

## Faculty Peer Observation Process

*Formative peer reviews of teaching offer the opportunity for growth for both the reviewer and the reviewee.  
–Isabeau Iqbal, PhD, University of British Columbia*

Peer review of teaching has been defined as informed assessment by colleagues of peers' teaching-related activities for the purpose of fostering development (formative) or making personnel decisions (summative). Peer observations are guided by criteria provided on the department's peer observation form.

**Formative peer review of teaching** to help faculty *enhance teaching and learning* in their courses. The peer review gives faculty opportunities to consider, modify, and reexamine their teaching with the support of their colleagues by using a shared understanding of effective teaching in the discipline. Frequent formative peer review provides an ongoing process that can contribute meaningfully to summative peer review by demonstrating a trajectory of improvement in teaching over time.

**Summative peer review of teaching** to *evaluate and assess* as part of a formal reward system used in merit, promotion, and tenure decisions. The peer review process uses the same shared understanding of **effective teaching in the discipline** as a criterion for making required decisions about compensation and promotion. The two purposes are discrete but complementary.

**Faculty peer observation process:**



### Guidelines for Observing In-Person Courses

**Note.** These guidelines also apply to conducting faculty peer observations in online courses. The “Guidelines for Observing Teaching in Online Courses” provide considerations **specific** to the online teaching context (p.4).

#### **Pre-observation meeting:**

Purpose: Establish goals for the observation and obtain information about session learning goals, students, and instructional context for the observer and outline the observation etiquette. The following questions are intended to guide the meeting within the context of the departmental peer observation process:

- What are your goals for the class? What do you hope students will gain from the session?
- What will students be doing in class to reach the stated goals?
- How will students engage in their learning during this class?
- What teaching methods will you use to help students reach the learning goals?
- How will you know if the students achieved the intended goal(s)?
- How does this class session fit in the course?
- What should I know about the students so that I can understand what is going on in class?
- What occurred in earlier sessions to lead up to this session? How will students prepare?
- Are there specific areas of interest that you would like me to focus on?
- What would you like to learn from this peer observation experience?

**Pre-observation meeting (cont.):**

- Are there materials that I can look at ahead of time that will help me understand what will occur during the class that I will be observing?
- How would you like to introduce me to the students? (especially advisable in smaller classes)

**Conducting the Observation:**

Arrive in class early if possible and seat yourself somewhere unobtrusive. Collect and record instructional data based on the criteria provided on the department's peer observation form. Take **detailed notes** about what the faculty is doing, what the students are doing, how engaged the students appear, take on a **student perspective**, such as: as a student, is the pace appropriate for taking notes, do I have enough time to answer questions? Look for **evidence of expected teaching behaviors**, such as What evidence did you see that the faculty showed concern for the students? How did the students respond? What evidence did you see of students asking questions? Keep track of **passage of time**, such as length of lecture, length of groupwork, length of students' working individually on problems. Note verbatim **statements, questions** to refer to during the post-observation meeting.

Try not to get caught up in specific details of the content; focus your attention on the **overall instructional experience**. Resist the urge to compare with your own teaching style. Do not intervene. Thank your colleague, be positive, briefly comment on what you found interesting, helpful.

Time	Observations	Thoughts
9:00	Begins class with housekeeping, review, learning objectives slide	Nice review of last class and how it prepares for this class. Learning objectives are very small—difficult to read from the back
9:05	Overview of PTSD symptoms and learning mechanisms involved: sensitization, overgeneralization, resistance to extinction.	Floats out from behind the podium a little, but moving further to the left and right of the room would create more energy and engage more students by being closer to them.
9:10	Self-deprecating joke about e-mail.	Class laughed easily. Seems like good rapport.
9:15	"Did everyone hear Larry's question?"	A few students did need it repeated.
9:18	"Any other questions?" Moved on quickly.	It looked like a couple students were maybe working up to asking some questions. Perhaps waiting longer?
9:20-9:35	Diagnosing steps for PTSD according to the DSM.	This is a somewhat long and detailed list. I'm seeing students check out a little bit towards the end. Perhaps break it up? Include some kind of brief activity?

Accessed September 24, 2020: <https://learning.northeastern.edu/adapting-the-faculty-peer-review-process-to-your-context/>

**Preparing the observation data for post-observation meeting and write-up:**

After the observation, it is helpful to review your notes and organize them into several helpful **themes**, highlighting both **Strengths and Questions/Considerations** to offer your colleague for reflection. You might consider using an Observation Organizer (example, Northeastern University). Be mindful of keeping the amount of feedback manageable for the colleague.

**Post-observation meeting:**

Purpose: Discuss the observation data with your colleague with a focus on **purposeful reflection** on the class and **collaboration guided by mutual respect**. Structure the meeting around questions that invite the colleague's insight, goals and provide the students' perspective. Offer **actionable** suggestions, avoid direct advice, and refrain from evaluative, prescriptive statements. Make it a learning experience for yourself. You should feel free to ask questions of the instructor any time clarification or information is needed during the peer observation process.

The following questions are intended to guide the meeting:

- What was your impression of how the class went? What worked well from your perspective?
- How well do you think the students achieved the goals you had planned for the class?
- How did the class session match with the plans that you made before class?
- When do you think the students were most or least engaged in the class?
- If you were to teach the class session again, what might you do differently and why and/or how?
- What did not work well from your perspective? Why do you think that might have happened?
- Was there something that surprised you or that was different from prior class sessions?
- How representative was what I saw today of the class in general?
- When you were explaining the problem set, did you have a sense of how well the students were following your explanation?
- I noticed that some students were reluctant to get into groups, and I am curious what your experience of that was. . .
- I learned from observing your class that . . . .
- I was intrigued by your use of TopHat to check student comprehension. How have you used TopHat to support students' learning?
- Based on our conversation, what was reinforced for you as effective in supporting students' learning?
- What specific changes do you envision as a result of this feedback?
- What would be most helpful to you as the next step?

