

## The classroom observation process

### STEP 1: The pre-observation briefing

This is a fundamental and often overlooked part of the process; the assumption seems to be that the review will simply know what s/he will be focusing on during the classes. A better choice is to meet beforehand so that the reviewer and the reviewee can identify the goals for the observation and the specific aspects of classroom practice that the latter would like evaluated.

For example, if faculty members want to collect information to support promotion and tenure cases, then it is less likely that identify voice projection would be identified as a key area of concern. They will be more likely to ask for a general overview of their teaching, which could include everything from the use of educational technology in the course, to teaching methods used, to assignments, and grading feedback. By contrast, if you have heard a murmur from the students that they are unhappy with a particular aspect of your pedagogy, you could invite a colleague to assess *just that aspect*. Remember that this is *your* evaluation, and so you can decide what you want the focus to be.

During this briefing, the reviewer needs to stress that the classroom observation is not a punitive process. Rather, it is a developmental process in which the reviewer's role is entirely one of constructive observation, followed up by feedback, designed to support the reviewee.

### Suggestions for the briefing:

Try to keep this briefing informal – opening one's classroom up to the scrutiny of colleagues can be rather nerve-racking! Discussion in this initial meeting could include the following:

- The *specific* aspects of teaching on which the reviewee would like feedback (such as presentation skills, discipline content, use of educational technology, student engagement techniques, the use of course materials such as the textbook to advance learning, and so on)
- The reasons for identifying these specific areas (Student comments on the SQOC? Feedback from TAs? The instructor's awareness that something could be improved?)
- The outcomes that the reviewee wishes the students to achieve
- The course materials (course outlines, handouts, reading lists and so on) that have been designed to support these outcomes. At this point, the reviewee should be ready to provide these materials for the observer since one cannot isolate the *content* of the course from the *tools* and *instruments* used to teach it.
- The role of the students during the class session. This may seem self-evident, since the students are in class for the express purpose of learning, but it has layers of complexity. For instance, some faculty members - through explicit discussion with their classes at the early stage of the course - prefer not to have the flow of the lecture interrupted by questions from the students. Rather, they

fashion an agreement that all questions will be held over until the last few minutes of the class. Other faculty members, by contrast, welcome student questions at any point during the lecture or expect that students are active participants in discussion throughout the class session. The reviewee needs to make his/her style regarding interactions with students clear so that there are no misunderstandings or misdirected criticisms at the reporting stage.

- The time frame of the review – since one cannot get a full impression of the reviewee’s teaching from a single lecture, it is important to negotiate the number of class or laboratory sessions that the reviewer will attend. There is no right or wrong time frame, and the reviewee should be mindful of the reviewer’s own workload. However, in order to get a broad overview of the reviewee’s teaching, it is a good idea to observe at least four class periods in order to get a solid sense of the teaching. Reviewers, resist pleas from colleagues for a single class visit—this will *not* give you the opportunity to form a broad picture of the pedagogy being used, or whether it is effective or not!
- If you are the observer, it is a good idea to write up your notes from this briefing soon while the discussion is still fresh in your mind. This is important for both the review itself as well as for your final report that will include information about this initial meeting.

## **STEP 2: Classroom observation, suggestions for the observer**

It is usually a good idea to seat yourself at the back of the class so that you have a wide view of the entire room, the students in it, and the screen or blackboard at the front of the room. Also, the students may find the presence of a new face more distracting if you were to sit in the middle of the room. Essentially, you need to be as invisible as possible, so that the students are not overly aware of your presence, and the faculty member does not feel self-conscious.

Then, during the course of the class, make notes of your observations based on what was discussed at your pre-review briefing. If, for instance, the reviewee simply wants a general evaluation of their teaching for developmental purposes, then you may want to divide your notes up into two columns as follows:

- ***What the lecturer did well***, with observations maybe like the following:

*Greeted students*

*Stated lecture objectives at beginning of class on PowerPoint presentation – “What I want us to do in this lecture ...”; very well laid out. Students copied for later reference (good for exam prep & getting the big picture)*

*Referred students to alternate sources of information, but not all students wrote this down. Wonder why not?*

