

# Using peer observation to enhance teaching

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# An established tradition at Leeds Met

Leeds Met has a strong tradition in peer observation of teaching as a developmental and supportive process. In January 2000, a briefing paper argued that “Classroom observation is seen firmly as part of a range of quality development tools used to improve the design and delivery of our curriculum. It will be productive only when undertaken in an atmosphere of trust and security, and with a developmental intent” (Hitchins and Pashley, 2000). The processes in use across the University have continued to build on this spirit, and this latest version of the process aims to make peer review even more useful to colleagues.

## Why is peer review so beneficial?

The purposes of peer review include:

- providing us with opportunities, both through observing and being observed in teaching sessions, to reflect on and review our teaching skills with the assistance of our colleagues
- identifying good practice, and needs which we can address, to ensure our ongoing personal and professional development
- helping us to continue to learn from each other, towards developing shared understandings of best practices in assessment, learning and teaching
- giving us continuing opportunities to observe students as they learn in colleagues’ teaching sessions, and reflect on how we can enhance their learning in our own sessions
- allowing us to gain from mutually beneficial learning experiences

through the processes of observing colleagues and being observed ourselves

- helping us to learn new tricks from one another (old colleagues learn much from new staff and they in turn can teach new colleagues old tricks!)
- identifying generic development needs, to feed into ongoing and future staff development activities.

## How confidential is it?

Essentially, it’s confidential between you and your observer. The Leeds Met scheme for peer review is not connected with formal processes of appraisal or Performance & Development Review (PDR), other than that we expect you to confirm that you have done it. That said, you may well wish to use feedback from your observer as evidence of your good practice in appraisal or PDR – the choice remains yours. Since the expectation at Leeds Met is that everyone who teaches should be observed twice per year, and observe someone else teach twice per year, it is natural that feedback from peer observation will be valuable evidence to you to put forward for PDR. Later in this booklet you can see examples of ‘Form 1’ which is the basis for your observation, and which you plan with your observer at a pre-meeting, and review at a post-meeting, where the form is returned to you to keep. All the University keeps is ‘Form 2’, recording that the observation took place, as described below.

## So what *is* recorded by the University?

In effect, all that is recorded is that peer review has happened, and continues to happen regularly. In general, a minimum of two sessions per academic year should be observed per person. Your name as an observed colleague, and that of your observer, and the time and place of the observation are reported to the person in your Faculty responsible for performance review (Subject Group Head or similar), to provide evidence that the review has taken place, using 'Form 2'

(below) or something similar. This basic information is collated within Faculties by the Associate Dean: Assessment, Learning and Teaching, ensuring that all members of teaching staff are engaging with the process both as observers and observed, and providing evidence of this engagement to help outside agencies or professional bodies to see how committed we are to maximising the benefits of sharing best practice with each other across the University.

### Form 2

PEER OBSERVATION RECORD SHEET ACADEMIC YEAR:

For completion by Subject Group Head

SUBJECT AREA:

| Date of observation | Name of person observing | Session observed<br>(name of person observed, time,<br>date, location) | Nature of session<br>(e.g. lecture, seminar, tutorial,<br>practical etc) |
|---------------------|--------------------------|--|--|
|                     |                          |  |  |
|                     |                          |  |  |
|                     |                          |  |  |

## What else comes out of peer review?

Several useful things emerge from peer review, including the following:

- increased confidence of all involved, derived from feedback on being observed and good ideas picked up while observing others' teaching
- identification of good practice, so that it is more easily shared and built upon
- identification of commonly experienced problems and needs, so that these can be made the basis of staff development opportunities designed by the Assessment, Learning and Teaching (ALT) team
- the benefit of focused 'learning conversations' between observed and observers, mutually helping both parties to continue to develop professional skills relating to teaching and learning.

# How exactly does peer review work?

Basically, there are ten steps for each observation – as a lecturer you're only involved in the first eight of these. These guidelines are written with 'you' being the observed. You can easily reverse steps 1–8 when it's your turn to be the observer – which may well be before you are yourself observed. The intended processes are as follows:

1. **You choose your own peer reviewers.** Normally the intention is you choose a different peer reviewer for each session reviewed, to optimise the sharing of experience. In selecting reviewers, you might ask colleagues from your own subject group or similar but could also consider approaching staff from different areas or Faculties. The Teacher Fellows of the University have expressed willingness to act as observers (and in turn for you to observe them).
2. **You decide what sort of teaching/learning is going to be observed.** All forms of teaching can be considered for review, not just lecturing. It is intended that one observation should be of a classroom-based or e-moderating session, and the other could be a further similar session, or a tutorial, a practice/work-based learning session or a review of learning materials – or whatever else you would like feedback upon. Ideally the first session should take place in the earlier part of the academic year and the second at a later time. If you are teaching at a distance, virtual observation and review can be undertaken.
3. **You meet to set the scene.** You arrange a brief 'pre-meeting' with your chosen observer in advance of the session to be observed, to explain its context and objectives and to agree any particular focus for the observation. For lengthy sessions, for example teaching taking place in a studio, you should negotiate the duration of the observation with your observer.
4. **You plan with your observer your feedback agenda.** At the 'pre-meeting' you plan the date, time and duration of the observation, and you also plan ahead for a 'post-meeting' after the observation so you can get feedback, which should be constructive, focused, supportive and developmental. You choose with your observer a framework for the recording of appropriate observations for your session. 'Form 1' provides a possible framework for feedback but this is only one suggested format and is designed primarily for observation of a classroom-based session. You (and your observer) can adapt this for other forms of teaching as appropriate. There are some alternative formats included in this booklet, and more can be found on ALT Resource on the University website (<http://alt-resource.teams.leedsmet.ac.uk/>), or from documentation already serving excellently in various Faculties.
5. **You do your bit – your observation takes place.** Your observer uses the agreed agenda ('Form 1' or alternative) as a basis for recording observations and suggestions during your session, and prepares to bring this back to hand over to you at the 'post-meeting' referred to above.
6. **The two of you meet for the 'post-meeting'.** This might be immediately following the observed session. During the feedback discussion, aspects of good practice and

developmental needs will be shared. It is your observer's role to assist you in the process of review and reflection with the aim of improving the quality of your teaching as well as highlighting good practice for wider dissemination. Remember you may be doing (or may already have done) exactly the same for your observer – peer review is a reciprocal process throughout.

