

PEER OBSERVATIONS OF TEACHING A BEST PRACTICES GUIDE

(Credit: CSU Fullerton, CSU Northridge, Iowa State University, University of South Carolina)

This document is intended as a guide to assist university faculty to prepare for and conduct peer teaching reviews and evaluations. This document summarizes those practices that may be most valuable and applicable to our campus. While there are multiple methods of evaluating teaching that involve various sources of data, this guide focuses primarily on conducting reviews of classroom teaching and online teaching.

Timeline

If you are an assistant professor seeking a peer observation to include in your WPAF for periodic evaluation or performance review, it is recommended that you schedule peer observation in the Spring semester preceding your scheduled review or in the Fall no later than one week before the WPAF closing date and that you clearly communicate your deadline to your invited reviewer.

If you are a lecturer, it is recommended that you schedule peer observation in the Fall semester preceding your review or in Spring no later than two weeks before the materials submission deadline and that you clearly communicate your deadline to the invited reviewer.”

Purpose of Peer Reviews

The literature identifies two types of peer evaluations with different purposes: **formative** (to improve teaching) and **summative** (for personnel decisions). At SDSU, peer observations are often utilized for personnel decisions as well as to provide the instructor with constructive feedback.

Notice of the Review

According to CBA 15.14, when classroom visits are utilized as part of the evaluation of a faculty unit employee under this Article, the individual faculty unit employee being evaluated shall be provided a notice of at least five (5)(5) days that a classroom visit, online observation, and/or review of online content is to take place. There shall be consultation between the faculty member being evaluated and the individual who visits their class(es) regarding the classes to be visited and the scheduling of such visits.

Orientation and Training of Faculty Who are Asked to Conduct Peer Reviews

Because peer reviews of teaching are important elements of an individual’s reappointment, tenure and promotion process, we recommend that department chairs/school directors spend some time orienting and training tenured faculty, who may be asked to conduct peer reviews, about the purpose and process for conducting peer reviews for their department/school.

What is the best way to begin a peer review process?

The faculty member/observer who is asked to conduct a classroom peer observation should meet with the instructor/observee to discuss the purpose, process, date and location of the review visit. The review process is enhanced if there is a discussion prior to the visit about the course goals and objectives with the instructor being reviewed. This is also the time that the person being reviewed can ask for specific feedback about his or her teaching. If a classroom observation form or rubric is utilized, this should be shared with the faculty member prior to the review. This meeting can also be the best time to ask for a copy of the course syllabus and review it together.

What to look for when reviewing a class syllabus?

A typical syllabus should include the sequence of assigned readings and activities by topic and date and information about course policies, procedures and objectives. The syllabus should also include language about University policies related to the Americans with Disabilities Act, plagiarism and others as listed in the course catalog. The syllabus should describe what students will be expected to know or be able to do after completing the course, including the skills and competencies that will be developed. The course student learning objectives should be clearly listed in the syllabus. The syllabus should give students a sense of what the course will cover, what work is expected of them, and how their performance will be evaluated, including grading criteria.

What to look for during the class visit?

Faculty who are asked to visit and review the teaching of a colleague should, if possible, observe the class for the entire session or with three-hour classes, at least until the break. The following should serve as a guide for what to look for and note in the review process:

- Does the class start on time?
- How many students attend the class?
- Does the instructor introduce the topics for the day, is material presented in a logical manner, does the professor use examples to illustrate concepts, does the professor summarize the main points at the end of the presentation?
- Does the instructor demonstrate knowledge of the subject matter?
- Does the instructor speak clearly and hold the students' attention throughout the session?
- Is the instructor enthusiastic about the subject matter?
- Does the instructor answer questions clearly and accurately?
- Does the professor provide a clear explanation of assignments, due dates, etc.? If there is a group assignment during the review, are clear directives given to the small groups; do students understand what they are supposed to do in the small groups?
- Is the lecture/class discussion consistent with the course outline, class content, etc.?
- Is the instructor aware of the extent to which students are engaged in the lecture/discussion? Does the instructor attempt to elicit input from those who are less engaged? Is the instructor receptive to student questions?
- Does the professor use appropriate pacing for student note-taking?

