

A Class Visit Model
Rick Holmgren
Allegheny College

Class visitation as described in our model is intended to foster conversations among faculty that will lead to a deeper understanding of classroom dynamics and improved student learning. Since we recognize that techniques that are successful for one instructor in inspiring student learning are often unsuccessful for others, the goal of class observation is not to measure the instructor's classroom behaviors against some fixed criterion or the preferred classroom behaviors of the observer. Rather, the observer seeks to serve as a mirror reflecting classroom dynamics and providing insight to the instructor about how well the instructor is meeting the instructor's goals.

Structure It is best if colleagues exchange class visits so that each is asked to share his or her teaching with the other. Observing the classes of others is particularly helpful for formative teaching development, and exchanging visits can decrease the stress associated with summative evaluation. So that observations can be situated in an appropriate context, each classroom visit should be preceded and followed by conversations between the instructor and the observer. The observer's response to a class is typically multi-faceted, and the observer's comments will be most helpful to the instructor if the observer focuses on topics that have been identified by the instructor in the pre- or post-observation conversation.

Cross-Disciplinary Observations Observers from outside the discipline of the instructor are uniquely positioned to describe the students' experience in the classroom since they, like the students, are unlikely to be conversant with the nuances of the material. Colleagues who are not experts in the content area are more likely to notice topics or presentational details that cause difficulty for the novice. In extreme cases—I have observed classes conducted in languages I do not speak—the observer can provide useful commentary on student reaction: note-taking patterns, postures that indicate engagement or disengagement, eye contact or other sign of connection between the professor and students. In my experience, faculty observers from the humanities have provided insightful comments on the conduct of my courses in advanced mathematics.

The Pre-Observation Conversation The goal of the pre-observation discussion is to identify the instructor's learning goals for the students, her or his strategies for meeting those goals, and areas of concern to the instructor. Learning is more effective if the learner is motivated to learn the material, and a class observation will be more helpful if it focuses on issues of interest to the instructor. For example, if my intent is to create a learning environment that stimulates students to ask questions and then explore those questions with me (the instructor), then an observation report that details how I might present the material in a lecture format may not be as helpful as one that addresses the ways in which I facilitated the questioning and investigative process. To help the

observer focus on issues that are important to the instructor, the instructor should be encouraged to answer the following questions in the pre-observation discussion:

- What is your teaching/learning philosophy? (Or, how do you describe your approach to facilitating student learning?)
- What are your learning goals for the students in this course?
- What are the learning goals for the class session to be observed?
- What will be happening in the class? Are you trying any instructional techniques in this class session that you have not used before?
- What do you see as your primary role in this class session (e.g., leading discussion, moderating a debate, organizing activities, presenting material)?
- What do you expect students to be doing in this class session (e.g., discussing, creating models, taking notes)?
- Is there anything in particular you would like the observer to be watching for in the class session to be observed?

It is often helpful if the instructor shares a syllabus or other class materials with the observer. It also helps develop mutual trust if the observer answers some of these questions for his or her own courses during the conversation. A written summary of the learning goals, teaching strategies, and issues of particular interest can help focus the observation and provide a starting point for the post-observation discussion.

The Class Visit Before the class visit, the instructor prepares the students for the observation and clarifies the role that the observer will play in the classroom. It is impossible for an observer to sit in a classroom without being noticed by the students, and if no reference is made to the observer's presence, the students will supply their own interpretations, which may or may not reflect positively on the instructor. On the other hand, students are likely to react positively if the instructor informs the students in the class period before the observations that he or she is exchanging class visits with another faculty member for the purposes of developing the teaching skills of both faculty. Problems might also arise if the role of the observer in the classroom has not been identified. In particular, the instructor needs to decide whether she or he intends to introduce the observer to the class and whether the observer will participate in class activities or simply observe. And of course, the observer should honor the instructor's wishes in this regard.