*Attempts at interaction -- e.g., “Why do you think this happened?” “How could we go about calculating this?” Perked students up, important for an afternoon lecture*

*Excellent classroom management--when students in the back held private conversations, she stopped, firmly but politely insisted that they "contain themselves until the break" and then moved on; rest of class seemed pleased*

*Good use of examples – e.g., The 'x' and 'y's of each equation get characters - 'x' becomes 'people standing at the bus stop' and 'y' becomes buses headed for a certain destination; students can identify; scribbled down*

*Paused every so often and checked in: "Is everyone with me? Any questions before I move on?" – very approachable; when students asked questions, repeated for whole class; asked for class input to answer the question; then, using class feedback, answered question using visual aids. Students attentive; some had follow-up questions.*

Good eye contact; very inclusive; allowed the instructor to gauge students' levels of concentration and learning

Excellent use of educational technology – slides were clear, big enough font to see at back of class; use of diagrams and graphs to illustrate theories (saw students nodding their understanding; some using colored pens to copy diagrams/graphs, although they had copies of the notes)

Good integration of info from course textbook and lectures – kept referring back to textbook and prior lectures

Consolidation of knowledge for students and demonstrated importance of text as a supporting resource

- ***What areas could be done differently***, with observations perhaps like these:

Softly spoken, at times, it was hard to hear what was being said. Lapel mike needed; students at back definitely couldn't hear (wonder why they didn't say anything?)

Instructor mostly read the PowerPoint slides; missed opportunities for explanations

Often quickly answered own questions when no immediate student responses were offered; did not probe or offer sufficient encouragement for answers; students seemed to know this and take advantage.

Kept moving backwards and forwards through slides, hard to follow a train of thought

Did not sum up lecture at the end by going back to initial lecture objectives and therefore there was a lack of consolidation

Turned back on class to read PowerPoint slide from the screen and did so often

Too much detail in places; students seemed to be very busy just trying to keep up with note-taking, didn't seem to be tuning in to the explanations offered by the instructor

### **STEP 3: The post-review de-briefing**

Like the pre-review briefing, the post-review de-briefing is a fundamental part of the classroom observation process. It should take place within a few days of the class observation (so that the information is still fresh in mind).

Often this de-briefing takes place in the office of either party, but this is not written in stone. Often, a neutral space like the coffee shop or a bench on the quad is more comfortable.

#### **Suggestion for reviewers:**

Try and make the de-briefing as much like a conversation as possible; the reviewee should have the opportunity to reflect on his/her teaching during the evaluation period, and the reviewer should provide constructive feedback. The language of these interactions is always supportive and encouraging, even when some of the observations were negative – the idea is to build faculty up, not tear them down.

This is also an opportunity for the reviewee to dispute any observation (or an inference) made by the reviewer in his/her draft report. Ultimately, if the two are unable to reach agreement about either the content or an inference of an observation, it may be appropriate to exclude it from the final report, or include it with the caveat that the reviewer and reviewee had disagreed about its interpretation.

### **STEP 4: The final report: a template (see example below)**

The final report (written by the reviewer) should aim at pulling together:

- An overview of what was discussed in the pre-review briefing;
- Observations from the lecture (specifically around the particulars identified by the reviewee in the pre-review briefing, although other, more generalized observations may also be included);
- Reviewer suggestions about how the reviewee might develop his/her teaching (these suggestions may include specific pedagogic methodologies, strategies for overcoming technical problems, ideas about how the students' course material may be better put together or integrated into lectures, and so on);
- A conclusion that summarizes what has been covered in the report and which makes recommendations for the future teaching of the faculty member reviewed.

#### **Suggestion for the reviewer:**

Your report should not exceed 4-5 typed pages. If it is any longer than this, you will lose the interest of its intended audience.

#### **Review checklist**

Once you have completed this process, it is quite useful to compare what you have done against the following checklist.

Ask yourself: "Have I ..."