7. **The two of you 'seal the deal' with your joint thoughts using the final section of 'Form 1'**. Remember, no-one else sees this form unless you choose to show it to them, so you can be frank and direct in your own comments about the session you taught. This makes it easier to revisit the form in future action-planning.
8. **You send in the basic data of the observation.** After the 'post-meeting', you contact the person who oversees annual reviews by email, simply supplying the date, location and nature of the observation session and the name of the observer, thereby recording that the observation has taken place. You are welcome to provide any generic feedback points for dissemination more widely, and any training needs you have identified, to ensure relevant development opportunities can be provided.
9. **Reviewing managers do their bit.** At the end of semester 2, the reviewing managers collate a record of peer reviews completed by staff, collating simply:
  - dates of observations, locations
  - names of staff observing
  - names of staff observed

- nature of sessions (e.g. lectures, seminars, tutorials, practicals and so on).

In addition, reviewing managers are expected to compile and share a separate anonymous summary of general areas of good practice and development needs arising from the peer observations they oversee.

At the end of the academic year, reviewing managers will email the completed record of peer reviews to the Associate Dean: Assessment, Learning and Teaching (ALT) in their Faculty. Generic staff development needs should also be fed back to the ALT team.

10. **Associate Deans: ALT do their bit.** They produce their annual reports on the implementation of peer review of teaching for consideration by Faculty Academic Committee, with summaries provided to Academic Committee. Deans will need to ensure that they are confident that all teaching staff in their Faculties have engaged in the agreed process. These annual reports provide information that can be fed back to the organisers of ALT staff development, so that appropriate, targeted staff development events can be made available to all staff within the annual programme of events, including the Staff Development Festival.

## What do I gain by being observed?

Most importantly, feedback both on your teaching and on how students are responding to the way you teach. The following quotes, from colleagues at Leeds Met and across the UK, illustrate how beneficial peer observation can (and should) be.

*“I enjoy receiving valuable feedback as it is in a supportive and constructive manner. It’s great to see my teaching from another peer’s perspective, linking this with student feedback makes it a much more robust review of my own teaching.”*

Sunita Morris, Leeds Met Teacher Fellow

*“I have always found peer observation of teaching invaluable. I have learned a lot from watching other colleagues teaching. Consequently, I am able to be a better teacher with improved style of teaching and classroom practice. Likewise, others who had observed my teaching had commented how this experience had helped them. I have been teaching for 28 years and I find each peer observation adding to my teaching skills.”*

Dr Aru Narayanasamy, National Teaching Fellow (NTF), Associate Professor, University of Nottingham

*“Being observed encourages me to reflect on my teaching approach and classroom management at all stages of the lesson – prior, during and after the observation. As lecturers, we owe it to our students to ensure that we not only possess relevant discipline-specific qualifications or knowledge, but that, in practice, our teaching approach is suitable to the context.”*

Dawn Leggott, Leeds Met Teacher Fellow

*“For me peer review of my teaching is an invaluable and constructive way of ascertaining the extent to which I am achieving my stated aims. The feedback from observers enables me to identify areas that require further thought and also highlights existing good practice.”*

Professor Deirdre Heenan, NTF, University of Ulster

*“The reward for me is the discovery of new approaches and constructive feedback on what I think I am doing. We think we are self aware but you can’t replace the reality of other people’s observation. What a learning experience.”*

David Gibson, NTF, Enterprise Education, Queen’s University Belfast

*“There is always excitement tinged with nervousness about being observed, just as there is with any performance, but I have always found it reinvigorating especially when observers seem to want to learn more about what I was teaching (as well as tell me about how). I try to ask more questions than I make statements.”*

Belinda Cooke, Leeds Met Teacher Fellow

## So what do I gain by being an observer?

The short answer is “probably even more than through being observed”! The Leeds Met scheme of peer review is designed so that everyone is an observer as often as they are observed – but of course it’s easy enough to gain even more practice at being an observer, not least when attending conferences and staff development sessions.

Here are some of the benefits of the opportunity to sit in others’ classes and watch what happens. You may well be able to add to this list if you already have some experience at watching how colleagues go about their teaching.

- **You see colleagues doing things that you can emulate.** Even very experienced observers comment that they continue to learn new things that they can take back and apply to their own teaching.
- **You may learn much from watching others use learning technologies, conferencing software or equipment unfamiliar to you.** It’s often really helpful to watch someone else in action before you try something new yourself.
- **You see other ways of going about teaching.** The more the better. In a small circle of colleagues you might only see a limited range of approaches to helping students learn. When you widen that circle, you’re likely to experience different approaches you would not otherwise have met, some of which may well be worth trying out for yourself.
- **You can feel you are supporting new colleagues by watching them teach.** Most people remember how tough it is starting to teach in higher education, so it’s good to offer support to people new to the job.
- **You get time out to watch and reflect.** For once, you don’t have to say anything. You can watch, think, listen, and capture things in your notes to share later with your colleague.
- **You can be a student for a while.** It’s really useful to sit being a student. It helps us think about how our students feel in our own sessions. You can share the joy and excitement when your colleague generates such emotions with the class. You can also share the tensions when things are going less well. You can watch the students in a way you can’t manage in your own classes when you’re busy teaching.
- **You can learn from how people do things in completely different disciplines.** In some ways, it’s even better to be sitting in someone’s session in a discipline you know little about. For a start, you can ‘feel for the students’ that bit more – you’re learning too, alongside them. And you’re better able to step back from the content of the session, and observe what exactly is happening – the teaching processes happening before you, and the learning that’s going on around you. (In our own subject areas, we’re too easily caught up in the subject matter itself, to the detriment of learning from the processes.)
- **You may see things to avoid doing yourself!** When you see something going wrong in a session you’re observing, you can make a note to yourself to avoid that in your own teaching, or prevent a problem from occurring as you watch one developing.