How is feedback provided?

At San Diego State University, we have traditionally relied on written comments (via letters) as a form of feedback to the faculty member. These letters range from brief reviews with template language to extensive letters that include the strengths and weaknesses of the candidate's presentations and provide comments for improvement. We recommend thoughtful and extensive written feedback that is individualized to the specific instructor, course and discipline under review. All written or verbal feedback should be accompanied with specific examples or observation notes and delivered in a timely manner to meet the RTP deadlines. A follow-up feedback meeting is also recommended to provide both highlights and strengths of the teaching as well as address areas for improvement.

How to conduct peer reviews of online or hybrid courses?

For hybrid classes the peer review can be a blended peer review. For example, the peer reviewer can attend a class when it meets face-to-face and when the class meets online. This will provide the peer reviewer with information about how the face-to-face portion connects with the online portion of the class. The blended peer review also enables the peer reviewer to see the instructor's pedagogy, delivery, engagement of and interaction with students as it is done in a physical classroom visitation.

Online classes can be peer-reviewed by having the peer-reviewer log-in as a guest when the class is synchronized (meeting online at the same time). Another way is to have the peer-reviewer "lurking" – sitting in as a "technician," while the class is in session. "Lurking" provides the peer-reviewer with information about the instructor's online teaching and interaction with students without the students' knowledge.

Suggested Steps for Peer Reviewing a Fully Online Course

1. Request to observe the online course. This involves asking for the following from the online instructor:
 - a) Enrollment into the online course.
 - b) You should decide whether you would like to be enrolled as a formal guest or as a lurker. A formal guest would be introduced to the students and have a presence in whole class and group discussions and on participant lists. Someone who is lurking is not typically introduced to the students and is not an active member of online discussions or interactions. The lurker is transparent, the same way a technical support person would be. There are benefits and challenges to both designations.
 - c) Information on how to log-in.
 - d) Information on where the syllabus or syllabus information is located and how to access it. The syllabus could be posted as one piece for reading online, copying and pasting into a word document, and /or downloading. Or, it could be posted in a folder as several separate pieces: course description, course schedule, readings and resources, contact information, and objectives. You could request that the instructor e-mail you a copy of the syllabus or place a paper copy in your mailbox; however, this would be extra work for the online instructor if the syllabus was developed and posted in pieces.

2. Arrange for an observation time frame.
In an online course this could vary (e.g., an hour, a day, a week, a specific time) depending on how the course is set up in regard to synchronous and asynchronous aspects such as due dates.
3. Log-in to the course and review the syllabus or syllabus information according to the evaluation criteria.
4. Visit a few sections of the online course and review them according to the evaluation criteria.
Sections could include lectures, topic information, resources, whole class discussion forums, group forums, blogs, assignments, weblinks, course information, activities/exercises, reviews, and quizzes. As with on-ground observations (a typical face-to-face, residential course), as a peer reviewer you may not have access to some important sections/components of the course such as quizzes, each student's grade book, and personal communication of students with other students or students with the instructor.
5. Follow the same format for providing feedback as with on the classroom courses, either a letter or a letter and follow-up meeting to provide feedback.

Other Relevant Tips for Reviewing On-line Courses

When reviewing and evaluating an online course and its instructor be aware of the following issues:

