

# **Peer Observation for Teaching Assessment**

## **College of Agricultural and Life Sciences**

### **University of Florida**

The College of Agricultural and Life Sciences values teaching. Improving instruction in the classrooms and laboratories should lead to enhanced learning for the students, the ultimate goal of education. The College sponsors and conducts a wide variety of activities and programs that encourage, recognize and reward excellence in teaching.

This Peer Observation for Teaching Assessment (POTA) program was developed at the University of Illinois (UIUC) by R. Kirby Barrick with assistance from Marne Helgesen, Office of Instructional Resources, and faculty in the College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences as a means to assess teaching in addition to the collection of student feedback. The term assessment is important; peer observation for teaching assessment is not a summative measure for evaluation purposes but rather a formative measure designed to help instructors improve so that students learn.

Since its inception in 1997, hundreds of administrators, faculty, research associates and graduate students have participated in this peer assessment program. The program was initially funded by the Provost's Initiative on Teaching Advancement, the UIUC Teaching Advancement Board, the College, the Academy of Teaching Excellence, and the Warren K. Wessels Endowment. POTA workshops have been conducted in many other colleges as well as at other universities. The peer observation system is appropriate in any college, school, department or discipline. POTA works for all!

## **Peer Observation -- An Important Component of a Teaching Assessment System**

What characteristics can be assessed?

- Good organization of subject matter and course
- Effective communication
- Knowledge of the subject matter and teaching
- Enthusiasm for the subject matter and teaching
- Positive attitudes toward students
- Fairness in assessment and grading
- Flexibility in approaches to teaching
- Appropriate student learning outcomes

How can data be collected?

- Self-assessment/report
- Peer observation
- Structured interview
- Student rating of course and instructor
- Test or appraisal of student achievement (outcomes assessment)
- Content analysis of instructional materials
- Review of classroom records

Who should do the assessment?

- Self
- Students
- Faculty peers
- Dean or department head
- Alumni
- Other appropriate administrators

Modified from: John Centra, Robert C. Froh, Peter J. Gray, Leo M. Lambert. (Robert M. Diamond, Ed.). (1987). *A Guide to Evaluating Teaching for Promotion and Tenure*. Acton, MA: Copley Publishing.

## **Assessment of Teaching: Why and How**

The assessment of teaching to improve instructor and student performance is one part of a total evaluation system. In spite of many instructors' aversion to evaluation, it is a practice that is likely to continue. Evaluation is necessary as an aid to:

- Improvement of instruction – by far the most important purpose for the benefit of learners.
- Change of status – salary increments, tenure, promotion, dismissal, transfer.
- Assignment of load – information for modification; the better the working conditions the higher the instructor morale.
- Motivation of self evaluation – instructors tend to be more alert and try harder when they know they are to be evaluated.
- Instructor evaluation of students – awareness, understanding, sympathy.
- Stimulation of better instructor selection – obtaining and retaining the best instructors possible.
- Appraisal of the entire program – objectives, curriculum, procedures, materials.

### Guidelines for the Assessment of Teaching

The emphasis should be placed on how to assess teaching effectively. Following are some general guidelines to help those entrusted with the task of assessment:

1. Assessment is something done with instructors, not to them - their participation in the process is essential.
2. Assessment should be directed at the result and not the instructor - should not be superficial, arbitrary, punitive, petty or judgmental.
3. The purpose of assessment should be clearly established, understood, and accepted by everyone involved.
4. Effective teaching should be clearly defined and criteria carefully developed in terms of observable behaviors growing out of the accepted aims of the department or college.
5. The process should be related to incentives and rewards for effort and achievement.
6. The assessment device should be simple, easily administered and economical of instructor and evaluator time.
7. Observation results should be immediately recorded in sufficient detail to retain maximum objectivity.
8. Snap judgments should be guarded against along with the tendency to assess high on all items when one or two are outstanding.
9. Assessment should be continuous, not just once or twice a year.
10. Assessment should not be based heavily on learner progress. There are many factors beyond instructor control such as student ability, past achievement and environment.

## Who should do the assessment?

Once a teaching assessment system is established, who should do the assessment? In order to avoid personal bias and subjectivity, the assessment should be the consensus of several people working as a team rather than the opinion of one person. The team could include administrators, coordinators, colleagues, students, and instructors.