You may or may not choose to share all these things with the colleague you're observing. If they know they've got a problem, they don't need you to tell them. They might however welcome some feedback on alternative approaches that might have prevented the problem occurring.

- **You get to know more colleagues.** Peer observation, and the discussions that follow it, make an excellent way of finding new friends and supportive peers. You'll have more people to turn to when you need help or advice. In particular, it's good to build bridges with colleagues in other Faculties.
- **You get the luxury of leading a 'learning conversation' with your colleague about teaching and learning.** Such conversations are extremely valuable, and in busy lives where time is precious, it's good to take time out from all those other things and talk about learning and teaching. After all, the main part of most of our jobs is to do with these things.
- **The process of giving feedback to colleagues on their teaching helps you become more receptive to feedback on your own teaching.** For example, if something has gone really well, you want to make sure that they know it has gone well, so that they will build on it and repeat it. Or if something hasn't quite worked, you'll want to help them find ways of making it work better next time. In either case, you'll be choosing how best to be a supportive colleague to the person whose teaching you observed. All this pays dividends when it's your turn to be receptive to your own observers.

- **Being an observer is the best possible preparation for getting the most out of being observed.** Someone's got to go first, and in any reciprocal peer observation it could be you. But when it's your turn to observe, it will still make future 'being observed' occasions all the more productive.
- **You can learn a lot about subject areas different from your own.** Watching people teach subjects tangential or completely different from your own can broaden your own understanding of a range of issues.

*"As an observer, my feedback drew attention to important but easily missed aspects of the learning process such as giving enough time to exercises, the 'energy' of the group and to processing feedback."*

Bill Penson, Leeds Met Teacher Fellow

*"I think that part of the value of peer observation is that it is a great prompt for reflective practice. It is sometimes easy to get complacent about teaching situations and to do it as you have always done it because it seems to go OK, but setting up an observation makes you reflect on the session from beginning to end, thinking 'What am I trying to do here?' 'Is what I normally do really the best way to do that?' And so on. Not wanting to show ourselves up [in front of the observer] is a great incentive to having a bit of a rethink!"*

Cath Sanderson, Leeds Met Teacher Fellow

## Experiences of learning through observing peers

The following quotes from Leeds Met and beyond confirm the considerable benefits of learning from observing.

*"I would say that I learned some of my best 'moves' in the classroom from peer observation. I learned to work the room. What this means is that I now know that the physical presence has a role to play in directing, guiding, and enthusing students. By watching a much more experienced lecturer, I realised that by not standing or sitting at the front, but by moving around, sitting among [the students], or even speaking from the back of the room, the students seem more attentive and more inclined to ask questions."*

Nicola Aries, NTF, Kingston University

*"It is fascinating how the observer's perceptions of the learners' experiences are usually much more positive than the teacher's ... I think this is because teachers often misinterpret student behaviours. For example, silence feels like lack of engagement rather than an indication of reflection. Observers are much better placed to feed back that a really useful discussion took place amongst a sub-group of learners who are out of earshot of the teacher."*

Belinda Cooke, Leeds Met Teacher Fellow

*"The great thing about observing other people's teaching is how much you learn and how much good practice one can pick up. Some of my best teaching techniques have been 'plagiarised' through watching other people!"*

Professor Brian Chalkley, NTF, University of Plymouth

*"I have always found observing others exceedingly valuable. Sometimes one learns 'what not to do' which is very valuable but also one picks up lots of tips and ideas. I think it really helps us not to get stuck in a rut and we should do it more often."*

Jane Stapleford, formerly of Leeds Met

*"I am a trained peer reviewer at my University. From experience I learn as much, from the process and experience, as the colleague being reviewed. It's mutually beneficial. Peer observation sparks new ideas and makes you think how things can be done better or at least differently."*

James Derounian, NTF, University of Gloucester

*"I find observing an enjoyable experience. I learn new knowledge especially when the subject is not in a familiar area. The added bonus is that I can pick up useful tips to use in my own lectures!"*

Sunita Morris, Leeds Met Teacher Fellow

*"Through observing others, I have seen how different approaches can lead to the achievement of the same goals, I have gained many new ideas which I have been able to put into practice in my own teaching and I have been forced, in a positive way, to reflect upon my own classroom practice."*

Dawn Leggott, Leeds Met Teacher Fellow

## What's in it for the University?

Comments from other institutions show that there's a lot to be gained through a well-designed scheme of peer observation. Just one example:

*“The benefits of sharing practice and engaging in critical discourse with peers had a dramatic effect on perceptions of ‘lecturing’ within our institution – to the real benefit of the learners placed in our care. A principled and values-based approach to ‘professional conversation’ pays real dividends driving up standards within a community of practice.”*

Symon Quy, NTF, Central School of Speech and Drama

And at Leeds Met:

*“Leeds Met aims to be a learning organisation. Open and reflective approaches to one's own practice lead to genuine quality enhancement, and peer observation benefits all concerned. I regularly seek people to observe me doing presentations, and observe and comment on other colleagues in action whenever I can, recognising the value of both sides of the equation. Peer observation is a central platform of our approach to enhancing the student experience.”*

Sally Brown, NTF, Pro-Vice-Chancellor Academic, Leeds Met

# The pre-meeting

## Preparing to be observed

Whatever kind of peer observation you are planning, it is really useful to arrange a pre-meeting with your observer. It's best to have the pre-meeting a few days before the observation, rather than try to squeeze it in ten minutes before the observation itself; this gives your observer more time to tune in to the nature of the session, and what you're planning to gain from the observation. Just as importantly, it allows the observer to reflect on what he or she may gain from the observation, and how it may link to their own teaching.

