

Guidance for Peer Observation of Teaching

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Peer observation of teaching should occur every year as part of Peer Review & Enhancement (PRE). All teaching staff with student-facing roles are expected to engage in peer observation activities as an integral part of professional academic life.

Aims of Peer Observation of Teaching

The model of peer observation used at Sheffield Hallam University is one where the observation process should benefit both the observed and the observer. The focus of any observation of teaching should be constructive criticism within a supportive environment (Lomas and Nicholls 2005) and any feedback should be provided against on mutually agreed outcomes. It is also recommended that staff refer to the UK Professional Standards Framework (HEA, 2011) as an external reference point to inform pre and post observation discussions (see Appendix 2, page 14).

Peer Observation of Teaching should enable:

- discussion, sharing and mutual support between peers
- the advancement and development of good practice in teaching
- self-evaluation and reflection on teaching practice
- evaluation of the interaction of student and teacher
- feedback on teaching methods including new ideas or methods
- critical self-reflection

Benefits of Peer Observation

The benefits of peer observation are true for both the observed and the observer where both are required to be reflective and critical about their professional practice:

Inviting someone from another teaching team to observe a session was incredibly enlightening and very helpful. The person observing was able to offer me new perspectives on my teaching delivery which built my confidence as well as enabling me to revisit some of my teaching practice. I had an idea to look at communication and we spoke about this and basically honed it down. It was very collaborative. They brought a wealth of their own experience which they generously shared during our discussion. I would definitely recommend this process to everyone.

Six stages of Peer Observation of Teaching

There are several steps to a successful peer observation of teaching:

- What is being observed?
- Who is observing / being observed?
- Pre-observation discussion / sharing of information
- The observation
- Post-observation discussion
- Recording the observation

1. What is being observed?

Student-facing teaching activities happen in a range of physical and virtual environments. Peer Observation of Teaching should happen in a formal teaching environment commonly associated with appropriate teaching methods in a disciplinary area. This could be face-to-face activities based in an on-campus teaching space, or tutor-led online activities where students do not share the same physical space but interact with a tutor in a virtual space.

Observation of teaching benefits both the observed tutor, who gains insights from the presence of another person looking at what is going on in the teaching and learning environment; and the observing tutor, who gains ideas and prompts for reflection on their own teaching. Indeed, an observation could be arranged so that the observing tutor chooses to watch a colleague who has experience with a teaching approach that they themselves would like to develop. A course team may wish to develop a 'team review' approach, where a particular aspect of course design and teaching is focused on, developed together (including students), and culminates in peer observations (either within or outside of the team) and sharing of feedback (including student feedback).

2. Who is observing / being observed?

The pairings of colleagues will be co-ordinated, and in some cases determined, by a suitable team leader or department leader; the precise process being decided within each department or centre. Normally a single observer would be selected, but there may be circumstances where more than one observer might be appropriate. For example a trio of peers may carry out a trio of observations where each colleague is observed by the other two colleagues at the same time.

Teaching observations often occur between colleagues within the same teaching team, but there are benefits to working with peers outside of teaching teams. Observation can provide an opportunity for colleagues outside of teaching teams to learn more about the different subject disciplines that we work within. Fresh perspectives can bring forth fresh ideas. The closeness of a teaching team, especially if they already have experience of seeing each other teach, can sometimes prevent the observation experience from being as useful as it could be.

Peer observation of teaching is a process that can be embraced by experienced and inexperienced teachers alike. Experienced lecturers can learn from new lecturers and vice versa. The process should allow the observed to question and analyse their teaching or support approach and the ongoing development of their practice (Fullerton 2003). The experience of a staff member, either in relation to the time they have been at Sheffield Hallam University or the time that they have been in an academic role, is not a factor in the success of their observation. Staff who are new to the role and/or the institution may feel limited by their lack of experience and inhibited in how to give observation feedback to a more experienced colleague - however, new staff should value the fresh perspective that they offer to others. Many experienced colleagues value and seek out feedback from those who are new to the organisation.

3. Pre-Observation discussion

Once the observer or observers have been agreed they need to be provided with the necessary information to enable a successful peer observation. This is usually best achieved with face-to-face discussion and the provision of any relevant documentation (Fullerton 2003).

The discussion should cover:

- the location, date and time of the session and arrangement of a feedback session as soon after the observation as possible;
- the learning outcomes of the session and how it relates to the rest of the module and course;
- a summary of the planned teaching and learning activities;
- information about the student cohort;
- any potential issues or areas of concern;
- the way in which students will be informed about the observation;
- if the observer will need to speak to students (this is normally not necessary);
- if students will be asked to feedback on the session;
- the elements of specific feedback that the observed wishes to receive;
- whether the observed colleague would like feedback on any aspect of the session, or just on the elements of specific feedback;
- a review of the tips and advice for observation (see What to Observe on page following this section).

Documentation that should be provided:

- Module handbook or access to a Blackboard site that contains the module information;
- Any relevant hand-outs or other teaching materials;
- Assessment task information if the session relates to the assessment in any way.

