Structuring a teaching observation

Successful peer observation of teaching requires planning. Normally this should include a pre-meeting, the teaching session observation itself, and a debrief meeting.

1. Pre-meeting

   It is important that the teaching observation has a clearly defined purpose and that negotiation of how the observer may be of help is undertaken before a teaching session. This might involve establishing an agenda in a pre-meeting that includes how the particular teaching session is positioned in a module or programme, what is being attempted, what delivery methods are being used, and what specific feedback is being sought by the observed member of staff.

2. Observation of teaching

   The observer may wish to record their observations and feelings as well as possible advice or issues for exploration after the session. However, it is important that reliance upon memory is minimised, particularly if the debrief meeting does not occur immediately. No single approach to this recording process will work for all situations; a variety of structured observation sheets or checklists can be used as well as unstructured approaches with a blank sheet of paper. These methods could be supplemented by video-recording the teaching session to talk through as part of the debriefing.

3. Debrief meeting

   In order to minimise possible negative impacts of feedback comments, observers should invite initial self-reflection by the observed member of staff. This may allow the observer to give non-judgemental, constructive feedback in a way that is more helpful, focused and less extensive. Only those points of interest and/or debate not already highlighted by the member of staff being observed then need to be addressed. The extent of such feedback will depend upon self-awareness and good reflection skills. There may be significant gaps between what was intended by the lecturer and what actually occurred during a teaching session. Sensitivity and skill are required to deliver helpful observations, comments and possibly advice in a way that allows those observed to preserve their self-esteem.

Giving and receiving feedback

1. The purpose of feedback

   It can be easy to confuse observed behaviour with intentions and it is therefore imperative that the observer focuses on behaviour, since behaviour is visible while intention is not. In the University's approach to peer observation of teaching, it is vital that both observer and observed, as giver and receiver of feedback respectively, accept responsibility for their joint relationship. This requires trust, risk-taking, honesty (including openness from the observed), and a genuine desire to help others improve and succeed. Though the guidance offered below may appear to be obvious, putting such information into use can take some practice, and is provided to ensure that feedback is given as constructively as possible.

2. Giving feedback (observers)

   a) Timing and venue: Feedback should be given as soon after the teaching session as possible in an organised debriefing, preferably at a time and place chosen by the member of staff being observed. However, there may be occasions when the member of staff wishes to take more time to reflect on the observed teaching session and immediate debriefing may be postponed since messages are less likely to be heard or absorbed.
b) **Style:** Feedback should be descriptive (non-judgemental) rather than evaluative (judgemental), which reduces defensive reactions from receivers. Describing your own honest reaction, or that of students (including minorities as well as majorities), with care and sensitivity leaves the receiver to evaluate what to do about the feedback - not all of which needs to be acted upon. Describe how you see it and leave it up to the other person to decide how they will use your feedback. If asked, you may wish to explore options for making improvements with your colleague. It is also important for an observer to deliver feedback in a direct way, where the verbal message and non-verbal message are congruent, i.e. good eye contact, open, receptive body posture, etc.

c) **Content:** Feedback should be specific and concise, using examples, rather than general or avoiding the point, and focus on behaviours that can be changed or controlled. Specific feedback is more likely to stimulate changes in behaviour. It is easier to give specific feedback if the person being observed has already declared in advance what they would like the observer to comment on. For feedback to be both constructive and effective, too much as well as too little can be counterproductive. Furthermore, there needs to be a balance between positive and negative. Another option is to report directly on a practical experience of being a student’ in the teaching session.

3. **Receiving feedback (observed member of staff)**

a) **Timing and venue:** Agree the time and venue for the debrief meeting, and don't leave too long a gap between observation and listening to feedback, so that the session is still fresh in both parties’ minds. You will probably be asked to make an initial self-analysis - possibly against the criteria you have outlined in the pre-meeting session. It may be helpful to ask for feedback during as well as after you have completed your own analysis. This will facilitate a more conversational style and is to be encouraged, although there will inevitably be other things upon which your observer will wish to comment.

b) **Communication style during debrief meeting:** Listen actively to what the observer is saying, allowing them to complete their reflective observations without interruptions. Your own body language should be open and receptive. Afterwards, check first that you have understood the message your observer is relaying. If this is problematic, further interchanges of clarification and digestion may be required. It may be that the feedback is too general and that you require your observer to be more specific.

c) **Response to feedback:** Once agreement has been reached about the key message from the feedback, even if you don't agree with the point, it is better not to argue or to logically rationalise your own behaviour. This can be difficult, but thank your observer for their feedback, and try to be positive in your response to what they are saying. This will encourage them to be even more open in giving you further feedback.

d) **Encourage balanced feedback:** It isn't always easy for your colleague to highlight areas for improvement, even though this has been agreed by both parties. Encourage them to do so by actively seeking comments about aspects that they felt worked less well or could be improved. In addition, seek comments on things they liked, thought worked well or were an innovation to be shared with other colleagues in the University.