*"The key thing is making sure that you have a pre-meeting with the colleague you are going to observe. Make sure it is not too long before the session takes place. This helps to relieve their pre-observation nerves, clarifies a shared view of your perceived expectations of the sessions and allows the observed person to ask you to 'watch out' for any particular areas they would like some extra specific feedback on."*

Sue Smith, Leeds Met Teacher Fellow

It is really useful for you to fill in a short pro-forma to give to your observer at the pre-meeting, to help firm up your particular agenda for the observation, and to allow the observer to know enough about the context of the session to see 'the bigger picture' surrounding the particular session being observed. The first part of 'Form 1' can be used for this purpose – more about this later.

The pre-meeting can help both parties get the most from the observation, and can address (for example) some of the following questions and issues:

- **What's the background?** For example, is this your 5th lecture in a series of ten, or a seminar following up a particular lecture, or a practical session based on previous lectures?
- **How do you feel about being observed on this occasion?** You may be very used to the experience, or it could be new and a bit scary for you. It can be worth sharing your feelings with your observer – you'll often get a lot of reassurance.
- **How long is the session to be observed?** If it's a long session, is observation going to be for just part of your session?
- **How is this particular group of students shaping up to date?** Any difficulties with them? Any particular strengths or characteristics that the observer could find it useful to know?
- **What are the particular learning outcomes for the session?** For example, what exactly are the students intended to be getting out of the session? How (very briefly) do these outcomes fit into the bigger picture of their studies?
- **What, in particular, do you want to find out from the observation?** For example, are you trying out something new, and would like feedback on how it works? Are you having some difficulties with this class, and would like feedback on what seems to be happening to help you address these difficulties?

- **What pro-forma would you like to be used by the observer during the observation?** Have you one of your own you'd prefer to be used? Is there one that's widely used in your own subject area or Faculty? Would you like to pick one from those on ALT Resource (<http://alt-resource.teams.leedsmet.ac.uk/>)? Do you have a good pro-forma of your own you could add to these resources? Would you like to rough out a specific one for this observation? If there's a particular form you'd like to be used to capture the observations, it is really useful to have this ready at the pre-meeting to give to your observer.
- **What do you want your observer to do at the session?** For example, 'be one of the students', 'sit in a particular place', and so on.
- **Will you explain to the students why someone else is in the room?** If so, how will you do this? At the time, in advance?
- **Observing what exactly?** Do you want your observer to watch what your students are doing, rather than just watch what you are doing?
- **What else might you want to find out as a result of the observation?** What *don't* you want to find out? For example, are there things you know already about your teaching in this particular context, and would prefer not to be told?

The pro-forma below is the first part of 'Form 1' discussed earlier in this booklet, and is a way of letting your observer know the intended learning outcomes for the session to be observed.

### Form 1

TO BE COMPLETED BY THE OBSERVED COLLEAGUE PRIOR TO THE SESSION

What are the specific learning objectives/learning outcomes planned for this session (e.g. knowledge and understanding, key skills, cognitive skills, and subject-specific, including practical/professional skills)?

However, please feel free to adapt it to your own session and preferences, or to use a different form for this part altogether if you prefer. A fuller, rather more detailed form is given below, for

example. This might be helpful in telling your observer a little more about the background to the session, and it could have the remainder of 'Form 1' attached for use during the observation itself.

|  |                  |
|--|------------------|
| Date, time and place:  |                  |
| Kind of teaching/learning context (e.g. lecture, tutorial, seminar, demonstration, practical, online learning, etc): |                  |
| Topic:   |                  |
| Approximate number of students:  |                  |
| Where this element fits into overall picture for students:   |                  |
| What the students should get out of the session (e.g. in terms of learning outcomes, skills to be gained, etc):      |                  |
| What I'd particularly appreciate feedback on:  |                  |
| Anything else? Any other requests?   |                  |
| My name:   | Observer's name: |

## Preparing to observe

Many people say they get much more out of observing others teach than from being observed themselves.

*“At a workshop in the late 90s the audience had all observed and been observed. They all said that they had learned more from observing than from being observed.”*

Michael Bradford, NTF (formerly Manchester University)

So when you're preparing to be an observer, it's useful to set up the observation so that you find out as much as you can about the class being taught, as well as the context of the particular session in the bigger picture.

Perhaps the most important thing to remember as an observer is that your primary aim should be to give your colleague feedback on what he or she wishes, rather than provide a lecture on how you yourself would have approached running the same session with the students who were present. It's only too easy to fall into “I would have done it like this...” when what's most important is how it actually worked: what went well, what went less well.

At the pre-meeting, your purposes could include:

- to get to know your colleague, if not known already
- to find out more about the session to be observed: the context, the time, place, and nature of the session and so on
- to find out from your colleague what the students concerned are intended to be getting out of this particular session

- most important: to find out from your colleague what he or she particularly wants you to do during the session, and what feedback would be most appreciated
- to check whether your colleague would like you to watch what the students are actually doing during the session, rather than just what he or she is doing
- to reflect on your own teaching as you observe, and to note down things you could take from the session to develop your own practice.

### Working constructively with anxiety

Both parties at the pre-meeting may have naturally some level of anxiety, and it is best to ensure that the meeting addresses this, and that the observation itself is planned to work through and resolve such anxiety.