An observation session should normally last no more than 1 hour. If the teaching session is longer than this, agree a suitable 1 hour time period where the observer should attend and how to avoid interruptions when the observer arrives or leaves within the session period.

4. The observation

The observer should arrive in good time to be able to place themselves unobtrusively in the room. The attendance of either a known or unknown member of staff as observer into a session can cause unease with students if they are not aware of the purpose of their visit. The observed tutor should explain that there is an observer present and that they are there to assist in the professional development of the tutor and not to assess the students. It is an opportunity to demonstrate to students that staff are engaged in continuing their professional development in learning, teaching and assessment.

The observer should not become involved in the session as this will change the nature of the session and

limit their ability to provide feedback (Gosling 2000; Siddiqui 2007). In certain limited circumstances it may be appropriate for the observer to ask students about work that they are doing.

Any planned discussion between the observer and the students must:

- be agreed at the pre-observation meeting;
- only occur if it is appropriate in assisting observation;
- not constitute involvement in the session.

If the observer plans to speak to the students, this must be explained by the tutor to the students at the start of the session.

It is helpful for the observer to make notes during the session. This can be using an observation pro-forma or simply a timeline of key activities or events during the session. The observer should be clear about the specific feedback required by the observed tutor as agreed at the pre-observation discussion meeting. This will provide the basis of their follow-up and helps the observer to focus their observations. It is not normally necessary to provide feedback on every element of a teaching session. Feedback is usually about teaching and learning activities and not the content of the session - unless specific feedback on content has been requested (for example, an approach to a particular topic).

5. Post-observation follow-up

The post-observation meeting should take place soon - immediately after the observation if possible or within a few days if not. The role of the observer is to promote reflection from the observed on their practice. This is best achieved by encouraging dialogue. This is the most crucial aspect of peer observation of teaching: only reflection and feedback lead to sustained improved teaching (Siddiqui 2007). Carefully agreeing the areas for feedback and the approach to observation prior to the observation taking place, therefore, is key to supporting the post-observation feedback.

The observer should begin the follow-up meeting by encouraging the observed tutor to reflect on their experience of the session. Once the observed has reflected on their experience, the observer should offer the positive points first and always end on a positive note. The discussion and reflection will support the observed tutor in being able to identify their own action points. The observer can support the observed in how to address the action points that they have identified and can offer suggestions to achieve change. The initial focus at the post-observation meeting must be the observed session, as described. Only when action points have been identified and discussed can the focus of the conversation broaden.

The observer can now reflect on their own experience of the observation and what they can learn for their own teaching and learning practice. They should also reflect on their own provision of feedback and constructive criticism and their development as an observer (Siddiqui 2007). Including this part of the process ensures that a true shared approach is taken and makes the giving and receiving of feedback less stressful (Fullerton 2003). Depending on the development needs that may be identified through the observation, it may be necessary to seek advice and support from other staff; the observed person should lead on this and seek the advice they feel is appropriate to support meeting their action points. Staff responsible for LTA in departments could be approached for support.

The detail of the observation, pre-observation meeting, the observation itself and the post-observation follow-up meeting is confidential to both parties. The peer observation of teaching is most successful when built upon a strong relationship of trust and honesty (Shortland 2007).

6. Making a record of the observation

If so desired a record of the observation can be made using the pro-forma (see Appendix 1) and shared with the observed tutor by the observer. The observed individual reflects on the observation process as a whole and reports the outcomes using the Departmental template. The observed and observer, in some circumstances, may find it helpful to record the session using audio or video recordings.

For example, this can help both parties to review and reflect on:

- lecture style
- teaching and interactivity in labs, simulations, workshops and other teaching situations in which the role of the observed is to facilitate learner activity;
- teaching in virtual learning environments (where videos are made using screencast software);
- where teaching cannot be observed in person for logistical reasons.

The use of video and audio for capturing a live observation for later review requires the agreement of both parties, and any students or other participants involved. This can be done using a release form (<http://ladatastore.shu.ac.uk/ReleaseForm2012.pdf>). Such recordings should be managed by the observed and will not normally be used beyond the peer observation activity. Students will also need to be informed in advance to give them a chance to raise any objections. It can be appropriate to record (e.g. by screencasting) observations of online interaction, but again the permissions of all those involved should be sought.

The observation and its written, video or audio recording is always confidential between the observed and observer unless the observed wishes to share it and has the explicit permission of those involved to use the recording more widely.

The observed staff member can use the record and their reflection of the observation to inform their PDR and development needs.

Guidance when observing

The features to be observed will vary according to the type of session and for the discipline concerned. For a typical lecture session, observers will note:

- the appropriateness and achievement of objectives/learning outcomes;
- communication of objectives to learners and links to prior knowledge;
- structure of the session, e.g. an introduction, organisation into sections and a summary;
- delivery – including pace, audibility, visibility;
- communication with students – including signposting, interaction, questioning and activities;
- the engagement of students in the learning process.