- Explained to the reviewee what the PURPOSE of the classroom observation is?
- Explained to the reviewee HOW classroom observation works?
- Done a PRE-REVIEW BRIEFING?
- During this briefing, examined and discussed the TEACHING MATERIALS used by the reviewee?
- During this briefing, examined and discussed the METHODS OF ASSESSMENT used by the reviewee?
- In conjunction with the reviewee, identified what area/s of teaching the classroom observation will focus on?
- Sat in on at least one week's worth (preferably more) of lectures/tutorials given by the reviewee?
- Watched the STUDENTS' responses to the faculty member during this time?
- Written up a draft report based on notes taken during the lecture?
- Discussed this draft report with the reviewee in the POST-REVIEW DEBRIEFING?
- Allowed the reviewee time to reflect on their performance during this debriefing?
- Included information that emerged during this debriefing in the final copy of the classroom observation report?
- Sent a hardcopy of the report to the relevant Dean or Head of School for inclusion in the reviewee's academic file?
- Kept a hardcopy of the final report for your own records?

### **Navigation guidelines for Deans/Heads of School/Department ~ What to look for in a classroom observation report**

Not everyone is familiar with the classroom observation as a form of instructor evaluation. Below are some guiding questions to support your navigation through the classroom observation report.

1. Did the reviewer and reviewee identify specific areas for the focus of the classroom observation?
2. Based on the answer to 1, was the choice of reviewer appropriate? For instance, if your instructor was experiencing specific discipline/content problems was a subject specialist asked to undertake the review?
3. Were the specific areas chosen by the instructor important for effective teaching?
4. How many lectures/tutorials did the reviewer observe for this review? (If only one, the findings of the report may be flawed since the reviewee may be on their 'best behavior' for this period.)
5. What did the reviewer think the instructor had done well? What evidence was provided to support this?
6. Which areas did the reviewer think that the instructor needed to improve on? What was the basis for these observations?
7. Did the reviewer make any constructive suggestions for improvement?
8. Does the report indicate whether the instructor being reviewed has reflected on their strengths and weaknesses and would like to make an effort to improve?

Asking these questions should help the Dean or Head of School to interpret the report.

**An example of a fairly typical Peer Evaluation Report (this is an amalgamation of some of the reports that I have written, with names changed to protect the participants)**

**Peer evaluation of Dr Mabel Cunningham**

**School:** Faculty of Arts, Science and Engineering

**Class:** Statistics for Engineers

**Lectures attended:**

Monday 15 August 2010, 10.15 – 12.00;

Tuesday 16 August 2010, 8.00 -8.45;

Monday 22 August 2010, 10.15 – 12.00;

Tuesday 23 August 2010, 8.00 – 8.45

Friday 26 August 2010 13.15 – 14.15 (additional lecture)

**Introduction**

Dr Cunningham approached me in early August 2010 to undertake a peer evaluation of her Statistics for Engineers class, which has a relatively large enrolment of approximately 285 students. She wanted to understand why students did not seem to be paying attention in class, particularly since the subject that she taught was fundamental to their degree. She assured me that she always put a great deal of effort into lecture preparation, and was therefore dismayed that the students were not more engaged. She was also concerned that, because the curriculum was so big, she might be rushing through it and in the process 'losing' the students.

The aim of this (and indeed, every) peer evaluation is to encourage lecturer development. It is *not* an exercise for monitoring or regulating staff performance. For this reason, I discussed both the current areas of Dr Cunningham's teaching strength, as well as areas that may need attention. I have also made some recommendations at the end of the report that she may choose to ignore if she feels uncomfortable with them.

**Areas of strength**

There were a number of these, which I have listed and discussed below. I would like to examine each one individually as a means of encouraging Dr Cunningham to continue with them in her future teaching.

**a. Punctuality**

This is often a taken-for-granted aspect of a lecturer's classroom practice – being in class on time (or early) so that the class can begin timeously. This is especially important when there is an immense amount content that needs to be taught. Dr Cunningham made a point of being early for her classes so that she could set up the

data projector and write up on the board anything that she would be using during the lecture. The purpose of this is clearly to save time. In addition, the students seem to know that she will be early for class, and one or two individuals used the opportunity to ask her questions before the class began. This served the purpose of clearing up any confusion that they might have been experiencing, sooner rather than later.