The following (anonymised) quotes from people who have been involved on both sides of peer observation throw light on how to minimise anxiety:

*“I think teachers should get lots of opportunity to be an observer before we expect them to feel happy about being observed ... I find if I offer an open invitation for people just to turn up and observe my teaching, before long those people will naturally ask me to observe them ... I always try to emphasise how inexact a science teaching is and how, even with careful planning, I still have failures.”*

*“Being observed can be anxiety-provoking but I have found that asking the observer for particular areas to watch for as well as their overall remarks can be helpful. On reflection it is a supportive and enhancing experience.”*

*“Despite 34 years in teaching, I have to admit that I was a little nervous having an ‘outsider’ in the room. I was a little surprised at this since nervousness always manifests itself with me as an interruption of my flow of words/points. I dislike being ‘observed’ (I feel self-conscious) and this is one of the reasons (not the only one) that I asked my observer to participate in the session. Once I got going though, I relaxed & thoroughly enjoyed having her there. Her contribution as a ‘student’ actually helped me in terms of support since with the interactive teaching one needs people who are happy to throw in stimulating points. I finished up wishing she could be there all the while!”*

*“I was a little nervous when undertaking the teaching review but only because I have never been assessed before regarding my teaching performance and also because there were a number of experimental elements to the session. The review has made me feel more aware of my performance in teaching sessions since, as I am constantly questioning what the students are getting out of my teaching. The peer reviewer put me at ease though and it was useful being made more aware of my teaching style. The review helped me to reflect upon things that ordinarily I would probably ignore.”*

And just as a reminder that peer observation does not have to be of ‘stand-up lecturing’, here is a short ‘question and answer’ transcript from a colleague at another institution who decided with her reviewer to have an assessment session with students as the basis for one of the observations:

***“Q. What was it like to have your teaching reviewed, within the Faculty’s new peer review scheme?”***

*A. I suppose my first reaction was predictably: ‘Oh no, not another assessment of my performance’ and ‘Why me?’ But when I actually read the paperwork that came around with the guidance as to how the process would work it did not seem so bad. For a start, the teaching review was more flexible than I had expected. I could choose the type of session that would be reviewed and it did not necessarily have to be a ‘straight’ stand-up lecture. This was useful for me as I was trying out a new assessment on one of my modules – and I saw the peer review as a way in which I could get someone else to look at the outcomes with me.*

***Q. So what did you do?”***

*A. I decided to focus on this assessment and to invite the reviewer to come into the final assessment session. The peer review process encouraged me to think around the approach to assessment I was taking with this group of students. As part of the review I built opportunities to get feedback from students about their perception of the assessment.”*

## The observation

This section is about making the most of the observation itself, whether you're being observed or doing the observing. There's a lot to be gained by both parties. Perhaps the most useful starting place is the form you choose to use at the session. 'Form 1' mentioned in this booklet continues from the pre-meeting with the following template. This consists of a table with some prompts at the left-hand

side, room for your observer to make comments about strengths relating to these prompts, and suggestions for development linked to any of these prompts. Then there's a part for the observer to complete either at the very end of the session, or shortly afterwards, simply summing up how he or she thinks the session measures up overall to the learning outcomes concerned.

### TO BE COMPLETED BY THE OBSERVER AT THE SESSION

Please comment on the strengths and areas for development in relation to the learning objectives/intended learning outcomes. The prompts are provided for guidance and other areas may be added or substituted by negotiation to suit specialist sessions.

| Prompts   | Strengths | Areas for development |
|---|-----------|-----------------------|
| Clarity of objectives/intended learning outcomes  |           |                       |
| Planning and organisation   |           |                       |
| Methods/approach  |           |                       |
| Delivery and pace   |           |                       |
| Content (currency, accuracy, relevance, use of examples, level, match to student needs) |           |                       |
| Student participation   |           |                       |
| Use of the learning environment and learning resources                                  |           |                       |

### TO BE COMPLETED BY THE OBSERVER AT THE END OF THE SESSION OR SHORTLY AFTERWARDS

Please summarise the session's overall quality in relation to the learning objectives/intended learning outcomes.

As suggested earlier, however, you might well have adapted the prompts in Form 1 at the pre-meeting, or decided to use another form altogether – possibly one already in use in your own School or Faculty, or one adapted from others available online, or one you've designed yourself for the purpose of the particular context being observed.

*"I've been observed many times, receiving constructive and detailed feedback from my peer observer. Areas such as aims and objectives, amount of material presented, explanation of points of difficulty, promoting and maintaining interest, framing of questions to stimulate thought, summarisation, recapitulation, usage of teaching aids, audibility of speech, enthusiasm and approach were all observed. A debrief was then held later, and feedback was provided as a write-up based on the areas observed above. The whole exercise encouraged me to think deeply of restructuring teaching to engage students and improve the whole learning process."*

Meg Soosay, Leeds Met Teacher Fellow

### More ideas on what may be observed

'Form 1' is quite general. Below are some other things you might wish to add or substitute, to make the most of feedback from your

observer. (Your observer may also have useful suggestions to make, based on his/her experience of doing observations already.)

*"My concern that I wanted specific feedback on was about the speed/pace that I was delivering my lectures – but I had not identified this as an issue/concern until my pre-consultation with my observer. Just by taking a few minutes to think about my teaching practice with my observer gave me the space to self-reflect and identify for myself a few personal concerns and then go on to identify actions – signposts/things to do – during my lecture. The lecture went swimmingly. I enjoyed it, I could see the students enjoyed it, my observer fed back that I showed an engaging grasp of the subject but reminded me to ground this in the learning outcomes for the session and to provide the necessary scaffolding that students require."*

Jayne Mothersdale, Leeds Met

Here are some general areas that might be useful in particular observations. You will be able to think of ideas that will be more relevant to your own teaching level and style.

- **How effectively you start your session:** how clearly you spell out the particular intended learning outcomes for the session, how well you link the session to what students should already know from previous sessions.

