

## **Classroom Observation Through Peer Review: Guidelines and Suggestions**

### **You plan to ask a colleague to observe your class:**

- You will learn something different from your peer than from the Center for Teaching Excellence consultants.
- The CTE consultants are experts in pedagogy, classroom dynamics, observation, but are not necessarily well versed in your discipline.
- Your peer knows your discipline but is not necessarily expert in the aspects of teaching the consultants are.\*
- Generally peers are good observers if you ask them for specific feedback on what you are teaching. For example, you might ask a peer to watch you teach a particular concept, and give you feedback, or to compare how you teach a difficult topic in your discipline to how he or she approaches it.
- Tell your peer what your objectives are for the class, that is, what you want the students to walk away with, or be able to do, at the end of the class.
- Then tell your peer what specifically you want from him or her.

See below for a standard three-part model of class observation.

### **You've been asked to observe a colleague's class:**

- When they first observe a peer's class, many faculty members use themselves as the standard for good teaching.\* That is not usually very helpful to the instructor being observed.
- There are many ways of teaching well, and your colleague will teach differently from you.
- Try to take the instructor's perspective. Put yourself in his or her shoes.

Here is a **Three-Part Model of Class Observation**, a useful structure for giving coherence to the observation process:

#### **Before class:**

- Meet and talk with the instructor:
- Ask the instructor to tell you about the course.
- What are his or her goals for the course and objectives for the specific class you are going to? What is she or he trying to accomplish?
- What is the instructor's plan for the class?

- What is it the instructor would like you to pay close attention to?
- Make sure you know what your peer wants from you so you can focus your observation.

### **During class:**

- Try to come early.
- Sit and take notes unobtrusively.
- Does what your peer asked you to observe lend itself to a check list? Devise a check list.
- Is there a better way to capture what you are observing, e.g., a map of the classroom, list of key words, diagram?
- Don't try to record everything that goes on in the classroom. Selectively observe and record depending on instructor's concerns.

### **After class:**

- Immediately after observing the class, review your notes to make sure you can recall specifics to tell the instructor.
- Debriefing should happen soon after class, but not directly after, if possible. Many instructors need several hours to wind down after class. Also, you may need some time to reflect on what you have seen.
- Ask for the instructor's response to his or her own class before you speak: "How did you think it went?" is a good opening.
- Start your own feedback with honest descriptions of things that worked well in the class. It is important for the instructor to know what works in order to reinforce strengths.
- Debriefing should be a discussion, not a lecture.
- Avoid information overload. Keep the feedback focused on what the instructor asked for in the pre-observation discussion.

### **Guidelines for Giving and Receiving Feedback:**

Feedback is not The Truth. It is simply information about others' perceptions and responses. If both the giver and receiver of the feedback follow the suggestions below, the feedback session will be most useful.

#### **Giving Feedback:**

1. Try to be as specific as possible rather than general.
2. Be descriptive rather than evaluative.
3. Make sure the feedback refers to something the person has control over.
4. Make sure you are giving the feedback to be helpful, not punitive.
5. Because it is easier for most faculty members to give feedback that aims to help someone correct something rather than to give useful positive feedback, try to give positive feedback more often than corrective feedback. Demonstrating first to the instructor that you noticed a lot that was good will give you more credibility when you give constructive feedback. Plus it will make your constructive feedback more hearable.

**Receiving Feedback:**

1. Ask specifically for the kind of feedback you want, and describe the behavior about which you want feedback.
2. Listen carefully. Try to be open.
3. Paraphrase what you hear to make sure you understand what the person giving the feedback means.

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\*If you would like to learn more about classroom observation processes, please contact Stephanie Nickerson, Stern Faculty Development Consultant, [snickers@stern.nyu.edu](mailto:snickers@stern.nyu.edu).

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