

Peer Observation of Teaching

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Overview

This section of the ProDAIT website gives an overview of current thinking on peer observation of teaching for professional development purposes. It takes a broad view of what constitutes 'teaching' and gives advice on good practice in carrying out peer observation. The specific requirements for peer observation activity vary from one institution to another, so please check local guidelines and requirements as well as these pages.

There is a separate section on the ProDAIT website on 'How to Do Peer Observation' at www.prodait.org/approaches/doing_observation/.

What is Peer Observation of Teaching?

Peer observation of teaching for development purposes is:

A collaborative and reciprocal process whereby one peer observes another's teaching (actual or virtual) and provides supportive and constructive feedback. Its underlying rationale is to encourage (continued) professional development in teaching and learning through critical reflection, by both observer and 'observee'. It may also include 'observation' and feedback of non-classroom aspects [such as] a staff member's approaches to teaching and learning, including module or course design and documentation, teaching resources, appropriateness of assessment etc.

Lublin, 2002 p5

Peer observation of teaching for development purposes is NOT:

- the same as teaching observation, and should not involve an unequal power balance (ie, it should not involve your line manager or your supervisor observing you teach)
- a judgmental process, primarily carried out for quality assessment or evaluative reasons.

Developmental and evaluative observation of teaching may sometimes happen simultaneously, but we believe that as soon as the focus turns to assessment of quality, it is too easy to lose the developmental aspect of the activity. We therefore recommend that the two processes be kept separate.

What is Peer Observation of Teaching for?

Among other things, peer observation of teaching allows both peer observer and observee to:

- develop their own reflective practice
- share good teaching practices
- gain new ideas and fresh perspectives about teaching
- enhance their own teaching skills
- improve the quality of the learning experiences made available to students.

Peer observation of teaching may also:

- raise the profile of teaching and learning within your department
- enable departments to demonstrate a commitment to enhancing teaching quality for external evaluation processes

Developmental peer observation should not be confused with observation of teaching for assessment and evaluation.

Is peer observation of teaching really worth doing?

Effective developmental peer observation of teaching brings with it many benefits. The developmental nature of peer observation may be particularly useful for established staff, but it is widely recognised to be beneficial whatever your level of teaching experience.

Among the benefits ascribed to peer observation of teaching are the following.

- It can be reassuring and confidence-building to receive positive feedback from a peer who has observed you in action.
- Observing a colleague teach can be a good way to gather new ideas for your own teaching, and/or to start you thinking more critically about how you teach.
- Peer observation of teaching can provide a useful tool to share and evaluate teaching innovations, and highlight good teaching practice.
- Constructive feedback amongst peers can increase trust and help build positive working relationships.
- It can help pinpoint the precise nature of problems and identify means of addressing these, plus reveal hidden teaching behaviours and provide space to plan strategies to eliminate negative behaviour patterns (for example some teachers unintentionally overuse a pet phrase or filler, such as 'actually', 'right', or 'ok').

- Peer observation of teaching raises the profile of teaching and learning and encourages colleagues to debate and engage in dialogue about teaching and share good practice informally, allowing for the cross-fertilisation of ideas and approaches.
- Peer observation provides an opportunity to record and report teaching achievements for the purposes of promotion or other reward.

Peer observation for development versus teaching observation for assessment

Developmental peer observation

The focus of peer observation of teaching within continued professional development is on giving individuals the opportunity to:

- develop and enhance their own teaching practice by observing others and by being observed
- contribute to the development of others and the wider dissemination of good practice in the teaching and learning field through formative review, constructive feedback and reflective practice, rather than evaluative judgements about teaching quality.

Evaluative teaching observation

The focus of ProDAIT is on professional development, so we will only provide a brief overview on the observation of teaching for assessment and evaluation.

- Observation of teaching is now a routine expectation for probationary staff.
- Observation of your teaching can supply you with a different and valuable professional perspective alongside student feedback, thus providing a more rounded evaluation of your teaching abilities, and the quality of the learning experiences you give your students.
- Having your teaching observed by a senior colleague or mentor can help to familiarise you with the process, and thus reduce your anxiety levels during assessments by external observers.
- Observation of teaching (including developmental peer observation) is a very clear demonstration to students of staff concern for quality.
- Observation of teaching by a senior colleague or supervisor also provides a mechanism whereby, through summative assessment, departments can monitor the overall quality of their teaching, and individual members of staff can evidence their teaching practice and expertise for their teaching portfolios.

