University of
Reading

Peer review of teaching

1   Many of us immediately associate peer review of teaching with peer observation. Guidelines for the introduction of peer observation schemes into those Departments or Schools who do not already have one are attached. Whilst direct observation can provide valuable exchanges of ideas and approaches to a variety of teaching situations, it is unlikely to encompass all the elements which comprise the role of 'teacher'. Issues such as overall course design; quality of assignments in promoting student learning, assessment (both formative and summative), and student support are more readily reviewed by methods other than direct observation. The notes which follow give some indication of peer review systems which are already in operation, systems which could perhaps be used to better effect and other ideas which individuals or Schools may wish to consider.

University/Faculty/School systems which contribute to the review process

- University Board for Teaching and Learning
- Faculty Boards for Teaching and Learning and any associated scrutiny panels
- School Teaching Committees
- Periodic Review
- External reviews and accreditation visits
- External Examiners
- Probationary requirements
- Peer observation schemes

Systems which can be used to strengthen review processes

Team teaching/Module development

2   A group of staff who are jointly responsible for designing or delivering a module might agree to act as an ongoing network to exchange ideas and experiences, engage in critical reflection with each other, produce resources together and collaborate in group problem solving.

Mentoring

3   For new lecturers participating in the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PGCAP - http://www.reading.ac.uk/cstd/teachingprog.htm), the mentor provides a mechanism to help stimulate both peer and self-review. This role could be encouraged for all new members of academic staff irrespective of their involvement in the PGCAP.

School/Departmental staff development workshops

4   The open exchange of experience, practice and materials at a local development session on an aspect of teaching can offer a significant opportunity for both peer and self-review.

CSTD staff development sessions

5   Workshops for academic staff provide opportunities for staff from different subjects to exchange and debate their approaches to teaching and to evaluate alternatives critically.

Co-supervision of PhD students

6   Co-supervision is a requirement for any member of staff supervising their first PhD student. The relationship created between the co-supervisors can be a useful mechanism for review of one-to-one teaching and student support skills.

Analysis and discussion of student evaluations

7   An opportunity to analyse, discuss and reflect on student evaluation of a module with a colleague can be a useful mechanism for reviewing and planning future developments and actions.

Staff development review

8   The Staff Development Review (http://www.reading.ac.uk/internal/CSTD/sdrjobchats/cstd-sdrjobchats.aspx) process offers staff and Heads the opportunity to make use of the system as a mechanism for review of teaching if it is appropriate to the individual concerned.

Additional ideas

A colleague talks to students about your module

9   A colleague could interview or run a discussion exercise with a sample group of students from another module. The discussion could perhaps focus on how the module contributed to and supported their learning, or if the colleague has expertise on the course content, discussion could focus on what they have learnt. Such a review should be structured in a similar way to direct teaching observation: a chance for the module tutor to explain their aims and objectives and ask for feedback on areas of particular interest, and after the discussion with students, a detailed person to person discussion and feedback session.

Preview of teaching materials

10   A colleague could be asked to review teaching materials, student assignments or reading lists before the module is taught.

Double marking or review of feedback to students

11   The process of double marking student assignments could provide an opportunity to discuss assessment practices. The Open University runs a comprehensive scheme to

provide detailed feedback to external tutors on the assessment and feedback they have provided to students.

Retracing teaching

12   Sometimes a direct observation is not possible due to logistical problems or is not desirable due to the nature of the teaching situation. As an alternative the tutor could give a structured account of how a recent teaching session went to a colleague. The colleague should probe areas of interest and encourage a reflective analysis on the effectiveness of the teaching. A video recording of the teaching session could be used to support the discussion.

Teaching portfolio

13   New lecturers participating in the PGCAP and staff applying for promotion to Senior Lecturer are likely to compile a teaching portfolio. Whilst these are essentially reflective documents, they do involve some kind of assessment or review by others.