- **Questioning:** for example the way you ask the class questions, the way the students respond to your questions, how readily students ask you questions, how well you respond to their questions.
- **Student attention:** the extent to which you seem to achieve students' attention, the length of time the students seem able to be attentive, what you do to regain their attention when it has wandered off.
- **Your talking:** how clear your voice is, how well students can hear you at the back of the room, how long you talk at a time.
- **How you deal with student mistakes and misunderstandings:** how well you avoid making students who have made mistakes feel embarrassed or uncomfortable, how well you communicate that 'learning by getting things wrong at first' is a useful step towards learning things correctly.
- **Student activities in class:** the way you brief students on activities, the balance of individual and group activities, how you de-brief activities when they have been completed.
- **Student motivation:** how well you warm up students' interest in the topic, how effectively you show them what they need to become able to do, how well students take ownership of the targets you set them.
- **Students 'making sense' of the topic:** the extent to which they seem to gain understanding during the session, how well they 'get their heads around' complex ideas and concepts.
- **Student coaching and explaining:** how well you make use of the learning achieved when students explain things to each other or help each other to master difficult ideas.
- **Students making informed judgements:** for example where you get students to assess past examples of work, or peer-assess each other's work, or self-assess their own work.
- **Students using resources:** how effectively students make use of handout materials or other resources you provide them with during the class.
- **Your own use of resources:** for example how effectively you use PowerPoint, how well you avoid reading out what is on your slides to the class, how clearly visible your slides are at different parts of the room.
- **Time management:** how well you make use of the time available for the session, how well you avoid rushing towards the end, how well you time tasks and activities.
- **How effectively you round off your session towards the end:** for example summarising the main points students should by now have mastered, reminding students about the targets associated with the intended learning outcomes, how well you come to the final part of the session (for example avoiding students gathering together their materials ready to leave while you are still saying important things), and so on.

# Explaining the presence of your observer

You will need to do this, one way or another. Unless your observer slips in at the back of the class (and there is still a place to sit there!), your students are bound to notice that there is someone else in the session with them. It may be someone they already know from other teaching. You will need to decide exactly how you feel most comfortable explaining the observer's presence and purpose. You could tell the class one or more of the following:

- that you have indeed got a colleague observing your session
- that it is a regular occurrence – all teaching staff do this from time to time
- who the observer is
- what the observer will be trying to do
- that the observer will primarily be watching what you do – or watching what the students are doing as well.

Sometimes, especially if you've got a good relationship with the class already, students will be on their best behaviour if they know that your teaching is being observed, but they could be rather more inhibited about answering your questions if they think that their actions are being observed too.

## Where will the observer sit?

You may have preferences here – and so may your observer. This is something to sort out at the pre-meeting.

Your observer needs to be close enough to you to see what you are doing, but far enough back to get a sense of how it feels to be a typical student in the group. Many observers prefer to sit at the back, not least so that students are not looking over their shoulders at the notes they are making about your teaching during the session! As students tend to fill the back rows preferentially in many teaching contexts, you may need to 'install' your observer before the class assembles, or at least be first through the door if a class change is going on before the start of your session. It can feel better to seat your observer a little out of your main line of vision, to minimise your being reminded of his/her presence too often.

*"I was observed by two colleagues at the same session. One observer sat at the back of the room and I forgot about her but the other person sat a few feet away from me and never took his eyes off me. I found the whole process slightly false – almost as if I was stepping up my teaching to impress. I think I would have preferred to be observed unknowingly – that way a true picture of my teaching would emerge. Having said that, the feedback I got from both colleagues was very good and most encouraging."*

Jackie Dunn, University of Newcastle

## Should your observer take part in the class?

This is up to the pair of you to decide, and is a useful matter to sort out at the pre-meeting. There are pros and cons of having a passive observer or an active one. If your observer takes part in the class, for example as a typical student, you can ask him or her questions, and seek opinions, questions to you, and so on. But that depends on whether your observer knows enough about the topic to be able to participate in this way. You don't want to make your observer feel stupid in front of the students! If it's someone who is in a closely related discipline, and who knows the students fairly well anyway, your observer is more likely to feel comfortable as a fellow-teacher in the class, and be willing to be brought in for a second opinion now and then and to contribute to the session. If it's someone from another discipline, who doesn't know the subject or the students, they could feel very uncomfortable being 'put on the spot' in any way, and then it's best to simply let them get on with their observing. A lot depends on how well you and your observer know each other, and your styles.

In practice, of course, even if you've discussed observer participation at the pre-meeting, things may go differently on the day. You may have an observer who just can't resist joining in when a question comes up in the class, or you may have one whom you're expecting to involve, but who ends up feeling reluctant to join in for some reason. Coping with the unexpected is an important part of successful teaching!

# The post-meeting

## Why a post-meeting?

The main purposes of the post-meeting are as follows:

1. To allow you to gain feedback from your observer
2. To allow you to receive your observer's notes, and store them for your own information and use
3. To allow your observer to explain things included in these notes
4. To allow you to explain to your observer any things that need elaboration
5. To complete, jointly, a summary record of the observation, which can be shared with others in the University (most importantly, a record of when and where the observation took place, along with the names of the participants, and any action points the pair of you might wish to record at this stage).

*“Make sure you have a debrief as soon as possible after the session and get the observed colleague to do most of the talking. If they wait for you to give them a ‘ruling’ on how ‘good’ the session was, take the initiative and say ‘How did you think that went? What were the best bits about it?’”*

Sue Smith, Leeds Met Teacher Fellow

## Why face-to-face?

After all, feedback could be dropped in your pigeon hole, sent via email, put through your letter box, or given by phone. But there's something about a face-to-face meeting, not least that you can both

sign the documentation as a record for your own files, and you can prepare a short review of your joint thoughts which could be shared more publicly, for example for appraisal or PDR.

Most important, however, is that face-to-face with your reviewer you've got tone of voice, eye contact, the chance to question until you know exactly what your observer means, the chance to clarify things, the chance to explain why you did what you did instead of what your observer might have thought you might have done – and so on.

The language of written feedback can sometimes look formal and cold on paper, but face-to-face explanation and discussion can be so much more natural and informal – that's often where the real learning and development takes place.