For most types of small group teaching activities, such as tutorials and seminars, an observer might note the:

- relationship of the session to the articulated objectives/learning outcomes;
- interaction of students with the tutor and each other;
- facilitation skills of the tutor, including engaging students, managing the group activity, questioning, listening, responding, and prompting of critical and analytical thinking;
- involvement of all members of the group; encouragement of students;
- use of the teaching space;
- quality of formative feedback to students;
- provision for summing up and consolidating what has been learnt;
- ways in which students are helped to become aware of their own learning.

Prompts for the observer to consider depending on the type of feedback requested by the observer - observers should not try to give feedback on all the topics below! (adapted from Gosling, 2000)

Structure and planning

- Was the relevance / point of the session made clear to the students?
- Were anticipated learning outcomes identified?
- Did the session begin and end on time?
- Was the structure of the session clear?
- Did the tutor relate the session to previous sessions and set it in an overall context?
- Did the session appear to be well-planned and organised?

Delivery / formative assessment

- Were the methods/approach taken suitable to achieve the learning outcomes?
- Were issues of equality and diversity considered? How?
- Did the pace and delivery seem appropriate for the students present?
- Were students invited to participate? Was the approach inclusive?
- Did the tutor check the students' understanding of the material/approach?
- What formative assessment activities were there?

Content

- Did the content seem accurate, up-to-date?
- Was the session pitched at the appropriate level for the students present?
- Did the content match the needs of the students?
- Did the content explore wider perspectives and consider equality and diversity?

Resources / accommodation

- Was technology enhanced learning used? Did this enhance learning?
- Were resources professional?
- Were other resources used, e.g. slides, video?
- Were they well-produced - did they consider readability?
- Were the seating arrangements appropriate?
- Did the tutor make good use of the space?

Overall style and ambience

- Did the tutor convey enthusiasm?
- Were they clear and audible?
- Was there good rapport with the students?
- Were students engaged?

Guidelines for giving and receiving feedback

The best approach is for the observing tutor to **ask not tell**.

Giving feedback

- the observed should reflect first (see prompt questions below)
- the observer should then begin with feedback on the positive aspects of the observation, start by talking about something that was really good to build confidence
- focus on the behaviour that can be changed and not the person by using specific examples
- focus feedback on the agreed outcomes from the pre-observation meeting
- only provide the amount of feedback that the observed can make use of at that time
- make constructive and make positive suggestions
- use questions to guide discussion and enable reflection by the observed
- the observer should finish on a positive from the session

Prompt Questions / statements

- What do you think went well?
- I really liked it when you....
- I wondered what you thought when...
- If you were to do it again, what would you do differently?
- Did you achieve what you wanted to?
- What do you think the students gained from the session? How do you know?
- How did you feel about that?
- What effect did you feel it had when you said that?
- How do you think you could have involved the students more in that?
- What were you trying to achieve at that particular point?
- How can you address that?

Receiving feedback

- ensure that the type of feedback is agreed in advanced
- be ready to accept honest feedback and constructive criticism
- be ready to be self-reflective
- attempt to find solutions to address less effective practice
- ask for examples and ideas for other ways of doing things
- develop your own action plan from the feedback received

(Adapted from Fullerton, 2003 p232-233)

Appendix 1: Observation of Teaching Pro-Formas (optional use)

Session Details and Planning:

To be completed by tutor being observed.

Colleague being observed	
Colleague observing	
Date and time of session	
Venue	
Number and level of students	
Course Title	
Module Title	
Title of session	
Type of session (i.e. lecture)	
Aims/planned learning outcomes	
Learning Materials?	
How does the session fit in with the module/course?	
Are there any specific issues to take into account?	
What are the particular elements that feedback is required on?	
Should feedback be provided on any aspect of the session or restricted only to the agreed elements above?	
Date and time of feedback and reflection discussion?	

Session Observation:

This is to be used by the observer as a guide to assist the taking of notes during the observation and conducting the discussion and reflection after the observation. See also guidance above.

What feedback has the observed individual specifically asked for:

What were the positive elements in the session?

What could be improved or developed?

Areas of Activity

- A1 Design and plan learning activities and/or programmes of study
- A2 Teach and/or support learning
- A3 Assess and give feedback to learners
- A4 Develop effective learning environments and approaches to student support and guidance
- A5 Engage in continuing professional development in subjects/disciplines and their pedagogy, incorporating research, scholarship and the evaluation of professional practices

Core Knowledge

- K1 The subject material
- K2 Appropriate methods for teaching, learning and assessing in the subject area and at the level of the academic programme
- K3 How students learn, both generally and within their subject/ disciplinary area(s)
- K4 The use and value of appropriate learning technologies
- K5 Methods for evaluating the effectiveness of teaching
- K6 The implications of quality assurance and quality enhancement for academic and professional practice with a particular focus on teaching

Professional Values

- V1 Respect individual learners and diverse learning communities
- V2 Promote participation in higher education and equality of opportunity for learners
- V3 Use evidence-informed approaches and the outcomes from research, scholarship and continuing professional development
- V4 Acknowledge the wider context in which higher education operates recognising the implications for professional practice