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## Peer Observation of Teaching

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Peer observation of teaching means that a teacher visits the class of a colleague, and afterwards both reflect and discuss the class, focusing on teaching-related aspects. Persons who are able to identify with the role of a teacher (and its challenges) because of their own teaching experience provide friendly yet critical feedback. Peer classroom visits are usually reciprocal, with colleagues alternating in the roles of observee and observer. The goal is to provide peers with an opportunity to exchange ideas, mutual support, as well as to develop their teaching skills.

## 1. Benefits: Why Engage in Peer Observation of Teaching?

Peer observation of teaching can complement workshops or consultations on teaching:

- Classroom visits provide a framework for mutual **exchanges of ideas and opportunities for networking between colleagues** with an interest in teaching. Peer support potentially counteracts the common feeling among teachers of being "lone fighters."<sup>[1]</sup>
- Classroom visits draw on actual **teaching practices** and reveal the **complexities of teaching**. Observers, who are present in the classroom and experience their colleagues teach, get a better grasp of many aspects of teaching than they would from merely talking about it.<sup>[2]</sup> For example, during classroom visits, observers might witness the subtle levels of communication between teachers and students or the situational context of teaching (classroom, etc.).<sup>[3]</sup> Furthermore, by asking questions, visiting peers might help colleagues to become aware of, address, and explain habitual and unconscious behaviours.
- Teachers have the freedom to **design their peer observation of teaching**. They can choose the session, the focus of observation, the visiting peer, as well as whether students will be involved.
- The observing "**guests**" may also receive valuable ideas and inspiration for their own teaching. They may compare what they observe to their own teaching, and experience teaching activities that may differ from their own.<sup>[4]</sup> Even without a post-observation meeting, teachers learn from observing others teach, just as the visited teachers learn from the peer feedback they receive.<sup>[5]</sup>

## 2. Requirements & Challenges

Many university teachers are unfamiliar with peer observation of teaching and perceive it a sensitive issue. Some of the metaphors used in describing the process ("classroom visit," "guest") point to difficult issues that must be negotiated in hospitality contexts: How can the encounter between host and guest be successful? How can hosts, who may reveal personal information in the presence of an outsider, maintain their sovereignty?

As a result, classroom visits can be challenging to implement. Thus, both peer observers and hosts should keep the following important requirements in mind:

- **Notion of objectives:** Guests should understand the objective of the peer observation as supporting the development of teaching skills rather than to assess or evaluate.
- **Concept of good teaching:** It is important that observers respect possible differences in teaching/learning styles or objectives and avoid giving advice based on a single perceived "correct" teaching/learning style. Acknowledging differing assumptions about teaching and learning is especially useful for supporting the self-reassurance and positioning of the people involved.<sup>[6]</sup>
- **Trust, goodwill, and discretion:** Feedback is always based on relationships and can be associated with a fear of getting offended (see Feedback (/en/start-page/teaching-advising/feedback/teacher-feedback/)). This is especially the case in peer observation of teaching, as the aspect of teaching that receives feedback is often very personal (e.g. your general appearance as a teacher and the way you speak). Thus, successful classroom visits are based on mutual trust. Teachers must be able to rely on the goodwill and discretion of their visitors.
- **Teacher sovereignty:** It is important that the teacher feels in control of the entire process. This self-determination is evident in the many decisions presented to the teacher (choice of guest, choice of class session, choice of focus of observation). This includes matters of intellectual property and copyright. It is never appropriate for guests to distribute or use a teacher's course material (for example slides) without permission.

### 3. Tips for Implementation

The peer observation is framed by a pre-observation meeting and a post-observation meeting afterwards. This section introduces this three-stage process which, considering the amount of freedom you have in structuring your classroom visit, is meant to assist in determining and developing your own individual approach.



#### 3.1 Thoughts on planning

If you are interested in peer observation of teaching, we recommend you give some thought to the following:

- **Teaching development:** What is your notion of "good teaching?" What parts or skills would you like to develop further in your teaching?
- **Focus of observation:** How can peer feedback support your teaching? What would you like feedback on? What would you be interested in that cannot be observed during a class session (possible limits of peer observation as a method)?
- **Motivation:** What motivates you to participate in peer observation of teaching? What are your hopes and expectations? What are you prepared to contribute?
- **Who:** From your point of view, who qualifies as a peer observer? As you reflect on this question, you may want to consider the following points: Someone who is interested in exchanging ideas about teaching and teaching experiences; someone who you can trust and whose discretion you can rely on; or someone with a similar or contrasting approach to teaching. There are good reasons for choosing someone from your own or a different discipline. If you chose the latter, you may be less concerned about competition or unwanted content-related "meddling" during the post-observation meeting. However, guests from your own discipline may be able to provide better answers to questions related to the interplay between content and teaching/learning methods. If, for example, you wish to discuss how you could better explain a specific point, then you might opt for a guest who is familiar with your field.
- **When:** Is a specific class session particularly well suited for a classroom visit?
- **Your own peer observation of teaching:** What would inspire your teaching if you were to visit the class of a colleague?

### 3.2 Pre-observation meeting: Getting to know one another & establishing foci of observation

The pre-observation meeting is an important opportunity for colleagues to get to know one another. At the same time, the guest receives crucial information to help provide useful and relevant feedback: Basic course information, practical matters concerning the course, as well as the teacher's wishes about what to observe.