1. If there seem to be formatting, layout, or technological problems/challenges -remember that the instructor has little control over much of the availability and functioning of the technology. It is unfair to include such technology related items or problems in instructor evaluations. However, it is fair to assess what the instructor has done to compensate for those problems and make information easier to find (e.g., posting an assignment due date in many places at multiple times, giving lots of reminders about locations or different types of information).
2. If there seems to be a paucity of visible communication and interaction, it may be that the communication is rich and robust but it is occurring via independent technologies and/or private means. If there seems to be a lack of visible interaction, you may want to ask the instructor how and where it may be occurring.
3. If the online discussions and interactions seem shallow, off topic, or profuse, they may be. Educators who are new to online instruction may not yet be knowledgeable about ways to allow students to communicate on topic and off topic as well as freely explore new technologies.
4. Look for indications that the instructor is designing, setting up, staging and giving feedback to encourage rich discussion and interaction (e.g., positing protocols and specific directions/activities for discussion topics, giving feedback that brings a discussion back on topic, reminding students that there are special forums for sharing off topic information). Look for specific ways that the instructor is allowing for off topic interaction. Ways to allow for off topic communication (e.g., sharing locations of additional information/resources, sharing new ideas, asking questions about procedures, coursework, or the field) can range from setting up special discussion forums with labels designating them as off topic to simply suggesting that the students communicate off topic issues within the message center or by e-mail.
5. Look for indications that the instructor is introducing a new technology and inviting free exploration.

OBSERVER INFORMATION

Faculty Observed:	
Observer:	
Course Title:	
# of Students:	
Date/Time/Location of Pre-Meeting:	
Date/Time/Location of Observation:	
Date/Time/Location of Follow-Up Meeting:	
Purpose of Observation:	
Course Goals/Objectives/Learning Outcomes for Class Observation:	
What else would you like the observer to know about your class prior to the observation? (see additional questions in pre-meeting notes below.)	

The faculty member being observed can provide the observer with relevant materials related to the observation prior to visiting the class, e.g., syllabus, lecture materials, activities, etc.

PRE-OBSERVATION MEETING

During the Pre-meeting, the two faculty members will meet to discuss the Peer Observation process. The approximate amount of time to complete a pre-meeting is 30 minutes.

- Faculty should complete the “Observation Information” chart (p. 2)
- Faculty should review the list of potential items for observation using **Observation Tools 1, 2, 3, or 4**, and discuss which items will be observable during their class. The faculty being observed can also include any helpful information regarding how the items may be observed - during lecture, through activities, etc.
- Faculty should discuss the class format, allowing the observer to gain a general understanding of what to expect during the class.
- The faculty member being observed can provide a general overview of the course set-up. For example, they can explain how they came to be the instructor of the course, if the course was pre-set for them or if they had control in how the course was created, if the content is predetermined, and any other helpful information related to the course and observation.
- Additional questions can be discussed at this time so that the two faculty members feel confident in the expectations for the observation and class time.
- Faculty may wish to discuss other items they would like the observer to look for:
 - Specific activities used to enhance learning
 - Technology to support/enhance student learning
 - Specific items that your students state you do really well on student feedback surveys and you want an observer to provide feedback on, or specific items that your students or department/school state you are lacking during your student feedback surveys and you want an observer to provide feedback on

***Please note, the pre-meeting should take place face-to-face or through a live online meeting, and between one (1) to two (2) weeks before the observation.**

OBSERVATION TOOL #1

Instructor: _____ Department: _____ Date: _____ Time: _____

Course #: _____ Course Title: _____

Observed by: _____

How does the instructor present the module, lesson, and/or assignment objective(s)?

How does the instructor create learning situations to meet the objectives of the class?

How does the instructor present information in a clear and organized manner?

How does the instructor demonstrate enthusiasm/interest for course material?

How does the instructor communicate material in a way that is consistent with the level of the course?

How does the instructor explain the content with examples, demonstrations, visual aids, and/or practical applications from a variety of sources (student, major, personal, etc.)?

How does the instructor communicate instructions and guidelines for class activities?

How does the instructor design class activities to promote engagement in any of the following:

- Student-to-instructor
- Student-to-content
- Student-to-student

How does the instructor encourage student participation?

(examples could include but are not limited to):

- asking questions
- allowing appropriate wait time for responses
- posing probing questions
- responding encouragingly

How is attention to equity manifested/illustrated by the instructor?

(examples could include but are not limited to):

- Attention to diverse learning abilities (neurodiversity)
- Inclusive learning experiences
- Accessibility
- Universal Design for Learning

How does the instructor gauge students' understanding during the lesson and modify instruction as needed?