#### **b. Greeting and body language**

Both sets of lectures that I observed began with Dr Cunningham greeting the class. Similar to the previous point, the simple courtesy of saying 'Good morning' or 'Good afternoon' is taken for granted in the greater scheme of the practice of good lecturing. However, it serves a psychological purpose: to acknowledge the presence of the students. In my experience, when such a greeting is absent, students become disinterested in the subject (they feel that they are simply 'objects' at which information is being thrust) or they become actively disruptive (talking, making a noise, playing games on their cell phones).

Dr Cunningham's body language is also very encouraging. She makes good use of eye contact with the whole class, not just certain sections of it. In addition, she makes excellent use of hand gestures to distinguish between different ideas, to emphasize the importance of certain facts, and so on. Although she does turn her back on the class from time to time (when writing on the board), the majority of the lecture is spent facing the students. The effect of these different facets of her body language is a profoundly positive one – they signal that she is actively engaged with the class. In other words, she is not simply handing the students information and facts about the course content (a very mechanistic, robotic way of approaching teaching) but rather is trying to 'pull the students in' to the lecture, to get them interested (and dare I say, excited?) and to encourage them to actively participate with her in the process of learning.

#### **c. Voice projection**

Linked with the previous point is the issue of voice projection. Both of the lecture theatres in which Dr Cunningham teaches are huge (I understand that they each hold approximately 300 students), which means that the onus is on her to ensure that the students at the back of the class are able to hear as well as those seated right in front of her (without deafening the latter). I am very impressed that she does this with ease. I made a point of sitting at the back of the room in both classes, and I was able to clearly hear everything that she said during the lectures.

#### **d. Links with the previous lecture**

One of the biggest issues facing any teacher or lecturer of any course at any time, is this: how does one create a sense of content continuity between lectures so that students do not think that each one is a discrete, separate unit, removed from both those that preceded it and those that follow it? Dr Cunningham seems to manage the transition between the lectures very well – she began each lecture with a brief summary/reminder of what had been covered in the previous lecture, and how it was going to be used in the current lecture. By doing this, she was explicitly creating links between them so that the students could see the applicability of previous work to the current lecture. What was also impressive about this is the seeming ease with which she managed the task – it wasn't artificial or forced, but rather was comfortably presented as a fundamental part of the days' lessons.

#### **e. Signposting**

In educational discourse, the term 'signpost' is used to denote a word or phrase that directs students' awareness and understanding in certain ways. For instance, when a lecturer uses the signpost "In other words", s/he is indicating that a previous point is being repeated; implicitly, students understand that if the lecturer is repeating the point, then it must be important. Dr Cunningham made excellent use of this tool; some examples are listed below.

- "Remember I said to you..."
- "I used examples last week of ..."
- "Please note here that I say 'proceeds' not 'profit' because ..."
- "Please note..."
- "Please be careful with this one because..."
- "Here again, you need to look at the notes..."
- "Please don't ever look at..."

All of these phrases alerted the students to particularly important points that they needed to both be aware of and understand. Each time she made use of such a signpost, I observed the majority of the students writing down what she had said – which strongly endorses their value to students.

#### **f. Use of multimedia**

Different students respond differently to different audio-visual stimuli during lectures: some prefer the use of the overhead projector, some are more partial to the blackboard as a visual aid, while still others prefer the color and stimulation that comes with the use of PowerPoint. Clearly, it would be a clumsy exercise to use *all* of these forms of media in every lecture. However, it is neither cumbersome nor impossible to use any two of these successfully, which is what Dr Cunningham does. She moves regularly and easily between the blackboard and the laptop, using each to illustrate the relevant equations that she is describing at the time. There are a number of advantages to this use of multimedia during a lecture: firstly, it 'hooks' the students whose media preference is PowerPoint and blackboard – usually a majority of the class. Used properly (as Dr Cunningham does), they become the tools by which learning is facilitated.

Secondly, the movement between the board and the projector screen creates a vibrant energy and a point of focus for the students to concentrate on as they listen to the lecture. Lecturers who stand in one place throughout the lecture often fail to stimulate their students' interest, while lecturers who move around tend to hold their students' attention better for this very reason. The energy also suggests that the lecturer is passionate about the subject and is enthusiastic about the teaching. It captivates the students, and holds their attention for the duration of the lecture. While this energy is not something quantifiable, it is nonetheless a powerful force in Dr Cunningham's lecture theatre.