#### *Course information*

**Basic information:** Course objectives and intended learning outcomes, course content, its place in the curriculum, first-time course or recurring, etc.?

**Information about the students:** Size of class, composition, what stage/year of study, previous knowledge, motivation. How did the teacher experience the students in previous classes?

#### **Information about the class session to be visited:**

- How is the session structured? (Topics, learning outcomes, learning/teaching methods, and lesson plan)
- Is it a "typical" session or is it different from other sessions of the same course?
- Are there any content-related reasons why the teacher has invited a guest for this particular session?

**Access to teaching/learning materials:** Teachers can provide their peers with course materials beforehand (e.g. access to the Moodle course, syllabus, readings, student assignments, etc.).

*Clarifying practical concerns*

### Information on time, duration, and location of the class

**Information on the space,** including thoughts on **where** the guest should **sit**. A seat in the back is often the appropriate choice, since it allows the guest to see the teacher and (several) students at the same time.

*Foci of observation and teaching development*

**Foci of observation:** The teacher explains what he/she would like to receive feedback on, his/her concerns regarding the class, or any other issues that may be important to him/her. This focus is closely linked to the effort regarding the person's own teaching development. The pre-observation meeting includes a discussion about the degree to which peer observation of teaching is an appropriate approach to revealing certain aspects of this effort in development, and the limitations of this method. The guest takes note of this content-related interest of the teacher, and takes it into account while observing the class as well as when articulating the subsequent feedback.

**The guest's interests:** Although the foci of observation take priority, visiting peers may bring their own interests and questions as additional focal points to the classroom visit. These are often related to the peers' own teaching development.

### 3.3 Visiting the class

<p><b>Punctuality</b> (10 mins prior to start)</p>	<p>Peers arriving on time can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ select their seats before most of the students arrive</li> <li>■ observe interactions among students as well as between students and the teacher in the minutes leading up to the start of class</li> <li>■ observe the beginning of the class session (welcome, introduction to the session's topics, links to the previous class, handling late students, etc.)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Introducing the guest</b> (if required)</p>	<p>Small to medium-sized classes require teachers to briefly introduce the guest and inform the students about the peer observation of teaching. It is important to communicate to the students that the main focus of the visit is on the class design and teaching – and that the second teacher in the classroom will not evaluate them. This is especially relevant in sessions that involve student presentations or other active student contributions.</p>
<p><b>Notes</b></p>	<p>Comprehensive and purposeful feedback requires the provider to take notes during the class session. These notes can include foci of observation, the activities or interactions of all participants, among other things (classroom, noise level). A log is one way to record the chronological sequence of the session in writing, and to combine it with the notes on content. This makes it easier to provide feedback during the post-observation meeting.</p>

<b>Involving students</b> (optional)	Provided the teacher feels comfortable, including student perspectives can enrich the observations of the visiting peer. If the perspective of the students hasn't already been heard in another way, visiting peers may have the opportunity to engage in conversation with some students. Possible questions could be: <i>Is this a typical class? How difficult do you experience this course? What helps you master the material?</i> It is important that conversations with students only take place when the teacher explicitly requests them.
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### 3.4 Post-observation meeting: exchange & reflection

The post-observation meeting should take place soon after the classroom visit. If you agree to meet immediately after the class, the peer observer will have to structure the feedback in his/her thoughts, as he/she takes notes during the class. We recommend having a well-structured introduction to the post-observation meeting ready, and then slowly transition into an open exchange or discussion.

#### Possible structure:

<b>The teacher's perspective</b>	The conversation begins with the teacher reflecting on the session. ( <i>How did I experience the class? What was successful, what was less successful? What seemed effortless? What was stressful?</i> )
<b>The guest's perspective</b>	Now the teacher listens while the guest presents his/her impressions (using the notes). Both similarities and differences between the teacher's and the guest's perspectives are addressed. Effective feedback is respectful and specific ( <i>giving examples</i> ). It focuses on the teacher's scope for action (XY worked well... ... contributed to it). It is also possible to phrase the feedback from the perspective of the students. ( <i>I can imagine that I, as a student, would have liked an example to illustrate this point</i> ).  Note: People familiar with the discipline should make sure their feedback addresses mostly teaching aspects. Try to avoid discussing content or even the professional qualification of the teacher.
<b>Questions</b>	Questions for the teachers can give them new ideas or make them think about their own actions. ( <i>Why did you use method X at this point?</i> )
<b>Discussion and exchange</b>	In an open exchange, teacher and peer discuss potential further developments and alternative approaches. ( <i>I could change/improve... In order to do so, I must/could...</i> ) In doing so, the guest can talk from his/her own experiences to help frame parts of the feedback. ( <i>In my experience, students are especially attentive when I... Have you ever tried that?</i> )

## 4. Note: Peer Observation of Teaching Network

Interested teachers at the University of Vienna may participate in the Peer Observation of Teaching Network. You can find out more about this on the Center for Teaching and Learning website (<https://ctl.univie.ac.at/qualifizierung/netzwerk-kollegiale-lehrberatung/>).

## References

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## Empfohlene Zitierweise

Center for Teaching and Learning: *Peer Observation of Teaching*. Infopool *better teaching*. University of Vienna, April 2019. [<https://infopool.univie.ac.at/en/home-page/teaching-learning-at-the-university/peer-observation-of-teaching/>]

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