OBSERVATION TOOL #2

This form is intended to focus observations on the mechanics of the classroom instruction and interaction, not on the content of the course. It is not meant to be used as a checklist to observe and evaluate, rather it should generally frame the feedback and serve as a starting point for identifying appropriate areas to address given the discipline, instructor teaching style and individual class session goals (e.g., as stated in the pre-observation form).

Instructor: _____ Department: _____ Date: _____ Time: _____

Course #: _____ Course Title: _____

Observed by: _____

Area of Focus	Observer Comments & Suggestions
<p>Preliminary Activities <i>Potential areas for comment:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Setup (i.e., materials, information projected on board/screen, physical arrangement) ● Class Start (i.e., on time, overview of class session w/ clearly stated goals or portrayed in an obvious fashion) 	
<p>The Main Event <u>Instructional Methods</u> (i.e., lecture, discussion, small-group work) <i>Potential areas for comment:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Well-suited for teaching the content covered ● Have a clear purpose ● Encourage general attentiveness and consider attention spans in the timing of classroom activities ● Provide opportunities for student participation and encourage engagement with the course content, instructor, and/or peers ● Emphasize and summarize important points ● Attend to the intellectual, emotional, and/or physical needs of students ● Prompt students' to draw on prior learning and experiences ● Examine student achievement of goals (i.e., questioning students on course material, observing student performance, discussion, quizzes) <p><u>Class Flow</u> <i>Potential areas for comment:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Well organized and easy to follow ● Transitions between units, sections, concepts and/or topics ● Allows time for questions ● Uses time management to cover content ● Concludes and reviews of day's topic 	

<p>Interaction with Students <i>Potential areas for comment:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentation techniques are well utilized (i.e. movement, lecturing from notes vs. manuscript, eye contact) • Tone of voice indicates interest in the subject, students, and student questions • Creates a participatory classroom environment • Responsive to student nonverbal cues (i.e., excitement, boredom, confusion, apprehension) • Uses student names whenever possible • Encourages student questions • Provides clear explanations to student questions 	
<p>Integration of Technology (if applicable) <i>Potential areas for comment:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technology is used to engage students, enhance learning, and/or generally enrich students' class experience as part of lecture, activities, or discussion • Technology is leveraged to facilitate a learning experience that would otherwise not be possible • Student work done via technology outside of class is integrated into the class session (i.e. homework, discussion board) • 	

General Comments, Summary & Suggestions: (to be filled out by peer observer)

This space could be used to describe the setting in which the lesson took place, relevant information about the makeup of the class, and any other descriptive characteristics that would provide appropriate context to the feedback. This space could also be used to highlight areas for suggested pedagogical improvement, along with concrete strategies for implementation.

Response: (to be filled out by faculty member)

This space should be used to articulate goals for the next peer observation of course instruction and outline concrete steps to reach those goals.

OBSERVATION TOOL #3

Checklist forms focus on description, the presence or absence of certain characteristics. The specific items can be answered “yes” or “no” or can be measures of frequency, such as “always, often, sometimes, never.” Comments can be used by the observer to explain the rationale for choosing the rating or for providing additional information to the observed. The checklist form can be a starting point for initial observation.

Instructor: _____ Department: _____ Date: _____ Time: _____

Course #: _____ Course Title: _____

Observed by: _____

Instructor preparation and organization

- The instructor arrives to class on time.
- The instructor states the relation of the class to the previous one.
- The instructor uses technology or other classroom materials as needed and appropriately.
- The instructor makes transitional statements between class segments.
- The instructor conveys the purpose and goal for each of the class activities.
- The instructor summarizes periodically and at the end of the class.