## What comes out of the post-meeting?

The post-meeting usually takes a bit longer than the pre-meeting. Probably it's best to schedule between 30 mins and an hour for the post-meeting. You need to allow a few minutes to jointly draft a short agreed record of the meeting, following on from your observer's comments, which you complete based on your observer's feedback and your own thoughts about the session, and which you could use in connection with appraisal or PDR if you choose to, in addition to any direct quotes you may be happy to make from your observer's comments. It is best that this summary part is quite short, and quite general. A possible format is suggested below, as the final part of 'Form 1' mentioned earlier.

Remember, all of 'Form 1' or your chosen adaptation of it is for you

to keep, and no-one else need ever see it unless you choose to show it to them, or quote from it. This does not go on to your line

manager, nor anyone else. All that does go on is a record that the observation actually took place, and who observed whom and when.

### Final section of Form 1

|   |                               |   |
|---|-------------------------------|---|
| TO BE COMPLETED JOINTLY BY THE OBSERVER AND THE OBSERVED COLLEAGUE  |                               |   |
| Outcome of discussions, action points and summary of general areas of good practice, generic assessment, learning and teaching development needs and areas for improvement for sharing with colleagues and for inclusion in the Faculty report. |                               |   |
| Observer's comments   | Observed colleague's comments | Action points/good practice points for sharing, generic ALT staff development needs |
| Date of peer review:  |                               |   |
| Session observed (format/venue/time/number of students):  |                               |   |
| Observed colleague's signature:   |                               |   |
| Observer's signature:   |                               |   |

However, don't hesitate to use a format you prefer for the joint section of the observation form (there's an alternative example

below), or one that is already in use in your Faculty.

#### Alternative joint final part of Form 1

| <b>Teaching observation joint notes</b>  |   |
|--|---|
| Observed colleague:  | Observer:   |
| Signature:   | Signature:  |
| Date of observation:   | Date of observation:  |
| <b>Observed colleague: summary of main thoughts</b> (e.g. what you got out of the observation, feedback from your observer and discussion) | <b>Observer: summary comments</b> (e.g. what impressed you about what you observed, things you may take back and put into your own teaching practice) |
| <b>Agreed action points and any other matters arising:</b>   |   |

## When is the best time for the post-meeting?

Now that we've thought about the purposes of the post-meeting, and the short document that needs to arise from it, it's worth

*Straight away?*

considering how long an interval may be best between the observation itself and the post-meeting. There are pros and cons regarding the scheduling of the post-meeting. Here are some considerations.

| Pros   | Cons  |
|--|---|
| Nice to get it over with straight away.  | Neither of you has had enough time to reflect. You may still feel rather defensive over how you did what you did. Your observer may carry forward particular feedback items as more important than they would have been with time to put them into perspective.         |
| You both remember better exactly what happened.  | But both of you are more likely to remember particular things, rather than the bigger picture – e.g. the extent to which students achieved what was intended.   |
| It can be hard to squeeze times for meetings into busy lives, and 'straight away' can be more efficient. | 'Straight away' risks mixing up the agendas. The agenda for the post-meeting is feedback and discussion, and it's best if both of you come to this meeting with this agenda, rather than trying to switch over from the separate agendas of 'teaching' and 'observing'. |
| Less chance of either of you forgetting useful things.   | However, there could be things that are best 'forgotten' – the feedback is best if it's developmental rather than analytical, and that comes better with a bit of thought between event and feedback.   |

### *A bit later*

As you'll have seen from the 'cons' of a 'straight-away meeting', it's worth letting a little time pass between the observation and the feedback. In practice, the delay need not be long. Even an hour or two is enough to give you the chance to 'cool down' from any tension at being observed, and to give your observer time to put things in perspective.

The most important aspect of planning the post-meeting as a definite appointment later is that you can both come to the meeting tuned in to the purposes of this particular meeting, and also arrange the meeting in a better place than 'the scene of the event'. Somewhere over coffee is likely to be much better.

### *Too much later?*

Clearly, it's not a good idea to leave the post-meeting too long. Memories on both sides could have faded too much. Paperwork may have got buried. What happened could have become blurred by other teaching experiences. What was meant by the notes the observer made may have slipped into ambiguity.

### Agenda for the post-meeting: some tips

This is likely to be different for every meeting. It will also depend a lot on the kind of observation template your observer used at your session, as well as on the format of the 'joint' part of the form to be filled in during the post-meeting.

It could be useful for both you and your observer to bear in mind some of the following general tips, to help the post-meeting go as pleasantly as possible and remain productive and helpful.

- **Value feedback from your colleagues.** We all try to gather feedback from students and adjust our teaching accordingly, but feedback from colleagues can be even more useful, as they can share how they might approach any difficulties, rather than just identify the problems.
- **Accept observation as normal.** When teaching observation is a familiar part of our routine, it is much less unnerving when visitors from outside are in our classrooms, for example when a professional body is checking up on how teaching is actually working.
- **It's really good practice for conferences.** Getting feedback on your teaching helps make your conference presentations all the more confident and memorable, helping to increase your reputation in your field.
- **Make use of opportunities to be observed in staff development programmes.** The sooner that you become accustomed to the experience of other people watching your teaching performance,

the greater becomes your confidence at handling such situations.