Reporting Requirements

14   Good practice in teaching identified through such review processes should be disseminated. Schools are asked to draw together issues and outcomes from the peer review and peer observation of teaching during the academic year and report these to the relevant Faculty Board for Teaching and Learning during the information gathering process for their Annual Reports on Programmes. Faculties are asked to summarise any areas of good practice in their Reports to the University Board for Teaching and Learning, so facilitating both Faculty-wide and University-wide dissemination.

Updated March 2007

Guidelines on the Peer Observation of Teaching

The Guidelines

15   These guidelines are available electronically and may be used as a basis for specific School/Departmental guidelines. They are organised into the following sections:

- Introduction
- Purpose
- Defining 'good' teaching
- Planning a School observation scheme
- The observation process
- Further information and help
- Appendices

Introduction

16   All Schools/Departments are expected to operate a system of peer observation of teaching. The operation of the scheme will be examined as a part of the Periodic Review process. All academic staff involved in teaching activities should be included in an observation scheme. Visiting lecturers, postgraduate students and others assisting in the teaching process do not have to be included in the schemes, although individual Schools may wish to make provision.

17   These guidelines are intended to help with the planning, introduction and operation of a system in those Schools/Departments where such a scheme is not already in place. The suggestions made are not prescriptive, by attempting to draw out good practice and reflect experience from this university and others, they are meant as a helping guide. Local adaptation and refinement to take account of subject specific teaching issues is encouraged.

Purpose

18   A peer observation system could have one of three main purposes:
- individual development
- performance management
- evidence of quality assurance

19   This University sees the purpose to be for individual development as a part of continuing professional development. However, an effective peer observation scheme with this purpose, could reasonably be expected to result in an improvement in the student learning experience, that is an increase in the quality of teaching. However, the purpose of peer observation is not to produce a 'paper-trail' for quality assessments. Nor is peer observation a mechanism for grading staff against set criteria and thus rewarding good performance or exposing and remedying poor performance. It is about giving individuals the opportunity to develop in relation to their own starting point and to assist in the dissemination of good practice at the level of the School and beyond.

Defining 'good' teaching

20   There is no clear-cut definition of 'good' teaching. What works well for one tutor in one subject with a group of students may be a disaster in another situation. However, there is some agreement on the characteristics of a good teacher (Ramsden, 1992) and these are listed in appendix 1. This process is not about getting everyone to teach in the same way, it is about helping individuals to reflect on and evaluate their own approach to teaching.

Planning a Peer Observation Scheme

These notes are intended for Heads of School or those responsible for planning and organising a local scheme.

Purpose

21   The University's preferred purpose for peer observation of teaching schemes is explained above. If you wish to vary the purpose away from individual development, you should clearly explain the purpose of your scheme.

The Observers

22   Observation by a peer from the same School is the most common scenario. Some alternatives are observation by a manager, by a mentor, by a colleague from another department with particular expertise in a given teaching method or by an educational specialist. The key to a successful observation pairing is normally mutual trust and respect. Increasingly some staff are finding an observation partnership from a disparate discipline area a rewarding opportunity. This process is encouraged as part of the PGCAP.

Organising Observation Partnerships

23   Thought needs to be given to how pairings are made. Some possibilities are:
   • Free choice of reciprocal observation colleague
   • Self-forming observation groups of 5-6 people who observe each other
   • Relationships around existing team teaching arrangements
   • Allocated observation partnerships
   • Designated observers with whom others can sign up (this may not be a reciprocal arrangement)

24   As a guide, a choice of an observation colleague or self-forming observation groups is normally found to work best. In order for an individual to experience a range of different ideas over time, a system which encourages a yearly change of observation colleague is suggested.

25   Experience shows that observers can learn as much, if not more from this process as those being observed. A partnership system which swaps roles will tend to reinforce personal development more than a system which uses designated observers and could be seen as judgmental. Indeed you may wish to focus your scheme with an expectation that the observer will be the partner who has most to gain in terms of their development.

What should be observed

26   As far as possible, a range of all the activities which constitute 'teaching' for an individual should be observed. Commonly this would be:

 • Lectures
 • Small group sessions
 • Practical classes

For those involved in large amounts of one-to-one teaching or distance learning delivery, thought will need to be given to the most effective and appropriate style of observation.

