Classroom Observations with Purpose

Peer observations can be powerful tools for teaching improvement—if you can avoid some common pitfalls.

There are plenty of reasons why peer observations, as practiced, do not work for faculty. Often the purposes of peer observations are not clear. Both when they are done for evaluative and for developmental reasons, peer observations have pitfalls that are commonly overlooked. Sufficient training and preparation are often lacking. We might assume that observations done purely for developmental reasons lead naturally to improved teaching practices, but in fact this is not always the case.

Still, with all of these limitations and challenges in mind, peer observations can be powerful tools for teaching improvement, and they can even serve as one (but certainly not the only) measure of teaching effectiveness. Planning, preparation, and training are all needed, however. Even informal observations by colleagues benefit from a degree of structure and from “user” training. In these pages, I will share some tips for structuring observations and for preparing faculty to get the most out of observations. Our emphasis is on using observations for teaching improvement. Writers and practitioners alike agree that observations, when removed from the evaluation process and when carefully planned and executed, can be a tremendous help for faculty who are interested in teaching improvement.

Many faculty members do not like being observed in their teaching. Too often, observations are seen as an imposition, as violating faculty members’ otherwise closed professional sphere within the classroom, and as the source of stress and anxiety. Yet the recipe to improve teaching is well known, and good helpful feedback coming from peers is one of the main ingredients (other ingredients include reflection, self-awareness, feedback from students, openness to new ideas, and assessment of instructional practices). With the right preparation, peer observations can indeed be transformed into valuable, genuinely helpful, and even enjoyable experiences.
Know Your Purpose and Your Challenges

The first step in designing peer observations is to know their purpose. Instructional developers commonly distinguish between observations done for formative purposes (for teaching improvement) and observations done for summative purposes (for teaching evaluation). Faculty, on the other hand, are more inclined to mention the practical reasons why we observe teaching. We observe teaching in order to review our colleagues’ content expertise, in order to catch “teaching problems” early on and help chart a corrective course, in order to provide a counterweight to end-of-semester student ratings, or in order to expose novice college teachers to effective teaching practices by observing their more experienced colleagues.

These are all good reasons for observing teaching, but several caveats bear consideration before we jump headlong into peer observations. We know, for example, that peer observations, especially when observers aren’t trained, tend to lack reliability as a method of evaluation. Also, observations of a single class do not measure a representative sample of teaching. Ken Bain (2004) explains: “professors tend to give high marks to colleagues who teach the way they do and lower ratings to those who do not—regardless of the learning... [and] an observer who sits in on only one or two classes may not get a clear picture of what really goes on.” Some important caveats apply to formative observations too. We know, for example, that the best results from formative observations come when faculty members are intrinsically motivated. If we require peer observations,
we risk sapping the experience of its potential for meaningful developmental results.

**Purposeful Feedback for Improvement**

Navigating through all these considerations is a challenge, to be sure. One approach that faculty and administrators together can take is to ensure that ample opportunities are made available for purely formative observations that are safe, confidential, and outside the evaluation process. Additionally, we should want the feedback that comes out of observations to be *purposeful*. Purposeful feedback is feedback that is helpful and likely to be used for actual improvement.

Just by observing a colleague’s class and then having an informal and confidential chat, we cannot be sure that the feedback will be applied to improve teaching. Some careful preparation, first for the observation itself and then for the exchange of feedback, is needed. For observations to be helpful, trust needs to be built between the observer and the observed. The faculty member being observed needs to establish and convey her goals—what she wants to gain from the observation—and also needs to be prepared to receive feedback. The observer needs to know what to look for during the observation and then how to frame feedback to maximize its usefulness. Throughout the process, caring must outweigh any tendencies to judge. An important affective dimension thus exists, without which peer observations lose their power to contribute to the recipe for teaching improvement.