**Observation write-up:**

Be **descriptive** (not prescriptive), focus on instructional behavior and student behavior, provide examples, offer suggestions for specific ways to improve, keep the process collaborative and constructive.

Consider whether the colleague observed will provide input or clarification or a **reflective statement in response to the observation write-up**. The reflective statement may be guided by the following questions: What have you learned about your teaching in the discipline? What have you learned about students learning in the discipline? How has this peer observation process supported your professional growth?

## Guidelines for Observing Teaching in Online Courses

**Note.** This section provides guidelines specific to the online teaching context; also refer to the section on “Best Practices in Online Teaching” for a summary of principles found to be central to quality online education. (Tobin et al, 2015, pp.60-61).

### Pre-observation meeting (via phone, Zoom):

- Establish the context for the online class visit considering the course modality (e.g., in-person, hybrid, simulcast, online) and ask for access to the Blackboard (Bb) LMS, as appropriate and adhering to [FERPA](#) guidelines.
- Discuss how the learning environment in Bb (asynchronous) interfaces with the in-person-class, and/or the online class (synchronous). How do these learning environments complement each other, build on each other to support students’ learning?
- Ask the instructor if they are interested in receiving feedback on specific areas and/or what they would like to learn from the peer observation.
- Ask the instructor to alert the students that an observer will be visiting the class to learn about the course (not to see how well they are doing).
- Discuss how you can be an unobtrusive observer (e.g. on Zoom, turn off video and mute microphone).
- Consider how the instructor can give you access to the appropriate features on the platform (e.g. on Zoom, make you a co-host so you can visit breakout rooms if they are used during the class session).

### During the observation:

Please keep in mind that while discipline-specific pedagogy drives the selection and implementation of technology tools the tools will often shape pedagogy (e.g., use of poll in Zoom). The observer needs to focus on how the instructor supports students’ learning given the technology tools deployed.

Consider the following questions to guide your observation:

- How does the instructor encourage and foster student engagement in learning activities (individual, student-to-student, and instructor-to-student) – for example on Zoom, speaking? Chat? Breakout rooms? Do not consider engagement solely on if students have their cameras/microphones on.
- How are students demonstrating their learning?
- Do students receive timely feedback on their questions, class work?
- Are both in-person and online students attended to and included in the class?
- Does the learning environment convey respect for students’ diverse talents and ways of learning?
- **If synchronous**, observe the full synchronous session.
- Keep detailed notes on what happens in the synchronous session.
- Make note of teaching strategies that work well in support of students’ learning and of ones that could be enhanced/improved upon
- **If asynchronous** (course in Bb) consider the following aspects: Consistent course organization (e.g., all projects in “assignment” section), clarity of syllabus, assignments, instructions, varied modes of course content delivery (e.g., print, video, graphs, images, audio), student engagement, ease of navigation. Adhere to [FERPA](#) guidelines.

**Preparing the observation data for post-observation meeting and write-up:** The guidelines articulated for in-person course observations apply.

**Post-observation meeting** (via phone, Zoom):

- Ask the instructor of their perception of the class (refer to questions from in-person class observation).
- Discuss aspects of the class that worked well from your perspective, that supported students' learning.
- Support your observations with concrete examples whenever possible.
- Discuss aspects of the class that, from your perspective, did not support students' learning as well.
- Talk with the instructor about their own ideas for enhancing students' learning.
- **If asynchronous:** Share with the instructor what the experience of navigating the Bb course is like – what is intuitive and what is not and how it impacted your experience in the course.

**Observation write-up:** The guidelines articulated for in-person course observations apply.

**“Best Practices in Online Teaching”** – Essential teaching behaviors found to be central to quality online education. (Tobin et al, 2015, pp.60-61).

- Encourage student-faculty contact
- Develop cooperation/collaboration among students (peer learning, study groups)
- Use active learning approaches (discover, process, practice, apply, integrate, evaluate information)
- Offer a balance of challenge and support (explicit expectations, feedback, examples of work)
- Emphasize time on task to help students manage and prioritize their study time (time-to-completion information on assignments)
- Provide prompt, constructive feedback that helps students reflect on their learning and guides improvements
- Promote a learning environment that respects diverse talents and ways of learning (variety of assessments, meaningful/relevant learning, various means to participate)

## Resources:

Chickering, A., & Ehrmann, S. (1996). Implementing the seven principles. Technology as a lever. *AAHE Bulletin*, 49 (2).

Chism, N. (2007). *Peer review of teaching: A sourcebook*. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing.

Taylor, A. (2017). [A peer review guide for online courses at Penn State](#). Dutton e-Education Institute, College of Earth and Mineral Sciences, the Pennsylvania State University. Accessed September 22, 2020  
The peer review guide is made available online to the entire higher education community for their use.

Tobin, T., Mandernach, J., and Taylor, A. (2015). *Evaluating online teaching. Implementing best practices*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

John E. Dutton eEducation Institute, College of Earth and Mineral Sciences, The Pennsylvania State University.  
[Faculty peer review of online teaching](#). Accessed September 22, 2020

Lafayette. (n.d.). [Conducting peer observations of teaching](#). Accessed September 23, 2020

New York University School of Professional Studies. (2017, February 23). [Guidelines for observing online courses.](#) Accessed September 23, 2020