#### **Areas for improvement**

##### **a. Pace of lecture**

In our pre-review briefing, Dr Cunningham identified the fast rate at which she speaks as an area of her teaching that she would like to improve. During the lectures that I attended, I noticed that she did speak rather quickly. Although the students seemed able to take notes, I do not think that they were internalizing the content of



these notes – they were too busy trying to write. So the question is: what mechanisms can be used in order to slow down the speaking pace?

The first, and most obvious (but by no means the easiest) way of working on this would be for Dr Cunningham to focus on each word as she says it, making sure that there is a 'space' between each. In other words, just as words in a written sentence have a physical gap between them, so the spoken word should have a gap, a nano-space between when the one ends and the next begins. Therefore, instead of having words running into one another, there is a definable space between them. The result would be a more measured pace of speaking.

A second, complementary, suggestion would be to repeat the important pieces of information, using the signpost "In other words...". What this does is to both flag this for the student as being important, and it repeats the information so that students who missed it the first time have a chance to write it down, and for the students who managed to get it down the first time, it is an opportunity to internalize it.

A third way of getting around this issue – especially when one is so engaged in the teaching that s/he is unaware of the pace at which s/he is speaking – is to negotiate some kind of signal with the class that would provide an alert. For instance, in discussion with students, the agreement may be that waving three fingers in the air is the signal that the students need to use in order to draw attention to the fast pace. Once the lecturer sees the signal, s/he is alerted to the fact that s/he is galloping through the material and can make the necessary adjustments.

#### **b. 'Checking in' with the students**

Throughout both sets of lectures, I was concerned about the lack of interaction between Dr Cunningham and the students in the class. There seemed to be a strong transmission mode of teaching, from Dr Cunningham to the students. What I could recommend to alter this seemingly one-sided relationship is for Dr Cunningham to keep 'checking in' with the students – that is, asking them "Are you with me? Did you get that?" "Do you understand what I have just said?" and so on. In other words, engaging with the students and encouraging them to engage back. I noticed in the lectures that there were a number of natural gaps where this could have been done with ease.

When I mentioned this to Dr Cunningham in our post-review de-briefing, she told me that she deliberately does *not* check in with the students because after a time, they tend to mock her use of "Are you with me?", which in turn is disruptive to the flow of the lecture. This makes sense at many levels. However, my gut instinct is to try and find a way of checking in that precludes the students from making a joke of it. For instance, make use of a variety of phrases during the lecture, such as "Are you with me?", "Do you get what I'm trying to say?", "Are there any questions so far?" and/or "Are you happy with that?". This will water down the students' opportunity to make a mockery of the exercise. It will also make the instructor seem more accessible should any questions arise.

### **Recommendations**

#### **a. Use of activities and active learning in class**

While I understand that there is a great deal of course content that needs to be covered in each lecture, I also believe that relying on the didactic method of teaching

('chalk and talk') may not be the most effective teaching mode to do this, especially in a class where the students need to be able to apply the principles and equations to real-life scenarios. Therefore, what I would encourage would be planning for one active learning exercise in every 45-minute period. This could take the form of any activity from a spot quiz to a 'think-pair-share' in which students are given a problem to solve individually, the solution to which they then share with a peer sitting next to them. The lecturer can then randomly call on students (in a non-threatening manner, obviously) to share their answer with the group. This would allow the faculty member to both gauge the students' grasp of the material and to raise energy levels in the class (which tend to slump about 20 minutes into the lecture). The students would also be actively engaged in their own learning.

**b. Use of more examples related directly to Engineering**

While Dr Cunningham did make use of examples throughout the lecture, most came out of the (British) textbook. Thus, students were not able to identify with them as much as if the examples had been more relevant to their context. If these are not readily available, Dr Cunningham may have to develop some of her own (and I recognize the labor-intensiveness of this process); however, if the students are able to connect the examples to the work that they will be doing, I suspect that they will pay more attention in class.

**Conclusion**

My overall impression of Dr Cunningham's teaching is a profoundly positive one. Her subject knowledge is impeccable, and she has excellent instincts when it comes to her teaching. With some minor adjustments, including the use of more activities and relevant examples, her teaching will continue improve.

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