Every semester at Metropolitan State University of Denver, the Center for Faculty Development invites faculty to participate in a Peer Instructional Coaching cohort designed to help members to get the most out of observing each other’s teaching. One of our first steps is to develop an idea of what the participants’ goals are. Is the goal to find solutions to an ongoing problem in the classroom? Does the instructor want a second opinion on how something is going that is being tried for the first time? Or is the goal simply to get an outside perspective that is encompassing enough to bring awareness to the instructor’s teaching traits? Whatever the goal is, the faculty member who is being observed needs to drive the process, and this means communicating her goals and agreeing to the conditions of the observation. All of these steps are attended to in two cohort meetings that take place prior to pairing off and observing each other’s teaching.

We also work toward building self-awareness, we practice giving and receiving feedback, and we cultivate relationships in order to promote the affective dimension of observations. We accomplish these tasks through discussion around shared readings (see references at end) and also through exercises and activities. These activities are easily transferable to any small group context where self-awareness, peer feedback, and trust-building are the objectives.

1. **Describe Your Teaching.** This first activity comes from Maryellen Weimer’s *Inspired College Teaching* (2010). Faculty are asked first to write a response to the following prompt: “Imagine yourself in a group of 20 teachers, all teaching at the same time but in different rooms. I don’t know any of the 20 teachers or anything about the subjects they teach. I need a detailed description of how you teach so that I can walk down the hall, look through the doors, and pick you out from among the 20 teachers. You can’t describe what you’re wearing, and don’t make any hints about the content that you teach. How do you describe your teaching so that I can find you?” After everyone has had a chance to write descriptive and distinguishing statements about their teaching, we share what we have written, and then participants are invited to identify any areas of teaching that they want to target for improvement.

2. **Knotty Problem.** This is an adaptation of the “FeedForward” model developed by Marshall Goldsmith for the business

### Best Practices > Do Not Prejudge!

The lengthy list of best practices in peer observation can be distilled to two main practices that apply to both the formative and the summative contexts: do not prejudge, and make it about the learning. James Austin (1992) writes that “the observer should never say, ‘I teach well, so therefore you have to teach like me.’” The observer, the faculty member being observed, and the evaluators alike should never form conclusions based on a single classroom observation which may or may not be representative. Instead, the observation should be considered one source of data among many, whether the goal is improvement or evaluation.

Making observations about learning is not easy, since the object of the observation is so naturally the instructor. In response to this tendency, the U.S. Air Force Academy developed and employs a protocol for formative observations that very intentionally turns the exercise into one about learning. Their observation rubric asks the observer whether learning goals are clearly articulated, if students are engaged in learning activities that are aligned with the goals, and whether students have opportunities for assessment and feedback. Best of all, the rubric prompts follow-on feedback in each of these areas to help turn the observation into a learning experience for the faculty member.

Illustration: Steve McCracken
world and has also been described in Faculty Focus, again by Maryellen Weimer. Participants are asked to write down a “knotty teaching problem” that they have or have had. One participant then takes two minutes to describe his problem to a small group of participants (no more than five) who should listen only. No one can interrupt with questions or ideas during the two minutes. Then, in succession, each of the group members takes two minutes to verbally share ideas and possible solutions, again without interruption. The participant whose knotty problem is being addressed can take notes (silently, without reaction), and after each group member has had a chance to offer feedback (or in Goldsmith’s term “FeedForward”), the individual with the knotty problem simply says “thank you.” The process then begins again with the next participant’s knotty problem. Listening without interruption helps build attentiveness to the issues, ideas, or teaching assumptions that shape our teaching practices, and responding to colleagues’ input by saying only “thank you” allows participants to process feedback without rejecting it prematurely with responses like “I’ve already tried that and it didn’t work,” or “that wouldn’t work with my students.”

Done in conjunction with discussion around shared readings, these activities can prepare faculty to give and receive purposeful feedback from their observations.

Many faculty will need convincing that peer observations can be a key ingredient to teaching improvement. If their prior experience with observations has left them with a bitter taste, they’re likely to dismiss observations generally as something that’s not for them. However, with the right preparation, observations can add robustness to your recipe for teaching improvement.

**REFERENCES:**
Shared readings for Peer Instructional Coaching are indicated with an asterisk (*).