During the class visit, the observer takes notes both on what he or she observes (describing what the instructor and students are doing at each moment) and his or her response to the behaviors (e.g., comments about the observer's level of understanding of the material and what aspects of the class help or hinder that understanding, questions that come up in the observer's mind, the observer's emotional reactions to the material or classroom behaviors, inferences about student understanding or reactions drawn from student behaviors, etc.) An effective way to take notes is to use a split-page format: A line is drawn down the middle of the paper. On the left, the observer makes notes on the content and the instructor's actions. On the right, the observer notes her or his response to

the material or situation, questions that come up for her or him, or other commentary. Ideally, responses are lined up across from the content moment during which they occurred. Some observers find it helpful to write the time in the left margin occasionally so that class events can be more easily located in the post-observation discussion. Often, the notes are given to the instructor during the post-observation discussion.

In general, the observer attempts to disturb the normal flow of the class as little as possible, which implies that the observer arrives a few minutes early to find a seat, stays for the whole class or until a class break, and refrains from speaking to students during class activities. The transition from a break to class is a particularly important period for setting the tone of a class and arriving early will provide the observer the opportunity to observe how the instructor manages this transition. Late arrivals or early departures are disruptive and send negative signals to the class about the perceived value of the class. In addition, although students are a good source of information about the class, the observer should refrain from talking with them about the class, especially during class as that could impart negative messages about the class or the instructor to the students, and any feedback gathered in this manner is likely to be skewed by the small sample size and the tendency of students with similar attitudes to sit next to one another.

The Post-Observation Meeting The instructor and the observer should discuss the class as soon after the class as possible. Ideally, the discussion occurs immediately after the observed class session when the session is still fresh in both their minds. An early meeting also helps to relieve any anxiety related to the visit that is felt by the instructor.

The instructor begins the follow-up meeting by describing her or his experience of the class and asking for feedback on specific issues, after which the observer can share her or his observations and answer any questions raised by the instructor. Since unsolicited advice often provokes defensiveness and is seldom useful to the instructor, the observer should refrain from offering advice or solutions (“This is what I would do . . .”) unless specifically asked to do so. The observer’s role is to serve as a mirror or recorder for the instructor; the observer’s role is *not* that of a teaching expert. The observer should bear in mind that students are often ill equipped to describe their experience in the classroom in a way that can help the instructor appreciate the triumphs and difficulties students experience. Consequently, the observer can usually best help the instructor by reflecting the student experience for the instructor, something an observer is often well equipped to do, especially when he or she is from outside the instructor’s discipline. Information about the student experience can then become a resource for the instructor in shaping her or his courses. As a side benefit of this approach to consultation, the observer may find that she or he will develop an increased appreciation for the joys and challenges of her or his own students. Indeed, many faculty with experience in class observation report that they learn more about their own teaching from observing the classes of others than from being observed themselves.

A list of more detailed suggestions for providing helpful feedback and a table of sample comments are appended.

Acknowledgements and Resources This work has been substantially informed by ongoing conversations with Peter Frederick of Wabash College. Other resources include the following written works:

DeZure, Deborah. "Evaluating Teaching Through Peer Classroom Observation." *Changing Practices in Evaluating Teaching: A Practical Guide to Improved Faculty Performance and Promotion/Tenure Decisions.* Ed. Seldin, Peter. Bolton, MA: Anker. 1999. 70-96.

Jensen, Jill D. "If I Knew Then What I Know Now: A First-Year Faculty Consultant's Top Ten List." *A Guide to Faculty Development: Practical Advice, Examples, and Resources.* Ed. Gillespie, Kay Herr. Bolton, MA: Anker. 2002. 92-99.

Lewis, Karron G. "The Process of Individual Consultation." *A Guide to Faculty Development: Practical Advice, Examples, and Resources.* Ed. Gillespie, Kay Herr. Bolton, MA: Anker. 2002. 59-73.

Weimer, MaryEllen. *Improving College Teaching: Strategies for Developing Instructional Effectiveness.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. 1990. See pages 118 – 123 and 209 – 213.

Wilkerson, LuAnn and Karron G. Lewis. "Classroom Observation: The Observer as Collaborator." *A Guide to Faculty Development: Practical Advice, Examples, and Resources.* Ed. Gillespie, Kay Herr. Bolton, MA: Anker. 2002. 74-81.

