

Peer Observation Tips and Recommendations

**tailored for teaching across modalities during the pandemic*

Peer Teaching Observations at Brooklyn College and throughout CUNY are both summative (evaluative for personnel actions) and formative (for the purpose providing feedback for improvement). The recommendations included here are focused on the latter—formative feedback.

Three basic parts to peer observations:

1. Pre-Observation Preparations
2. Observation
3. Post-Observation Discussion

Peer observations are an opportunity to create a community of practice around pedagogy with our peers. When we take each part of the process seriously as both observer and observee, we enact a commitment to high-quality education for our students.

For information about what to observe in online courses, see the [Guidance for Teaching Observations](#) document and/or refer to §18.2 of the PSC-CUNY contract and the corresponding sections of the 2019 Memorandum of Agreement.

Ideas and Recommendations:

Before the Observation Period

- What do you need to know, what information would be helpful to gather before the observation to ensure you can provide helpful reflections and feedback to your peer?
- Arrange a pre-observation conversation/exchange if possible. At minimum, exchange some of this information by e-mail.
 - Ask the observee to share their syllabus and the learning goals for the observation period.
 - Allow the observee to provide a “tour” or orientation to course materials and the course site.
 - Ask the observee: Are there specific areas around which they are seeking feedback?
- If the class is being offered online, the observee might choose to pull from an optional tool for “self-evaluation/reflection” as part of the pre-observation process, especially for those teaching fully asynchronous courses. (See [BC Sample Teaching Self-Evaluation for Asynchronous Courses](#))

During the Observation

- We are all learning and our pedagogy is necessarily responsive to the current pandemic context. Consider a “trauma-informed approach” ... in other words: be human first and supportive.
 - Consider reciprocal approaches to the peer observation process, for instance, make note of: “Ideas/approaches observed that I might use in my own teaching”
 - Remember that lives continue to be complex; faculty have been working harder than ever on their pedagogy, teaching and course designs; teaching remotely can be overwhelming;

teaching on-campus comes with new challenges as well;

the crisis of childcare continues for many; and we are all working under less than ideal conditions.

- At the same time – be prepared to be wow-ed and inspired! We know that innovative and effective pedagogical approaches abound across our campus.
- The literature supports the use of open-ended questions in peer teaching observations.

For the Post-Observation Write-Up and Discussion

- Giving constructive feedback takes skill and care. According to Sullivan, et al.,¹ feedback should be descriptive of behavior rather than personality, specific and sensitive, focused on what is changeable, and timely. (See also the tips quoted below under General Best Practices)
- Anti-racist pedagogy is effective pedagogy. How does your department take anti-racist pedagogy into account in the peer observation process?
- Reflect on experiences and ideas with your department. Moving forward, are there any changes/tweaks to the evaluation process to better integrate the different modalities of our teaching?

Resources and Guides from Other Institutions

Check out these comprehensive guides and resources from other institutions.

- Vanderbilt University, Center for Teaching – [Peer Review of Teaching Guide](#)
- University of Toronto, Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation – [Peer Observation of Teaching: Effective Practices \(pdf\)](#)

¹ Sullivan, P., Buckle, A., Nicky, G. & Atkinson, S. (2012). Peer observation of teaching as a faculty development tool. BMC Medical Education, 12(26).

Some General Best Practices... *Applicable Online and On Campus*

The following is quoted from Appendix B (pg. 27) of University of Toronto, Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation – [Peer Observation of Teaching: Effective Practices \(pdf\)](#)

Suggested Best Practices for Classroom Visits

(Kachur et al., 2013)

- Be present (online or in-person) quietly in an unobtrusive place.
- Refrain from redirecting student work or behaviour (except in emergency situations).
- Have a non-evaluative state of mind. Stay focused on gathering data about student learning, that you see or elements of instruction that facilitate student learning.
- Use open, nonjudgmental body language.
- If asked a question by a student during your observation, reflect the question back to the student or instructor in order to encourage continued learning.
- Do not enter classrooms during the first or last five minutes of class.
- Most important, note only what you see—not what you don't see.
- Take notes after the classroom visit and discuss briefly as soon as possible.
- Write down exact quotes instead of paraphrasing a teacher or student.
- Refrain from talking about the classes you visit until the debriefing.
- Turn off cell phones.
- Use agreed-upon common language for describing high-quality instruction.
- Observe the classroom from the perspective of the student as a learner.
- Do not teach or assist individuals or small groups with assigned seatwork.
- Exit the classroom quietly and expeditiously.

Suggested Best Practices for Follow-up After Classroom Visits

(Kachur et al., 2013)

- Listen to, welcome, and consider others' ideas.
- Create opportunities for and value humour and fun.
- Support emotional collegiality.
- Honour the idea that we are all here to learn and grow together.
- Avoid evaluative language and critique.
- Make comments straightforward and clear.
- Ask genuine questions that you wonder about.
- Avoid leading or multiple-choice questions.
- Do not set up the answer.
- Be clear about your intent: clarifying questions are for the person asking them (who, what when, where), and open-ended probing questions are for the person answering them (why).
- Challenge ideas, not people.
- Encourage the exchange of ideas.
- Ask for clarification if you do not understand what you observed.
- Look for positive ideas you can take away.
- Speak consistently to the observed focus and look-fors (if applicable).
- Engage in deep questioning and conversation to inspire one another.
- Ask "what if" or "I wondered" reflective questions.
- Keep student learning the central focus of all comments.