



B i r m i n g h a m
College of Food · Tourism · Creative Studies

G u i d a n c e o n C l a s s r o o m O b s e r v a t i o n

I n t r o d u c t i o n

Classroom observation is an integral part of the College's quality assurance system. It is carried out by an appropriately qualified member of staff – in most cases the lecturer's Line Manager (if applicable) who is responsible for the lecturer's appraisal and training and development. In addition, copies of this observation report must be forwarded to the Personnel Unit for recording and validation.

This guidance is provided to supplement the prompts on desirable and undesirable features that appear on the Report Form. It should be read alongside the form. In addition, guidance is provided on grading both FE and HE sessions and on the recommended process and protocols of observation and linkage with appraisal where appropriate.

The front page acts as a focus for your thoughts before and at the start of the session. All the boxes need to be filled in.

Observer's Preparatory Notes

In this section you should enter any issues that have already been raised about this group, this unit or this lecturer.

You could also note down the student's mode of attendance, and any issues that you have picked up when you saw the Scheme Of Work or the Lesson Plan

Description Of Event: Topic, Teaching and Learning Styles

This prompt reminds you to consider if the teaching and learning offered is appropriate for this group of students at this stage in their programme.

Evidence Provided By The Register – Stage of the event within the Scheme of Work, Attendance Trends

This section prompts you to comment on the amount of learning that you have observed on the day: poor attendance may result in a lower grade since some aspect of the provision has failed to engage and sustain the interest of the students.

The next two pages have prompts to focus your mind on 12 aspects of teaching and learning. You should write an account of the session in the central boxes, following roughly the line of thought indicated by the prompts.

The prompts were written to reflect the indicators that have been issued by the funding bodies for their inspectors. This guidance gives more detailed versions of the prompts, taken from recent inspection documentation.

DESIRABLE FEATURES	UNDESIRABLE FEATURES
<p>1. Preparation Goals The aims and objectives of the learning opportunity are clearly expressed.</p> <p>Linkage to previous learning is established.</p> <p>Learners are confident in the value of the learning opportunity.</p>	<p>The aims are vague in conception or expression. The learning opportunity is not presented as part of a coherent sequence of learning.</p> <p>Learners lack confidence in the validity of the session's objectives.</p>
<p>2. Content Appropriate level and amount, accurate, relevant.</p> <p>The teacher displays in-depth knowledge and understanding of subject material.</p>	<p>The content is either too ambitious or too thin, or of doubtful relevance. The session displays lack of familiarity with the planned learning sequence. The level of information is inappropriate to this group.</p> <p>The teacher does not establish their own in-depth understanding of the topic.</p>
<p>3. Teaching and Learning Methods Varied exercises and activities appropriate to this group and structured to maximise learning opportunities.</p> <p>Well thought out session which takes into account the level, size and composition of the group</p> <p>A stimulating mix of learning activities that engaged all members of the group.</p>	<p>Limited activities failing to maintain the interest of the group.</p> <p>Manifestly inappropriate activities.</p> <p>Risks to the health or safety of the group result from mismanagement of the learning environment.</p>
<p>4. Management of The Learning Environment The environment is conducive to learning.</p> <p>Demonstration equipment is as realistic as possible and skills demonstrated reflect 'real life' practice.</p> <p>Control, student motivation and management is clearly maintained. Distractions and interruptions are minimised wherever possible.</p>	<p>The environment inhibited participation and learning.</p> <p>Poor management and control compromised learning.</p> <p>Disruptions and distractions resulted in a loss of concentration or confidence for the learners.</p>

<p>5. Personal Teaching Qualities Enthusiastic, confident, 'warm'. Creative.</p> <p>Demonstration of skills and methods are an accurate reflection of real practice.</p>	<p>De-motivated. Hesitant. Aloof/distant. Rigid. Confrontational. Demonstration of skills and methods does not reach current best workplace practice.</p>
<p>6. Delivery and Presentation The style, level and pace of communication is appropriate to the learners' abilities. Voice – clear, audible, interesting. Aids – very well produced and used.</p>	<p>Of poor clarity. Inaudible. Uninteresting. Did not help learning or exposition.</p>
<p>7. Relationships with Students Good rapport and friendly relations promoting learning. Learners are actively listened to and are encouraged to present their own personal wishes and views and ask questions at their own pace.</p> <p>Learners feel comfortable to ask questions and express their own views</p>	<p>Poor rapport, apparently unaware of students needs. Personal barriers discourage learning.</p> <p>The manner of interaction demonstrates assumptions about the learners' level of achievement.</p>
<p>8. Interaction All students' actively involved and contributing to learning experience. Group management achieves effective learning.</p> <p>Constraints on communication with learners are identified and minimised.</p>	<p>Limited to stereotyped interactions, students not involved in learning.</p> <p>Group dynamics inhibit learning. Barriers to access to learning opportunities are not identified or challenged.</p>
<p>9. Effectiveness of Tactics and Strategies Explanations clearly understood. Questioning clear and logical. Student contributions used well.</p> <p>Learning is checked regularly and instruction modified as appropriate.</p> <p>Timely feedback on performance is given to learners in a positive and encouraging manner.</p>	<p>Inappropriate strategies used.</p> <p>Lack of harmony or consistency in tactics used.</p> <p>Failure to facilitate appropriate student activity.</p> <p>Little or no check that learning is taking place.</p> <p>Little or no feedback is given</p>