Instructional strategies: Variety and pacing of instruction

- More than one form of instruction is used, i.e., simulations, discussions, case studies.
- The instructor uses appropriate questions.
- The instructor pauses after asking questions.
- The instructor accepts student responses.
- The instructor helps students extend their responses.
- The instructor appropriately facilitates the direction of the discussion.
- The instructor provides time for students to complete learning tasks, such as group work.
- The difficulty level of the activities is appropriate.
- The instructor is able to complete the topics scheduled for the class.

Content knowledge

- The instructor identifies accurate and important sources, perspectives, and authorities in the discipline.
- The instructor identifies accurate and important sources, perspectives, and authorities in the industry.
- The instructor elaborates on terms and concepts.
- The instructor emphasizes major points in the delivery of the subject matter.
- For graduate level courses and as appropriate, the instructor incorporates current research in the discipline.

Presentation skills

- The instructor’s voice is audible.
- The instructor’s voice is comprehensible.

- The instructor varies the tone and pitch of voice for emphasis and interest.
- The instructor avoids distracting mannerisms.
- The instructor establishes eye contact throughout the class.
- The instructor avoids prolonged reading from notes or texts.
- The instructor speaks at a pace that allows students to participate and take notes.

Teacher-student rapport and engagement

- The instructor welcomes students into the class.
- The instructor is attentive to student non-verbal communication, i.e., comprehension and puzzlement.
- The instructor provides feedback at given intervals.
- Evaluation of student procedures/techniques/activities/responses is constructive.
- The instructor uses positive reinforcement.
- The instructor incorporates student ideas into the class.
- The instructor exhibits an appreciation of student diversity.

Classroom Management

- The students generally seem engaged and on-task.
- The instructor draws non-participating students into the classroom environment.
- The instructor prevents specific students from dominating the classroom environment.
- The instructor maintains a classroom environment that is inclusive and conducive to learning.
- The instructor is available to the students throughout the class session.
- The instructor mediates conflict or differences of opinion.
- The instructor provides clear explanations and answers to student questions.
- The instructor provides clear directions for student activities.

Inclusive Classroom

- The instructor's syllabus, textbooks, resources, and content recognize and represent a diversity of backgrounds, identities, experiences, beliefs, and values.
- The instructor maintains a classroom environment that is inclusive and conducive to learning.
- The instructor provides clear directions for and explanations of evaluation practices.

Other observational comments:

OBSERVATION TOOL #4

(Online Course Observation Form)

Instructor: _____ Department: _____ Date: _____ Time: _____

Course #: _____ Course Title: _____

Observed by: _____

Section 1. General course overview and introduction

Setting the stage for learning and preparing students for successful participation in the course activities.

Considerations	Yes or No?	Comments
Does the instructor provide a thorough description of the course and introduce students to the course and the online format?		
Are the learner requirements such as basic technology needs and participation expectations described?		
Are practice use of tools and community-building activities included to prime the students for learning? (e.g., the instructor created a video introducing students to the Canvas course)		
Other:		

Section 2. Assessment of student learning

Alignment of activities and assessments with learning outcomes is evident in the course design.

Considerations	Yes or No?	Comments
Are learning outcomes communicated?		
Is there a variety of activities and assessments?		
Is there alignment of learning activities and assessments with learning outcomes?		
Are formative and summative assessment opportunities part of the design?		
Are assignments clearly described, including grading schemes or rubrics?		
Is student workload appropriate to course level and duration?		
Other:		

Section 3. Student engagement

A clear path to students' learning opportunities is provided, including interaction with the content, peers, and instructor.

Considerations	Yes or No?	Comments
Are there opportunities to interact or seek guidance from the instructor?		
Are there opportunities to participate in community activities or peer-to-peer sharing?		

Is learning scaffolded, guiding students toward increasingly independent learning and application of relevant skills?		
Are there opportunities for student reflection on learning and feedback to the instructor?		
Other:		

Section 4. Online organization and design

The instructor's design and choice of technology effectively deliver course content and supports learning processes.