- **New colleagues are best treated gently.** The detail of the feedback on observation should match experience levels. A very experienced teacher is likely to value quite a lot of detail; a new colleague may prefer a focus on key points only.
- **Remind yourself that in normal teaching, students do see you, but don't really observe you.** While it is possible that some students will notice slips you may make, you are unlikely (fortunately?) to have the undivided attention of the whole class at any time.
- **Observation is a good defence against 'getting into a rut'.** When anyone has been teaching a particular topic for a considerable time, it is natural to tend to go on autopilot and be less aware of what is actually happening during teaching sessions. Teaching observation can act as a powerful aid to refreshing your approach.
- **Take advantage of team teaching opportunities.** Observation is not confined to scheduled observation sessions. When, for example in team teaching contexts, you are regularly in the position of observing parts of your colleagues' teaching, and vice versa, a considerable amount of automatic staff development occurs as you learn from each others' triumphs and disasters. Often when a big lecture is followed by satellite tutorials, staff taking the tutorials will attend the lecture. This could double up with observation.
- **It doesn't take long.** Suppose your observer gives you (say) three tips after an observation: this can be very good value compared with spending the same time reading a book on teaching

practices, where you may not happen to read the things you may most need to find out.

- **When you've observed someone else teach, always give positive feedback first.** Help to put the colleague you are observing at ease by giving the good news first (and indeed making sure there is always some good news!). We are all much more likely to take on board the 'could do betters' if we have received the positive statements first.
- **Try to give three positives for every one 'could do better'.** Even when there is much to comment adversely on, it is important to give sufficient good news. If people are given too much adverse comment, they may lose track of which are the most important parts of the agenda that they need to address.
- **When you are observed, treat it as free consultancy.** "Isn't it wonderful to have a colleague or friend who finds time to engage in an educational conversation with me?" is a much better approach than "I haven't time for all this observation and feedback".
- **Be prepared to receive positive feedback.** In many cultures, there is a sense of embarrassment when receiving praise. This leads people to shrug it off, and to fail to really take on board the value of finding out more about what is regarded as successful. It is worth practising receiving positive feedback, and verbally acknowledging it, and thanking the people who deliver it. The majority of people who have had their teaching observed are delighted with the feedback they receive, and often surprised at how positive it was.

- **Regard any criticism as useful feedback.** Avoid the temptations to become hostile, or to justify your position, or to make excuses for things that were found to be lacking. When critical feedback is felt to have been openly received and taken note of, the people giving such feedback are much more satisfied that their job has been done effectively, than when they are not at all sure that the feedback has been listened to and heeded.
- **Practise eliciting feedback.** Gain skills in drawing out feedback, and getting the people giving it to clarify it and expand on it when necessary. “What do you consider the best thing about the way I am handling so-and-so?” and “What is the first thing about this that you would suggest I try to change?” are the sort of questions that help in this process.

## Frequently Missed Answers

Here are some responses to some of the questions that people ask about peer observation. We describe them as 'frequently missed answers' because although some aspects of these are implicit within this booklet, this is an opportunity to make things clearer.

- **Is it possible for me to choose my own peer observers?**

Yes indeed, this is an approach encouraged by the University, as genuine reciprocal peer review is most effective.

- **Does the person I observe have to be the person who observes me in turn?**

Not necessarily; some people like to form peer observation groups, where for example person A observes B, then B observes C, C observes D, D observes E, and E observes A. Over a period of time, each of the five participants can observe and be observed by each of the others, and this can be really productive.

- **How does my peer observation feed into Performance & Development Review?**

At PDR, the reviewer will want to confirm that you have been engaging in peer observation. You will not be asked to produce your peer observer's notes on your teaching, but you may wish to discuss positive aspects of your experiences, and you will be encouraged to propose training needs so as to ensure the staff development programme addresses genuine needs.

- **What if my reviewer does not teach my subject?**

Some of the best observations take place when your observer doesn't share your subject expertise. Many people find that

watching someone teach in an unfamiliar subject area enables them to concentrate usefully on processes. As a side effect, one can learn a great deal of fascinating material in this way!

- **Can I undertake more than two reviews per year?**

There is no requirement that you undertake more than two per year, but if it is something from which you are gaining a great deal, and your colleagues agree, then why not? Extra observations do not have to be formally recorded, but can be if you wish.

- **What happens if I do not manage to achieve the target of two peer observations in a year?**

Peer observation has been established at Leeds Met for a long time, but its take-up has been patchy in some areas. The University is aiming to adopt a more coherent approach, so it is important that all teaching staff work towards the goal of two observations annually as soon as possible. To help you do this you should organise and plan well in advance and consider the alternatives to being observed giving a lecture. Include peer observation as part of your own objectives so that it is a priority.

- **What do I do if what I observe has very few redeeming features?**

It is important to begin the post-meeting with positive aspects even if all that immediately springs to mind is the importance of the subject matter the teacher was trying to convey. However, observers should not duck discussions of the less positive aspects, and should aim to critique the processes observed rather than the personality of the teacher being observed, focusing on the most

important issues, not every single negative detail. It is important to offer positive ways forward, for example referring to resources that might lead towards improvement.

- **Should feedback be written?**

Normally, feedback will be given as part of the post-observation conversation, where the observer will no doubt refer to notes taken during the observation, and the person being observed may wish to write down some aspects of the feedback given. An audio feedback record might be a useful option. This will form the private record of the observation, kept only by the person being observed, including the joint action plan at the end of Form 1.

- **Having an observer in the classroom necessarily makes for a different kind of teaching experience. Will the observer take this into account?**

This is the kind of thing you are likely to be discussing in detail in your pre-meeting, since inevitably an individual's actions and interactions may be rather different when an observer is present. Pairs or groups working together are likely over time to get used to one another's presence, which may well lead to less artificiality.

- **If we have found peer observation a really positive and helpful process, how can we share this with other people?**

It would be great if you reported this locally within your Faculty, if you offered to support others who are less sure about the process, and if you wrote ALT reflections for the website or longer articles for the ALT Journal describing your experiences. You can also

choose if you wish to take extracts from your peer observer's notes to your PDR as evidence of your excellent teaching, and intersperse such quotes in your applications for promotion or other jobs.

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ISBN 978-0-9560099-7-5 © Leeds Metropolitan University 2009

Leeds Met Press  
Leeds Metropolitan University  
Old School Board  
Calverley Street  
Leeds LS1 3ED  
Tel: 0113 812 9257  
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