CLASSROOM OBSERVATION

PURPOSE
Colleguial peer observation allows good instructors to continually improve as they observe each other, reflect on their strengths, and identify areas for growth. “It’s hard to improve when you have no model other than yourself to copy after” (Oliver Goldsmith). This tool addresses misconceptions about instructor peer observation, explains its benefits, and presents models for getting started.

DESCRIPTION
Essentially, instructor peer observation involves a pair or small group of instructors taking turns observing each others’ classroom. The observation focuses on either or both of the following questions:
1. How could I improve my own instruction?
2. What are the strengths and weaknesses in this instruction (not in the instructor)?

Most instructors are acquainted with the use of classroom observations for personnel or Continuing-Faculty-Status (CFS) decisions. Though these processes also involve sitting in on a class, they do not have the same questions, focus, or purpose.

Instructor peer observation is not a personnel evaluation. It is not used for determining instructor competence or for generating summative feedback. Its results are not shared, except with the instructor. Neither does peer observation refer to involvement in a remediation or formal development process. Its purpose is not to correct problems or train new instructors. Rather, peer observation starts from an assumption of competence and good teaching skills.

Peer observation allows instructors to improve as they reflect together on their strengths and identify areas for growth. Doctors, lawyers, and other professionals consult with one another and engage in ongoing professional development. Peer observation fulfills this for the professional educator.

EXAMPLE
There are many models for organizing instructor peer observation. Here are a few, designed to benefit the observer, instructor, or both.

Teaching Squares (observer benefits)
In Teaching Squares, groups of three or four instructors visit each others’ classroom, either reciprocally or in rotation. After, they meet to share only how their own teaching has been affected as a result of their observations.

Teaching Squares Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Your Task</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Kick-off meeting</td>
<td>Meet your square partners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Visit 1</td>
<td>Establish agreements and schedule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Visit 1</td>
<td>Prepare for visit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Visit 2</td>
<td>Visit and record observations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Square Share</td>
<td>Review and glean from notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Share observations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Option 1: Non-Reciprocal Rotation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observer</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visit 1</td>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visit 2</td>
<td></td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Option 2: Reciprocal Visits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observer</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visit 1</td>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visit 2</td>
<td></td>
<td>D</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Open Doors (observer and instructor benefit)
Another model, developed by Parker Palmer in The Courage to Teach (1997), is less structured than the previous model. The premise of Open Doors is that teaching is a public activity, even though it may be very personal for the instructor. Instructors are urged to welcome numerous, spontaneous, and unannounced classroom visits by colleagues who share their desire for improving teaching quality. Feedback is exchanged in informal conversation after the class. The feedback may include observer’s reflections on improving his or her own technique as well as suggestions for the observed instructor.

Harvard Model (instructor benefits)
In the Harvard Model, the observer prepares by meeting with the instructor to determine what issues the instructor wishes to address and by reviewing any necessary class materials. During class, the observer takes notes to capture both small details and the big picture. Often, the observer uses a form for noting observations. Before debriefing

http://www.byui.edu/learning-and-teaching/instructional-tools

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with the instructor, the observer reviews the notes, settles on strengths and opportunities for growth, and recalls specific examples as illustrations. The observer leads the debriefing as follows:

1. Ask an **open-ended question** about the instructor’s perceptions. Note gaps to better create congruence between their perceptions and your own observations.
2. Discuss the **strengths** of the instruction and how they could be better leveraged.
3. Discuss **opportunities for growth** that would yield the greatest benefit.
4. Selectively review **key moments** or turning points in the classroom experience.
5. Provide general but actionable **recommendations**.

**SCOTs Program (instructor benefits)**
Specially trained student consultants ([Student Consults on Teaching](http://www.byui.edu/learning-and-teaching/instructional-tools)) can give various kinds of feedback on a course from a student perspective, or collect data from participants in the course. These students, or SCOTs, provide data and observations that can be difficult to get in any other way.

Classroom observations services include:

- **Recorder/observer**: notes on classroom process
- **Faux student**: insight on what’s getting through
- **Filmmaker**: an objective look at the class
- **Focus group**: eliciting student feedback
- **Primed student**: data on any classroom variables
- **Gradebook**: introduction to a statistical analysis of your gradebook
- **Materials audit**: a student-eye perspective on your syllabus, your website, your tests, your rubrics or any other course material
- **Other**: students are trained and available as a classroom concierge. They’ll help in whatever way is needed to gather data and garner insight on your classroom experience.

**TIPS**

- **Culture of open feedback**. Build a culture of open feedback and trusting relationships. Participating regularly and contributing feedback that is neither self-congratulatory nor overly critical will help.

**Describe behavior**. Giving and receiving feedback is a bit of an art. Describe behavior as the subject of discussion, not the person.

- **Good**: The way this activity followed that one made it appear...
- **Bad**: The way you moved from the first activity to the second...

**Rules and training**. Agree on standards and procedures before observing and arrange for departmental or group training before you organize into groups.

**Mixed groups**. Involve cross-disciplinary groups and mix them periodically to broaden your perspective and share the strengths of your discipline’s subculture.

**PITFALLS**

- **Accepted but ineffective**. Instructor peer observation runs the risk of propagating generally accepted but ineffective teaching strategies.
- **Unintentional offense**. As instructors who care, it is possible to take teaching very personally. It’s hard to distinguish between formative feedback on improving performance and summative feedback on competence.

**OTHER NAMES**
Classroom observation, Reciprocal peer observation, Peer teaching observation, Formative peer review

**KEY ARTICLES**


**OTHER RESOURCES**

- Observation Template with Instructions