Following are some characteristic items which might be used on assessment forms:

- *Command of subject matter* – knowledge.
- *Planning* - long and short-range, cooperation with colleagues, instructor-student planning, student motivation and purposeful assignments, initiative, evidence of creative activity.
- *Presentation* - well-balanced variety of appropriate procedures and materials, enthusiasm, alert to new media and methods, willingness to experiment, use of resource people within or outside the university.
- *Provision for individual differences* - stress on the total development of the student; interests, needs, abilities; knowledge of student background and ability.
- *Student participation* - interest, involvement, working habits, self-direction, initiative, independent thinking; students actively engaged.
- *Rapport with students* - teaching atmosphere, mutual respect, patience, impartiality, fairness, constructiveness.
- *Reliability* - promptness and accuracy, attendance, attention to detail and routine, conscientiousness.
- *Professional stewardship* - ethical conduct, participation in professional organizations, team worker, committee work, willingness to work for overall good of the program.
- *Social consciousness* - cooperation, ability to work with others, courtesy, tactfulness, loyalty to profession and colleagues, support of educational policy, receptivity to suggestion.

In preparing an assessment device, two cautions should be noted. If there are too many items to be assessed, the process will become routine. A second caution relates to the balance among the items to be assessed. It is easy to obscure classroom teaching with many other items.

Modified from: Clement, Stanley L.  
Retired director of division of professional education,  
Bridgewater State College, East Weymouth Mass.  
*NASSP Bulletin*, October 1979

## Peer Assessment of Teaching

Purpose: To provide information to complement student evaluations, alumni surveys and administrator comments.

### Process

- Instructor to be observed should complete some form of self-appraisal before the class visit. This can be the basis for pre-visit conference discussion.
- Set up meeting with person being observed. The following should be discussed:
  - a. An overview of the class to-date
  - b. The instructor's overall course objectives
  - c. How things are going to this point
  - d. How well are students prepared and motivated
  - e. The physical or environmental factors that may be influencing the class
  - f. The teaching approaches being used and reasons for using them
  - g. The direct purpose of the observation
  - h. Particular needs or things to look for
  - i. The instructor's goals for the class being observed
  - j. The particular assignments/activities for the class, and those that preceded
  - k. The student objectives for the class session being observed
- Observer should review course syllabus before class visit.
- Individual being observed should inform class prior to class visit. The instructor should explain the purpose and value of such a peer review process and encourage students to act as naturally as possible.
- Peer observer should arrive 10-15 minutes early. Observer should sit ½ way back, to one side of the class. It is not necessary for instructor to introduce observer if students were informed before hand.
- Class observation should last the entire class or at least 50 minutes for a multi-hour class.
- Observer should visit more than one class. Don't rely on only one observation. Observe different classes, subjects if possible. Use same observation procedures.
- More than one observer should visit the instructor.
- Observe student behavior as well as instructor behavior.
- View class from student's perspective as well as peer's perspective.
- Focus on instructional process as well as content.

- Prepare detailed follow-up report.
- Meet with instructor to discuss results of peer review.
  - a. First ask instructor to share his/her reactions and impressions of class.
  - b. Review written comments.
  - c. Start feedback with positive (strength) and then alternate strengths and suggestions for improvement.
  - d. Avoid judgmental statements.
  - e. Focus on needs identified during pre-observation meeting.
  - f. Plan for follow up: changes instructor can make, other areas to observe next time.

Adapted from James Groccia, Ed.D.  
University of Missouri Program For Excellence in Teaching

## **FEEDBACK IS MORE EFFECTIVE WHEN.....**

1. The source of information is perceived as credible, knowledgeable, and well-intentioned.
2. The consultant/peer is respectful, empathetic, supportive, non-judgmental, and knowledgeable.
3. It focuses on specific behaviors, rather than the person.
4. It is descriptive, rather than evaluative.
5. It relates to goals that are defined by the observee.
6. It considers the observee's experience and developmental stage.
7. It contains a moderate amount of positive feedback with a selective amount of negative feedback – and the latter is 'sandwiched' between positive information.
8. It is given as soon as possible after the performance.
9. It allows for response and dialogue.
10. It is a part of a process, not a one-time fix, and given frequently, but not excessively.