Frequency of Observation

27   A minimum target of one observed session per year for each member of staff should be incorporated into observation schemes. Schools are free to plan for a higher frequency of observation. A scheme should be flexible enough to allow staff pairings to increase the frequency of their observations above the minimum to suit their own needs.

Confidentiality and Paperwork

28   Individual Heads of Department/School will need to make a judgement on the most suitable system of reporting for their area. An observation system which can meet the developmental needs of individuals and provide written evidence for Periodic Review and other audits, would obviously save time and duplication of effort.

29   It is recommended that the exact details of the observation discussion remains confidential between the people involved unless the observed member of staff wishes to share the information. An individual may choose to use a written record of their observed session for a number reasons: as a part of their Staff Development Review discussion; in a promotion case; as a part of a portfolio towards a qualification or membership of a professional body. For these reasons, a written record should always be made but it should remain under the control of the observed person. A *suggested* format for this record is given at appendix 2 (www.reading.ac.uk/web/files/qualitysupport/peerobsfeedbackform.doc).

30   Schools are strongly recommended to collect and retain some form of written record of observations. This may perhaps take the form of a joint observer/observed written statement. A suggestion of the type of record which might be kept is given in appendix 3 (www.reading.ac.uk/web/files/qualitysupport/peerobsjointstatementform.doc).

31   In order to learn from the individual observation experiences, a School may wish to have a system which facilitates the sharing of general issues or good ideas. For example, if every observation in a certain room came to the conclusion that the quality of the room was significantly undermining the student experience, the combined evidence may help to put forward a case for room modification. If an observation group system is in operation, a group may decide to discuss general issues, pool their ideas and write a group statement for School use.

Please note that there is no requirement for any of these suggested records to be lodged centrally within the University.

The Observation Process

These notes are offered as guidance to the observer and observed.

32   First agree on a suitable session for observation. Most people like to select a session they feel comfortable and confident with, but the maximum benefit from observation may be to select a session which is new, difficult or in need of a change. Normally an observation should last for about an hour, so a longer practical class may need to be 'sampled'. Ideally both people should be available for a discussion of about an hour soon after the observation takes place.

33   The process of observation can then be seen in 3 stages:

- Initial briefing
- Observation
- Debriefing

Initial Briefing

34   This process will establish ground rules, set the scene, focus the observer and decide practical issues. Examples of items to be discussed include:

- Aims of the selected session
- Issues that the tutor would particularly like feedback on
- Any new or experimental parts of the session where feedback would be valuable
- Where the observer will sit, or whether it is appropriate to wander around (in a practical session it may be useful for the observer to talk to students)
- How the observation will be explained to students
- How the observer will record information
- When you will meet to debrief after the session
- How you will each provide feedback

Note: Students are likely to notice the presence of another member of staff in the session and observers will inevitably make notes about the student audience as an integral part of the observation. Therefore, it is a good idea for the tutor to introduce the observer to the students and explain about the observation process. Thereafter, the observation should have no impact upon the session.

The Observation

35   There are four stages in the teaching process which can be identified in any session which is likely to be observed:

- Planning prior to the session
- Introducing the session
- Delivering and developing the plans
- Conclusions

36   At the pre-session briefing you will have agreed a particular focus for the observation, but within the hour, the observer can also make some useful general observations on these stages. Some possible prompts follow:

37   Planning the session:
- How does the plan relate to previous sessions?
- Are there clear aims and learning outcomes?
- How does the session fit in with the overall programme for the course?
- Are resources (AVA, handouts, tasks) available at the appropriate points?

38   Introducing the session to the students:
- Is it clear to the students how this session relates to previous work?
- Does the introduction give the students a clear overview of how the session will develop?

39   Delivering and developing the plans:
- Is the communication of ideas relevant, clear and coherent?
- Is there opportunity for the students to clarify their understanding? How is this handled?
- What strategies are used to gain attention, to refocus and to ensure attention is maintained?
- Are students motivated?
- Are teaching methods appropriate to the tasks?
- Are there opportunities for the students to think, question and feedback?
- What modes of delivery are used? Is there a reliance on one mode?

