Jin did not seem to be fully achieving his own learning goals is in the student presentation. Jin had explained that for this upper level course he wanted to minimise lecturing in favour of structured discussion and student-led inquiry. However, by encouraging or allowing student presentations to follow lecture format, he has not removed lecture so much as out-sourced it to the designated student presenters. In our post-observation conversation Jin and I discussed the pros and cons of having students lecture versus lead discussion as part of their presentations. In future courses Jin plans to experiment with the instructions he gives to student presenters, perhaps requiring them to have some form of interactive exercise or discussion.

Tone: Jin is self-aware and knows that he has a very informal and collegial persona vis-à-vis students. This creates some risk that his authority may be compromised and students will not be as attentive to his assignments and deadlines. He therefore goes to lengths to reiterate penalties for not completing relevant assignments. Nonetheless, he has noticed that students continue to miss deadlines across the semester. We discussed whether this was a problem vis-à-vis his learning goals and steps he could take to improve course discipline.

Student Participation: In our pre-observation discussion Jin alerted me to the fact that one of his struggles this semester has been to coax two or three students who are persistently silent to contribute to class discussion. He has experimented with techniques during class, such as allowing longer silences to give those students room to enter that conversation. Jin has also proactively reached out to these students outside of class to talk through the impediments they may experience to participation. He also reiterated several times, and in a clearly genuine way, that he was available for additional consultation during office hours. But despite these efforts, a small number of students continued to abstain from participating. During the first 45 minutes of the discussion part of class, 8 out of 12 students did not talk once. During the last 45 minutes five of those eight students started talking (but three of those only spoke once). In our post-observation conversation, we discussed how Jin may want to experiment with some new tactics to invite even more even participation from these students, such as starting with short writing exercises, or creating smaller circles within the main conversation circle and having students rotate in-and-out of that smaller circle. Jin was responsive to these ideas and seems excited to experiment with new techniques in his more introductory-level course next semester.

Clarity: One are that Jin could improve with the asynchronous part of the course, is to indicate to students when Jin would be present. It would help students know how often Jin would be responding to posts on the discussion forum and confirm his presence on the platform. It is essential that presence is obvious and well structured, so that students understand that the instructor is maintaining high expectations and available to support them when needed.

Concluding Thoughts

Jin is very thoughtful and intentional in his goals for student learning, and his teaching practices align very deliberately and effectively with those priorities. He is a dedicated and innovative educator who elevates students to the next level in their analytical thinking and communication skills. Perhaps most significantly, this course is both firmly a Pastry major course and a Liberal Arts course. As an advanced course in the major, this course inducts students into the literature and helps them prepare for the capstone. In addition, and very much by design, this course contributes significantly to students’ broader, liberal arts learning by integrating training exercises in reading, writing, communication, and analysis. In this sense, Jin’s course design and pedagogical approach achieves the aims we have for our students both in terms of the depth we hope they get in the major, and the breadth achieved from a liberal education.