Guidelines for Peer-review Process for Teaching Enhancement

The following guidelines were prepared so that instructors 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, for departmental promotions, or for an instructor’s teaching dossier. These guidelines can also be used for ongoing observations to improve teaching and student learning.

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

The peer-review process of teaching observations is a self-developmental approach to achieve the above objectives. It is active, reflective, benefits peer observing and peer teaching, and is non-judgmental (Cosh, 1998).

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-review 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 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 in the peer-review process are as follows.

Stage 1: Planning

There are two levels to planning: the departmental level and the individual level.
a. At the departmental level, it is beneficial to have a discussion about the peer-review 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.

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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.
b. At the individual level, the instructor will need to be aware of how to go about selecting a departmental peer (observer) to conduct the peer-review process, 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) It is important that the instructor selects a trained observer, such as a peer who has experience conducting peer observations, to ensure that the instructor receives ample feedback. It is important for the observer to have a critical, constructive perspective so that the instructor receives feedback that is not just complimentary but also provides formative feedback that will lead to improved teaching.

ii) 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 also a personal friend.

iii) It takes training and experience to become an astute observer who can help develop the skills necessary to conduct teaching observations. The Division of Learning and Teaching Support and Innovation (LTSI) provides workshops to help instructors to know what to expect and to train observers. Please check our events page for dates and times of these workshops.

Stage 2: Pre-observation meeting

Once the instructor has determined who will be conducting the peer-review process, 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, first and foremost, to ensure that trust is established and to reassure the instructor that the process is formative (not evaluative).

As the one being observed – the role is to articulate clearly the focus of the peer-review process and what the expected goals and outcomes are. Provide the observer with relevant material for the course that will be observed, such as the syllabus, lesson plan (including intended learning outcomes for the class being observed), readings, where the course fits into the curriculum, or anything else that would give the observer contextual background about the course. Ensure that the observer knows the date, time and room number for the observation. Confirm with the observer on the day before the observation.

Together – determine the following:

• where the observer will sit
• whether the observer will video-record the teaching session and, if yes, whether it will be for personal or public use
• whether the recording will become part of the instructor’s dossier or be published on YouTube, in which case the recording must meet the University of Victoria Protection of Privacy policy.

Stage 3: Conducting the teaching observation

Criteria – the focus is on supporting students’ learning. Remember that teaching is complex. The observation form is available on the website and provides criteria common to teaching that are student/learning-centred. However, the department or discipline may have additional criteria that are
essential to quality teaching that can be added. The observation form is strictly a guideline on what to look for and to provide feedback about. Feel free to use and modify it to suit the specific context of the department, discipline, course or instructor.

**Methods** – the instructor will inform the class of the purpose of the observation. The observer will be discreet (not bring lunch or other distracting material) and will refrain from participating in the session or interacting with students in order to maintain focus on observing the whole teaching/learning process. It is advisable 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 within the classroom can be recorded. 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 record to bring notice to the communication patterns occurring in the classroom, 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 classroom.

**Stage 4: Post-observation meeting**

After the observation, the observer will need a few days to reflect and to coherently 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 time to reflect and attain emotional distance from the observation. 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 should begin the meeting by asking the instructor how the session went, what went well, and what could be improved. The observer should 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 should 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 should 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. The observer should finish the discussion on a positive note by asking the instructor what he or she does well and should keep on doing, and by pointing out resources that the instructor may want to consider for going forward.

**Stage 5: Written report**

Before departing the post-observation meeting, the observer should 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.

As well, there are other models that can be investigated. One model is called a teaching square (or triangle), which involves three or four instructors, each from a different department, who mutually observe one another teach. The aim of this model is for the instructor to observe and gain knowledge about different ways of teaching, as opposed to only giving feedback. Once a triangle or square is formed, each participant observes all others teach and, when complete, all come together to discuss what was learned and what could be implemented into their teaching.

Resources


Appendix 1 – Sample Peer Observation Letters

Name of Instructor
Teaching Observation for Name of Course
Date, time, and location

Total students registered: 15
Total students present: 13

Thank you so much for allowing me to observe Name of Course. I will begin with my observations about the learning environment you created, then proceed to specifics about your teaching style, and conclude with student interactions.

I thoroughly enjoyed the learning environment that you created for your students. 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. I thought that this was an effective way to begin. It helped students warm up to the topic of the class and provided you with a diagnostic about the knowledge level of students.