Considerations	Yes or No?	Comments
Overall, is the navigation and structure, of course, easy for students to follow?		
Do the tools and media formats selected to support the course learning outcomes?		
Are guides and protocols for the use of the course tools provided?		
Other:		

Section 5. Inclusive Classroom

Considerations	Yes or No?	Comments
Does the instructor's syllabus, textbooks, resources, and content recognize and represent a diversity of backgrounds, identities, experiences, beliefs, and values?		
Does the instructor maintain a classroom environment that is inclusive and conducive to learning?		
Does the instructor provide clear directions for and explanations of evaluation practices?		
Other:		

Section 6. Overall course

Considering the course as a whole, provide feedback on the following:

- What aspects of the course do you see as strengths contributing to effective student engagement and learning?
- Are there any strategies or resources that you would recommend for enhancing the design of this course?
- Final comments or observations?

POST-OBSERVATION MEETING

During the follow-up meeting, the two faculty members will meet to discuss the observation tool. The approximate amount of time to complete a follow-up meeting is 30-60 minutes.

- Faculty will review and discuss the list of observation items. The observer can explain their notes and examples of how the instructor demonstrated each observable item during the class.
- The faculty being observed can ask questions or explain why certain items may not have been observed during the class.
- The observer can ask questions or provide ideas related to areas that may have been missed during the observation.
- The follow-up meeting should be scheduled within one week following the teaching observation to ensure both faculty members clearly remember the class/observation.

*** The follow-up meeting should take place face-to-face or through a live online meeting and within one (1) week following the observation.**

FEEDBACK LETTER

The observer will write a peer observation letter discussing the teaching observation that they conducted. The approximate amount of time to complete a feedback letter is 30-60 minutes.

- The observer can use the pre-meeting, observation, and follow-up notes to write the feedback letter.
- The observer will explain how the observed faculty member demonstrated items on the observation list during the lesson.

SAMPLE FEEDBACK LETTER #1

[Date]

[Instructor's First Name Last Name]
[Department / School]
[College]

Dear Professor [Last Name]:

On (date of pre-meeting), __ (name) __ and I engaged in a Pre-Meeting in order to discuss our scheduled observation. During this time, we discussed ____, ____, and ____.

When I observed (name)'s instruction on (date), I noted and observed __ (items clearly observed) ____. It is evident that __ (extra items observed) ____.

(Additional paragraph for concrete evidence from observation, connecting focus from pre-meeting)

During our post-meeting on (date), we revisited our discussion and expectations from our pre-meeting as well as the observation tool used. We agreed that (name)'s strengths are displayed in _____. In addition, we discussed areas that would benefit (name)'s instruction. In particular, we agreed upon the following area(s) (he/she/they) would like to explore for further instructional development: _____.

It was (adjective) collaborating with and learning from (observee's name) throughout our pre-meeting, observation, and post-meeting. I wish (him/her/them) the best in (his/her/their) teaching endeavors.

Sincerely,

[Observer's First and Last Name]

SAMPLE FEEDBACK LETTER #2

[Date]

[Instructor's First Name Last Name]
[Department / School]
[College]

Dear Professor [Last Name]:

Thank you so much for the opportunity to observe your class this semester. It is my pleasure to meet a fellow faculty member. I thoroughly enjoyed watching the class. During our pre-observation meeting, you mentioned (observable items to look for from the observational tool document). I want to share a few observations that I made in those areas and offer a few suggestions for further development.

Professional Knowledge: I observed that you provide (3-5 sentence description of how the faculty member demonstrates professional knowledge during the observation).

Student engagement: I observed that you are providing (3-5 sentence description of how the faculty member includes student engagement during the observation).

Classroom management: I noticed that you (3-5 sentence description of how the faculty member manages the classroom during the observation).

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the classroom: I observed that you are (3-5 sentence description of how the faculty member demonstrates diversity, equity, and inclusion during the observation).

Lastly, I could understand from the classroom observation that you had spent considerable time developing and refining the course that is positively impacting the students and helping in creating an inclusive learning community (or other description to describe the learning environment). Thank you again for giving me the opportunity to be part of your pedagogical practices.

Sincerely,

[Observer's First and Last Name]