Modified from: Brinko, Kathleen T.  
"The practice of giving feedback to improve teaching."  
*Journal of Higher Education*, 64(5), 1993

## What is Peer Observation?

An effective peer observation program is: Systematic, Professional, Collegial, Collaborative, and Motivating. It includes:

planning  
consultation  
observation  
consultation  
feedback  
action

Adapted from: Barbara J. Millis  
"Conducting Effective Peer Classroom  
Observations." To Improve the  
Academy, Vol. 11, 1992

## Peer Assessment and Scientific Inquiry

University faculty are trained in the process of scientific inquiry. The peer assessment process follows the same general process as scientific method.

Formulate a Plan  
Gather Evidence  
Report Findings  
Generate Conclusion  
Implications for Future.....

## Giving Criticism vs Being Critical

*. . . A Friendly Reminder*

Giving Criticism:

A judgmental act, focused on negative materials/behaviors/  
happenings, with a resulting negative perception; typically received as punitive and  
severe.

Being Critical:

The acts of:

- 1) identifying specific materials/behaviors/happenings that are essential or contribute to a condition or product, and
- 2) simultaneously placing these into the 'bigger picture' with a resulting objective perception; typically received as objective, relevant and helpful.

# **PEER OBSERVATION FOR TEACHING ASSESSMENT**

## **An Overview of the Five Part System**

### **Practice Observation**

Observers can look for a number of things that do not require a pre-observation conference. Essentially, the observer wants to gain a ‘sense’ of being in someone else’s classroom, and the instructor wants to become comfortable with having an observer in the classroom. Teams (instructors and their mentors) are encouraged to “sit in” on each other’s classes as a warm-up to the five part peer observation system, outlined below.

#### **Part 1: Identification**

The identification portion of peer observation is designed to help participants understand the instructional goals associated with a particular course, session, and instructor. Setting the instructional goals will later enable both parties to establish the specific teaching elements to observe for feedback to the instructor. As an instructor, you want to give the observer an opportunity to understand the context of your course, so that the observer can look for the areas where you feel you need help. Remember that goals include the learner behaviors (what the learners will be able to do as a result of the class) and the instructor strategies (what the teacher will do to help ensure student learning).

#### **Part 2: Dialogue One**

The pre-observation conference (Dialogue One) helps the observer understand the context for the instructor’s particular class. The primary goal of this first meeting is to engage in a dialogue to review the instructor’s course/class goals, teaching strategies, learning objectives, past problems, perceived strengths, etc. This meeting will serve to identify the elements where the instructor needs the most help. Another result of this dialogue will be to collaboratively identify any parts of the classroom experience that the observer feels are necessary for observation. “What to look for” should be decided by both parties and be based on previous observations, student evaluations, or other feedback mechanisms. This first dialogue will also identify the role the observer will take during the observation.

### **Part 3: The Observation**

The actual observation is the primary part of the system designed to improve teaching. The observer and instructor will have discussed what specific behaviors the instructor wants the observer to look for during the class session. The observer is in the unique position to gather more and richer information on the class than the instructor can. Keep in mind that for the instructor to make effective teaching-related decisions the observer's data collection must be: specific, accurate, descriptive, contain irrefutable evidence, and relate to the goals that are defined by the instructor being observed. The observation should be guided by the specific teaching elements as defined in the pre-observation dialogue.

### **Part 4: Dialogue Two**

The post-observation dialogue (Dialogue Two) is designed to allow the instructor and observer to review the observations regarding the goal(s) the instructor set for that day's class session. As such, this second dialogue should focus on helping the faculty member to understand the events that transpired during the observed class session. The dialogue should take place as close to the time of the observation as possible. In order for the instructor to make effective changes to teaching, peer feedback should be:

- specific,
- focused,
- concrete,
- action oriented,
- accurate,
- clear,
- honest, and
- positively phrased.

### **Part 5: Post-Observation Write-ups & Action Plans**

The peer observation write-up generates a set of action steps that will positively affect an instructor's teaching. The post-observation write-up is a result of the dialogue between the observer and the observed, and should be written collaboratively. This document should be:

- descriptive, not evaluative,
- specific,
- focused on behavior,
- take into account the needs of the receiver and the giver of feedback, and
- include only the amount of information the receiver can process.

The action steps should serve as a basis for follow-up observations. In particular, an observer could look for changes in an instructor's teaching based on the agreed upon action steps from the previous observation. Thus, multiple observations will be required to gain an accurate picture of the evolution of teaching over time.