

Guidelines for Classroom Observation

The following procedures for developing a colleague visitation program are drawn from successful programs at Indiana and other colleges and universities. Classroom observation models emphasize a three-step consultation process which includes a pre-observation conference, classroom observation, and a post-observation conference.

Pre-Observation Conference

In the pre-observation session, the colleague observer obtains information from the instructor concerning his or her class goals, students, and particular teaching style. An interview schedule provides a brief, structured way of obtaining such information and includes the following questions:

1. Briefly, what will be happening in the class I will observe?
2. What is your goal for the class? What do you hope students will gain from this session?
3. What do you expect students to be doing in class to reach stated goals?
4. What can I expect you to be doing in class? What role will you take? What teaching methods will you use? .
5. What have students been asked to do to prepare for this class?
6. What was done in earlier classes to lead up to this one?
7. Will this class be generally typical of your teaching? If not, what will be different?
8. Is there anything in particular that you would like me to focus on during the class?

Details such as the date for the classroom observation, use of a particular observation form or method, and seating arrangement for the colleague observer should also be decided by mutual agreement at this session.

Classroom Observation

Faculty and students have identified the following as characteristics of effective teaching: organization and clarity, command and communication of subject matter, teacher-student rapport, and enthusiasm. Questions listed below may help the observer identify particular skills or techniques in the classroom which illustrate the characteristics of good teaching.

Knowledge of Subject Matter

Does the instructor exhibit mastery of the content? Is the depth and breadth of material covered appropriate to the level of course and group of students? Does material covered in this class relate to the syllabus and overall goals of the course? Does the instructor emphasize a conceptual grasp of the material? Does the instructor incorporate recent developments in the discipline? Is the content presented considered important within the discipline and within related disciplines?

Organization and Clarity

Structure: Is the instructor well prepared for class? Does the instructor provide an overview of the class? Is the sequence of content covered logical? Is the instructor able to present and explain content clearly? Does the instructor provide transitions from topic to topic, make distinctions between major and minor points, periodically summarize important concepts or ideas in the lecture? Does the instructor use examples and illustrations to clarify difficult or abstract ideas?

Teaching Strategies: Are the instructor's teaching methods appropriate to the goals of the class? Is the instructor able to vary the pattern of instruction through movement gestures, voice level, tone and pace? Does or could the instructor use alternative methods such as media, discussion, lab, questioning? Is the boardwork legible and organized? If appropriate, does the instructor use students' work (writing assignments, homework problems, etc.)? [Is] the use of various teaching strategies (lecture, handouts, media) effectively integrated?

Closure: Does the instructor summarize and integrate major points of the lecture or discussion at the end of class? Are homework or reading assignments announced hurriedly?

Instructor-Student Interaction

Discussion: How is discussion initiated? Are the purpose and guidelines clear to students? Does the instructor encourage student questions?

Kinds of Questions: Are questions rhetorical or real? One at a time or multiple? Does the instructor use centering questions (to refocus students' attention), probing questions (to require students to go beyond a superficial or incomplete answer), or redirecting questions (to ask for clarification or agreement from others)?

Level of Questions: What level of questions does the instructor ask? Lower level questions generally have a "right" answer and require students to recall or list facts. Higher level questions ask students to generalize, compare, contrast or analyze information.

What is done with student questions: Are questions answered in a direct and understandable manner? Are questions received politely or enthusiastically?

What is done with student response: How long does the instructor pause for student responses (formulating answers to difficult questions takes a few minutes)? Does the instructor use verbal reinforcement? Is there a non-verbal response (smile, nod)? Is the instructor receptive to student suggestions or viewpoints contrary to his or her own?

Presentation and Enthusiasm

Does the instructor demonstrate enthusiasm for the subject? For teaching? Can the instructor's voice be easily heard? Does the teacher raise or lower voice for variety and emphasis? Is the rate of speech too fast or slow? Is the rate of speech appropriate for notetaking? Does the teacher maintain eye contact with students? Does the instructor use facial expressions, posture, or motion to sustain student interest?

Student Behavior

Survey the class on occasion and note what students are doing. What are note-taking patterns in class (do students take few notes, write down everything, write down what instructor puts on board, copy each other's notes in order to keep up with lecture)? Are students listening attentively, slumped back in desks, heads on hands? Are there behaviors that are outside of the mainstream of class activity (random conversations among students, reading of materials not relevant to class)?

Overall

What did you like most about this particular class and/or the instructor's teaching effectiveness? What specific suggestions would you make to improve this particular class and/or the instructor's teaching effectiveness? Did you learn anything in the pre- or post-observation sessions that influenced or modified your responses? Overall, how would you rate this instructor?

Post-Observation Conference

The post-observation conference is most useful if it occurs within a few days of the classroom observation, while the activities are still fresh in the minds of the teacher and colleague observer. No later than one day following the observation, the colleague should review the notes on the class. The colleague observer should then discuss the classroom observation in depth with the teacher. A series of questions with which to initiate a follow-up discussion would include:

1. In general, how did you feel the class went?
2. How did you feel about your teaching during the class?
3. Did students accomplish the goals you had planned for this class?
4. Is there anything that worked well for you in class today that you particularly liked? Does that usually go well?
5. Is there anything that did not work well-that you disliked about the way the class went? Is that typically a problem area for you? .
6. What were your teaching strengths? Did you notice anything you improved on or any personal goals you met?
7. What were your teaching problems- areas that still need improvement?
8. Do you have any suggestions or strategies for improvement?

The colleague observer can reinforce and add to the instructor's perceptions by referring to the log of class events.

An analysis and interpretation of the classroom visit, as well as of the post-observation conference, should go to the instructor. It is important that the results of observations be shared with the faculty member being evaluated. (Colleague evaluations could also go to a departmental committee or to the chair, depending upon the departmental policies for sharing such information). It is also important that any colleague observation program emphasize the positive, constructive feature of the observation process - the improvement of instruction.

Note: This chapter in Improving College Teaching, Strategies for Developing Instructional Effectiveness by Maryellen Weimer (1991, Jossey-Bass Publishers) is reprinted from Sorcinelli, 1986, by permission of the author.