



Guide to **Peer Observation of Teaching**



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH



“ Having my teaching observed gave me a great sense of confidence in what I was doing in the classroom”

Contents

Peer observation of teaching	03
What is peer observation of teaching?	04
What are the aims of peer observation of teaching?	04
What kinds of teaching can you have observed?	04
What are the benefits of a peer observation scheme?	05
How will peer observation of teaching work?	05
Before the observation	06
Pre-observation form	07
During the observation	08
Observation form	09
After the observation	10
Post observation form	11
What next? Using the results of peer observation of teaching	12
Further reading	12



Peer observation of teaching

This is a guide to be used in situations where peer observation of teaching is taking place. It is based on academic research and feedback from existing peer observation schemes.

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What is peer observation of teaching?

Peer observation of teaching is a formative process where two peers work together and observe each other's teaching. The observer offers feedback to the colleague who is doing the teaching.

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What are the aims of peer observation of teaching?

- To enhance teaching through critical reflection on it
 - To enhance the quality of teaching and student learning
 - To bring benefits to the person doing the observation as well as to the person doing the teaching
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What kinds of teaching can you have observed?

Any kind of teaching can be observed. The crucial thing is that the teacher is facilitating some kind of learning to take place. This teaching could be a lecture, or a tutorial or seminar. It could also be a lab class, or a field trip. Or it could be a one-to-one session with a student, for example in a PhD supervision. And the teaching can take place in any medium. You might want the observation to focus on an online session – how to moderate a discussion board for example, or how you facilitate a session using Collaborate.

What's important about the process is that it's based on a situation where teaching is taking place. This makes the scope of peer observation very wide. You could choose to have your teaching observed in a research seminar or even in a public engagement event.

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What are the benefits of a peer observation scheme?

There are many benefits to having your teaching observed. We almost always think of these as being mainly for the person doing the teaching but research shows that both parties benefit. Indeed, in many situations the greatest benefits actually flow to the person who is observing.

Some of these benefits include:

- Discussion of your teaching
- Sharing of good practice
- Positive valuing of teaching
- Sharing critical reflections
- Challenging assumptions about teaching
- Learning about a range of different approaches to learning and teaching

We can all learn a great deal by watching how other people design and deliver their teaching. Even if you are a teacher with a lot of experience you can still learn from observing your peers.

How will peer observation of teaching work?

This is a peer-based scheme which is based on the assumption that everyone involved in teaching has knowledge and expertise to share.

There are three stages involved in the observation process, and there is a form to help with each of these:

1. Before the observation
2. During the observation
3. After the observation

These forms are designed to help you with the observation process, but you could choose to proceed without using them.

01. Before the observation

The first thing you need to do is to choose a peer. You need to decide what School or discipline that peer is from. It can be enormously beneficial to go outside your comfort zone or School to see how teaching is undertaken differently in other parts of the University. Equally, you may prefer to work with someone from within your own area because of the importance of discipline-specific teaching approaches that you would like feedback on.

The next thing is to meet with your peer to discuss the teaching you would like to have observed. You should fill out the following form and use it to start your discussion. This asks for some basic information about the teaching session as well as helping both you and your observer to think about what you would like to learn from the observation.

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“ I’m constantly re-using tips, tricks, and methods I’ve observed other people using in my own teaching”



Pre-observation form

To be filled in by the person being observed

Name of teacher

Name of observer

Date, time and venue of session to be observed

<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
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Number of students

Level of students

Course title

Topic for the session

Context eg have you met the students before, what format will the teaching take, where does this session fit with the rest of the course?

What are you aiming to do in the session?

Is there anything specific you would like feedback on?

How will you introduce the observer to the students?

02. During the observation

The next stage is to undertake the observation itself. There are a number of practical things for both peers to consider:

- How should you introduce your observer?
- You should proceed as normally as possible
- The emphasis should be on the teaching (and not on the content)
- The observer should take notes on the teaching

Again, there is a form to fill in to help with these processes. This time the form should be filled in by the person doing the observation.

“ Watching other people teach allows me to become a student once again and reflect on my own teaching from the ‘other side’ ”



Observation form

To be filled in by the person doing the observing

What went well with the session (eg structure, activities, clarity, pace, organisation, interaction, body language, visual aids, enthusiasm)?

Can you identify areas for reflection and possible improvement (as above)?

Do you have any comments on specific areas of focus identified prior to observation?

What have you learnt that you can use in your own teaching?

03. After the observation

The final stage is to meet to discuss what you have learnt from the process – this could take place immediately after the observation. During this time you should use the observation form to offer feedback on how teaching went. It's important to keep this discussion positive and constructive and to think about what you have learnt from the process, whether as an observer or through the process of being observed.

Peer observation of teaching is a developmental activity. The final form to fill in will help you to reflect on how you might develop your teaching. This should be filled in by the person who was doing the teaching.

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“ I find it immensely valuable to be able to watch and observe how other people go about their teaching. It's a privilege to be invited”

Post observation form

To be filled in by the person being observed

Were there any differences/similarities between your views and those of your observer?

Can you identify any areas of good practice from the teaching session?

What areas of development can you identify from the feedback and how do you intend to address these?

What next? Using the results of peer observation of teaching

We have deliberately designed this guidance so that it can be used flexibly and for a range of purposes. These include:

- **formative approaches** for example you choosing to use it yourself to get peer support to investigate a specific aspect of your teaching practice; as part of a formal staff development programme (such as Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice or the Edinburgh Teaching Award); or as something to discuss at annual review or with a line manager or mentor.
- **summative basis** as part of a formal process in some Schools (for example linked to probation/part of staff induction) or in support of a case for promotion.

Further reading

For how peer observation can bring about discussion of teaching see:
Blackwell, R. and Machin, M. (1996) Peer observation of teaching and staff development. *Higher Education Quarterly* 50(2): 156-171

On how peer observation can contribute to the enhancing the value of teaching see:
Gosling, D. (2005) Peer observation of teaching: implementing a peer observation of teaching scheme with five case studies. (London: Staff and Educational Development Association)

On how the opportunities for shared critical reflection within peer observation can lead to the challenging of assumptions about teaching see:
Peel, D. (2005) Peer observation as a transformatory tool? *Teaching in Higher Education* 10(4): 489-504

On how the benefits of peer observation accrue to the person doing the observing:
Tenenberg, J. (2016) Learning through observing peers in practice. *Studies in Higher Education* 41(4): 756-773



“ In my experience, POT is like holding up a mirror so that a critical friend can provide you with constructive feedback on your teaching. At this point, you can either look away or engage with the process by reflecting on their observations and undertaking some critical self-evaluation with a view to improving the quality and effectiveness of your teaching.”