Questions to Guide a Classroom Observation

- Are the goals for the class clear to the students? Is it clear to students why the class activities are structured as they are?
- In the case of lectures or instructions for activities, is the presentation of the material clear? Does the observer understand what the instructor is trying to convey? What evidence is there to suggest that the students understand the material?
- Do students appear to be aware of connections between the material for that day and other material for the course? Do students appear to be aware of connections between the material for that day and the students' experience outside the classroom? Are connections made to students' prior knowledge or experience?
- To better understand the student experience, the observer might choose to adopt a student persona by asking him or herself, if I were a student in this class, what would I experience? At what points in the class might I be confused? Challenged? Motivated? Angry? Enthused? Intimidated? Intrigued? Distracted? Bored?
- Who appears to own the learning? That is, who is actually doing the work, solving the problem, going to the board, reading the passage?
- What do you observe about the relationship between the instructor and the students? Do all students appear to feel free to ask questions or interject comments? Are students' comments constructive? How does the instructor respond to student questions or comments?
- What do you observe about the interactions among students? During discussions, do they direct comments, questions, and requests for clarification to one another or to the instructor? Do students appear to value the contributions of their classmates? What evidence do you have to suggest that?
- To collect observations about the pacing of the course or about the students' perceptions about relationship between theory and examples, describe what you observe about student activities. Who is taking notes? Who appears to be attentive? Who asks questions? Are students in some areas of the room more engaged than those in others? Describe any patterns you see.

Suggestions for Providing Helpful Feedback

1. Pointing out strengths is helpful feedback, and being helpful does not mean that you cannot raise issues of concern. The most effective feedback is a conversation that identifies both particular strengths of the instructor and issues to think about and work on within the context of a particular group of students in a particular course. Helpful feedback is always embedded in context.
2. Helpful feedback is *descriptive* and *specific*. General comments (“That was great!”) make a person feel good but are not useful in developing teaching skill. Descriptive comments tied to specific events in class are much more helpful.
3. Helpful feedback expresses the experience of the observer in the class, what she or he learned, her or his emotional response (intimidated, enthused, intrigued, bored). Observers from outside the instructor’s discipline are often well situated to describe the student experience, and information about the observer’s response to the class can be very useful to instructors.
4. Helpful feedback does *not* include judgmental comments. Such comments are best avoided by starting sentences with “I” rather than “You.” Statements that begin with “I” and describe the observer’s experience allow the instructor to decide what to do with the information.
5. Helpful feedback focuses on observed behaviors that a person can do something about rather than on the person.
6. Helpful feedback is checked for consistency. In situations where more than one person is observing a class, feedback should be checked with other observers to determine the extent of agreement about a particular experience or observation.

See the accompanying table for examples of feedback that is helpful and not so helpful.

Sample Feedback for a Class Observation

<u>Not so helpful feedback</u>	<u>More Helpful feedback</u>
You really didn't create much enthusiasm.	It appeared to me that the students' energy levels began to sag when you were talking about ____.
Your presentation of ____ was very clear.	I understood ____ best when you presented the example about ____.
Your voice is too soft.	I found it very hard to hear your comments from where I was sitting.
That long quote from Nietzsche was pointless.	I noticed that many of the students appeared to stop listening when you read that long quote from Nietzsche.
You have a dominating personality.	I felt intimidated when you spoke so forcefully about states' rights
Your comments on students' anxiety about doing science [discussing racial issues] were good.	I sensed the students' relief when you acknowledged their anxiety about doing science [discussing racial issues].
Your board work was great.	The diagram of ____ that you drew on the board helped me understand the concept.
The way you use the blackboard could be improved.	I found it very hard to read the comments on ____ that you wrote on the board. <i>or</i> It was hard for me to distinguish the major points in the diagram of ____ that you drew.
The comment you made to Mark didn't help his learning.	I noticed that Mark stopped raising his hand and participating in discussions after you responded to his question about ____.
Your comment to Lisa was on target.	Lisa appeared to be affirmed by the way you repeated and elaborated on what she said. I noticed that she talked again in class.