40   Concluding the session:
- Is the session drawn to a satisfactory conclusion?
- Is there a summary of the main ideas or a review of the point reached so far?
- Does the conclusion look forward to the next session or encourage further action?

Observation Methods

41   There are several methods of making observations, and these can be considered at the initial briefing. The questions above can provide a framework to which other agreed areas can be added. Observation methods could include:
- A chronological record of what happened for the session, this provides a rich if unfocused set of notes
- Focus on a particular issue, perhaps agreed in advance, maybe using a proforma
- A set of random notes made as something of interest occurs
- Observations based around a structured or semi-structured framework (see appendix 2)
- A video recording

The Debriefing

42   Obviously detail will be easiest to recall if the de-brief follows on immediately from the session. It is normally best to let the observed person have first comment on how they felt the session went. It may then be appropriate to go through the observer's notes. The observer can help the observed by taking the discussion through these stages:

Description	-what happened?
Feelings	-how did you feel? -what were your reactions?
Evaluation	-what was effective? -what was less effective? -what might this mean or imply?
Analysis	-why do you think this happened? -what was really going on? -what sense can you make of the situation?
Conclusion	-what else might you have done? -how might you tackle it next time?

43   Good feedback should help you lead to an action plan for personal development and perhaps an agreement to use another observation as a way of reviewing progress.

Further Information and Help

Assistance to Schools establishing a peer observation system can be provided by the Centre for Staff Training and Development. This includes briefing sessions for staff on conducting observed sessions and giving and receiving feedback. Electronic versions of these guidelines for School use are also available from CSTD or the CSTD web page.

The following references give more information and ideas on peer observation systems and may be borrowed from CSTD or the Library:

Brown, S; Jones, G & Rawnsley, S (Editors), 1993. *Observing Teaching*. **SEDA Paper 79**; 96pp. ISBN 0946815488.

O'Neill, M. & Pennington, G. (1992). *Evaluating Teaching and Courses from an Active Learning Perspective.* CVCP, London.

Ramsden, P. (1992). *Learning to teach in higher education.* Routledge, London.

Appendix 1

What is Good Teaching?

Ramsden (1992) identified 13 characteristics of good teaching from an individual lecturer's point of view:

- A desire to share your love of the subject
- An ability to make the material stimulating and interesting
- A facility for engaging with students at their level of understanding
- A capacity to explain the material plainly and helpfully
- A commitment to making it absolutely clear what has to be understood, at what level and why
- Showing concern and respect for students
- A commitment to encouraging student independence and experiment
- An ability to improvise and adapt to new demands
- Using teaching methods and academic tasks that require students to learn actively, responsibly and through cooperative endeavour
- Using valid and fair assessment methods
- A focus on key concepts and students' current and future understanding of them, rather than just on covering the ground
- Giving high quality feedback on students' work
- A desire to learn from students and others about the effects of your teaching and how it can be improved

Consideration of *some* of these can be useful as a part of the observation process.

Appendix 2

Peer Observation of Teaching – personal feedback   **CONFIDENTIAL**

Observer:		Observed:	
Observation Date:		Module:	

Nature of Session:					
Lecture		Practical session		Studio session	
Small Group session		Fieldwork		Other (please specify)	

Feedback on issues specifically requested by Observed:

Other feedback (Refer to guidelines for indications of issues to be considered under each heading)

Planning the session

Introducing the session to the students

Delivering and developing the plans

Concluding the session

Other observations:

Observed's comments:

Training, development or other needs:

Agreed actions:

Signed			
Observer		Observed	
Date			

Appendix 3

Joint Statement on Peer Observation of Teaching for School Records

Observer:		Observed:	
Observation Date:		Module:	

Nature of Session:					
Lecture		Practical session		Studio session	
Small Group session		Fieldwork		Other (please specify)	

The following major topics were discussed:

The following examples of good practice could be shared:

The following training, development and other needs were noted:

The following actions were agreed:

Signed			
Observer		Observed	
Date			