- Assessment of teaching quality should use a range of assessment tools, of which observation of teaching is just one.

Assessment Tools for Evaluating Teaching Quality

When assessment of quality is the focus of teaching observation, particularly when a written assessment of a faculty member will result, a *range* of assessment tools should be employed. This may include some or all of the following.

Self-review

This may range from a relatively brief account to something much more substantial, for example:

- a few comments included in the papers that you prepare for your regular Staff Development Review
- a citation and record of achievement prepared for a specific purpose, such as an application for a UK National Teaching Fellowship, or for promotion. These reviews must usually conform to a specified format
- a much more substantial teaching portfolio.

Flinders University (undated) offers further ideas for guided self-evaluation, including a self-evaluation inventory.

There is more on recording achievements on the ProDAIT website in the section on 'Records and Evidence' at www.prodait.org/doing/records_evidence.php.

Student evaluation

Formal student evaluations typically take the form of end-of-module questionnaires. Staff should be given the opportunity to respond to the results.

Student feedback may also be given via student representatives at staff–student committees

Student feedback may be given informally and directly, or can be solicited via other techniques. Further information on this can be found in Sheppard, Leifer and Carryer (1998).

Peer review

Peer review is similar to peer observation of teaching, in that it may be done for developmental purposes, but it also incorporates an evaluative aspect. The University of Wisconsin-Madison (1998) gives a more detailed definition.

Further information, including a list of characteristics of good teaching that may form the basis for criteria for peer review, is given on the University of Reading's website (details appear under 'References' at the end of this document).

We recommend Sheppard, Leifer and Carryer's *Guide to Peer Review of Teaching* (1998), which offers a wide range of summative and formative observation schedules for lectures, tutorials, laboratory sessions, supervisions etc.

Flinders University (undated) also has guidelines and some examples of the types of report that might result from a peer review in its *Suggested Procedures for Conducting a Peer Review*.

Each of these tools can address some issues of teaching quality and effectiveness, but not all issues. Triangulation, or viewing from a combination of perspectives, is essential to arrive at a reasonably valid and accurate evaluation of teaching quality and effectiveness.

Peer Review of Pedagogic Practice

Peer review is familiar to most academics in the context of research and the submission of papers for publication. The notion of peer review can be extended across all activities and responsibilities of staff in higher education. What is important is that this type of review is carried out by a peer, a co-worker of equal status, as opposed to a colleague, ie a peer who may be of unequal status.

Peer review of teaching will use multiple sources of data, which may include, for example, peer observation, student evaluations, teaching materials, written feedback to students on their work, module and programme design documents or review papers. Information from these sources can therefore provide a comprehensive view of a person's teaching responsibilities. Ideally peer review is a collaborative process in which the reviewer takes the role of 'critical friend' providing comment and feedback in discussion.

Often a peer will have an insider's view, with similar experiences of courses and students. Discussions in peer review will often be of mutual benefit to reviewer and reviewed.

A very important element and explicit purpose of peer review is that it makes teaching 'public', that is, visible to others who support its development. It also endorses the status of teaching and subjects it to similar processes as research in higher education.

The University of Gloucester in the UK has reinterpreted peer review as 'review of professional practice as a way of supporting and developing staff in teaching. You may be interested to look at the process (McNamee et al, 2005).

D'Andrea, (2002) provides a summary of how peer review has developed in the USA.

Guide to References

Peer observation of teaching is widely used in Australian HE institutions for developmental purposes. Bell (2002) details the strengths and issues identified in a study on implementing peer observation of teaching as a development tool.

Lublin's *Guide to Peer Review of Teaching* (2002) is also recommended.

In the USA, peer observation of teaching is increasingly located within wider processes of 'peer review', including peer mentoring, discussion groups and the development of teaching portfolios. D'Andrea's study of peer observation (2002) exemplifies this.

Gosling's paper for the Higher Education Academy's Education Subject Centre (ESCalate) (2000) presents comprehensive guidelines for conducting peer observation in UK HE institutions. Gosling also extends peer observation models to include further permutations such as peer observation circles and triads.

Also through ESCalate, Gilpin (2000) describes how models of peer observation of teaching have been extended at Bristol University beyond teaching observation to peer review of curriculum planning and learning materials.

Most UK higher education institutions offer guidelines on peer observation. We found the University of Reading website (undated) helpful.

The University of Wisconsin-Madison (1998) also offers some user-friendly examples and models for peer review work.

Materials for training in observation include Beaty and McGill (1995) and Beigy and Woodin (1999).

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