The subtle cues that you utilized throughout were very effective in re-focusing students’ attention. For example, when it was time to move onto the PowerPoint slides, the lowering of lights at the front directed everyone’s attention to the screen. Similarly, after going through the segment about feedback and migration, you nicely had the whole class get up and move the seats back to create a new space of learning for the next part of the lesson. I found this very effective in changing the format and atmosphere so that the students had different spatial and visual cues to associate with the new topic.

As well, I noticed how respectful you were of students. You not only knew everyone’s name, but you thanked them for their input, ideas and interactions. This was especially demonstrated through the review of the midterm feedback. You kindly read each entry and responded to concerns and comments, ensuring that everyone received acknowledgement and closure to the process. You made it a conversation and a transparent, shared assessment, rather than a one-way, directed critique where the student never knows if his or her comments were read. As was evident by the feedback, students are very satisfied with the class and offered constructive ideas on how to improve certain assignments, showing their willingness to take the time to engage in the betterment of the course. Overall, the learning environment you created was inclusive, safe, respectful, well-structured, with clear goals and learning outcomes, was creative, and included active learning. I particularly loved how you ended the evening class with a bit of dance and song, suturing the activity to the lesson content and maintaining everyone’s energy until you ended right on time.

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 and have them 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. Also, you added humour – that always works well! You certainly demonstrated enthusiasm for the material, had a good pace of delivery, made eye contact with students, and had a clear voice that everyone could hear. You transitioned nicely from conversation to presentation and questioning modes. I also noticed that you used your body language very effectively. 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 very well, making sure points were clear, that students understood, and you 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 during the whole three hours. I found that students responded quickly to your and other students’ questions. However, as in all classes, not all students were speaking out. I did notice, though, that you included a think-pair-share activity about half way through the discussion portion of the class. I think this strategy worked well because of it being a more intimate way to discuss the topic, but also because the question you posed was about including their family stories of migration. Therefore, it not only allowed these quieter students to contribute vocally but also personally. Through this strategy, you were able to have all students actively participate.

Once again, I thank you for inviting me into your class. I observed a very caring, respectful classroom 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, to your own reflection about their midterm feedback about the class, and on into the material to be explored that day. The class was well-paced and included a variety of activities that not only critically engaged the students, but had them thoroughly enjoying the experience. Looking through your course learning outcomes on your syllabus, I can safely say that each were demonstrated in that single class.

Sincerely,
Dear Name of Instructor,

The following are my observational comments on your lecture in PSYC 3XX, given on March 8, 2017, at 10:00am in the Corbett building. There were approximately forty students present.

Your overall presentation was well suited to the number, level and interests of the students. There was lots of variety to sustain attention throughout the class period. The PowerPoint slides were clear, uncluttered, and with readable fonts. Your command over the technology was evident, including the interjection of video presentations. Your use of the blackboard was effective, and your handwriting was highly legible. The only minor problem concerned the audio portion of the video, which was barely audible.

Your demeanor throughout the lecture inspired respect and interest; students were patiently attentive and engaged throughout. Your references to the intended class learning outcomes were useful. I particularly appreciated your informal and personal approach, which was replete with personal anecdotes, stories, and references to popular media. The breakout groupings were conducted effectively and served to provide a break from pure lecture transmission. Your self-deprecatory humour revealed to the students your self-confidence, and it fostered in them a strong connection with you that must have developed throughout the course. The trust that had formed in the class manifested itself in some of the personally revealing comments and spontaneous humour among the students.

The following are some minor points I can offer you for consideration:

• Having the students listen in class (with your direction to keep one’s eyes closed) to a popular song at low volume certainly created a relaxing (non-academic) atmosphere, but, on its own, it did not seem to me to be driving the narrative forward. The words must have been relevant, but I could only partially make them out. You might have taken the opportunity to repeat or go over some of the words to explain their direct relevance. There were no specific follow-up comments.

• I would suggest making more direct references or citations to specific pages or parts of the reading in the text or articles that relate to your class discussions.

• The phenomena discussed in the class were very interesting, and it was clear that the students were very engaged with them, but the nature of the coverage seemed, to an outsider like me, to be basically descriptive and with seemingly little analysis. For example, given that this is an advanced course in the discipline, I would think that the course would provide a good opportunity to explore questions about these phenomena that could be answered by research methods familiar to advanced students in your discipline.

These are, admittedly, minor issues that might well be dealt with in other lectures in the course.

On the whole, Name of Instructor, you come across as a competent and sophisticated teacher with a lot of poise and command of your craft and with a focus on student learning. I enjoyed the experience of sitting in on your lecture and learned some notable things from it.

Sincerely,