<p>10. Sensitivity to Individuals Able to adapt approach to suit the evolving situation and student needs.</p> <p>Guidance encourages self-development and promotes equal opportunities.</p> <p>Progress of group members is monitored sensitively.</p>	<p>A rigid, ritualised approach maintained. Individuals' differing learning needs are ignored.</p> <p>Equality of opportunity is not promoted.</p>
<p>11. Logic of Approach Orderly progress. Well organised. Group dynamics are managed effectively</p>	<p>Progress haphazard.</p> <p>Disorganised.</p> <p>Group activities fail to involve all learners.</p>
<p>12. Check on Learning Check regularly by appropriate methods that learning is taking place. Learning is taking place.</p>	<p>No checking that learning is taking place.</p> <p>No learning is taking place.</p>

The General Comments and Grade Box can be used to enter an overall summary of the session such as would appear in an Internal Audit Report.

The Grading conforms to the Quality Assessment Criteria used by OFSTED/ALI for further education inspection and the QAA for higher education inspection (the new round of HE inspection).

FE Grade Descriptors

- Grade 1 - 'Excellent' teaching
- Grade 2 - 'Very Good' teaching
- Grade 3 - 'Good' teaching
- Grade 4 - 'Satisfactory' teaching
- Grade 5 - 'Unsatisfactory' teaching
- Grade 6 - 'Poor' teaching
- Grade 7 - 'Very Poor' teaching

Judging the quality of teaching in lessons based on the OFSTED/ALI framework

The following characteristics illustrate where to pitch judgements about how well students are taught in lessons.

Very good or excellent

The teaching of skills and subject matter is knowledgeable, stimulating and exciting; it uses imaginative resources and makes intellectual and creative demands on students to take their learning further. Challenging questions are used to consolidate, extend and verify what students know and understand. The methods chosen are well geared to the particular focus and demands of the lesson and make the most productive use of the time available. Relationships in the teaching situation provide a confident and positive atmosphere in which achievement flourishes. Students are keen to learn, rise to challenges in creative ways and think further. They work well for extended periods of time and as a result gains in knowledge and understanding are very high.

Satisfactory or better

The teaching of basic skills and subject content is clear and accurate, using explanation and demonstration and involving all students. The organisation of the teaching session allows most students to keep up with the work and to complete tasks in the time available. Teachers check students' understanding and ensure they remain on task. The relationship between the students and teacher is such that students can get on with their work and know how well they have done. Most students show sound application to their work.

However teaching **cannot be satisfactory** if any one of the following is present:

- teachers' knowledge of subjects is not good enough to promote demanding work;
- basic skills are not taught effectively;
- a significant minority of students are not engaged in the lesson;
- lessons are poorly planned and organised and time is wasted;
- there are weaknesses in controlling the teaching group;
- students do not know what they are doing;
- students are not making progress.”

Judging the quality of HE Teaching: From QAA Handbook for Academic Review

“Reporting on the quality of learning opportunities will place each of the three aspects of provision into one of three categories, **'failing'**, **'approved'** or **'commendable'**, and will be made on the following basis:

- provision makes a less than adequate contribution to the achievement of the intended outcomes. Significant improvement is required urgently if the provision is to become at least adequate. In the summary report, this judgement will be referred to as **'failing'**;
- provision enables the intended outcomes to be achieved, but improvement is needed to overcome weaknesses. In the summary report, this judgement will be referred to as **'approved'**. The summary will normally include a statement containing the phrase 'approved, but...', which will set out the areas where improvement is needed;
- provision contributes substantially to the achievement of the intended outcomes, with most elements demonstrating good practice. In the summary report, this judgement will be referred to as **'commendable'**.

Within the **'commendable'** category, reviewers will identify any specific features of the aspect of provision that are exemplary. To be deemed **'exemplary'**, a feature must:

- represent sector-leading best practice; and
- be worthy of dissemination to, and emulation by, other providers of comparable programmes; and
- make a significant contribution to the success of the provision being assessed. Incidental or marginal features do not qualify for designation.

The characteristics of exemplary features will, by their nature, vary between institutions and programmes. The criteria listed above will ensure that features identified as 'exemplary' will be broadly comparable in weight and significance.”

The Purposes of Lesson Observation

Lesson Observation is now an integral part of College life and is used for a number of purposes.

- *Appraisal* - as a means of providing a basis for discussion for the appraisal process, which focuses on role related skills and contains an element of performance review. This enables good practice to be recognised and acknowledged and specific skill related training and development to be mutually identified.
- *College self-assessment* - this is key component of college quality systems. To support claims of teaching and learning excellence within self-assessment, quality systems must include a strong emphasis on classroom observation and evidence must be collated and referenced to provide objective evidence through grading profiles. It must be stressed that the

confidentiality and anonymity of the observation process is maintained. Individuals cannot be identified with a particular grade.

- *Peer support and development* - the process and practice of observation and associated training encourages the exchange and sharing of good practice. Debate and professional dialogue focussing on classroom strategies and experience is an important part of mutual support and practitioner skill development.
- *Probationary and trainee staff coaching* - as means of supporting, coaching and assessing the ability and skill development of new staff and staff working towards teaching qualifications.

The Observation and Feedback Process

The observation and feedback process may be divided into four parts:

- Pre-observation arrangements
- Observing the lesson
- Giving Feedback
- Follow-up arrangements

Pre-observation arrangements

The observation is likely to be most effective where both the teacher and the observer are clear about the objectives and understand the ways in which they can contribute to making the experience constructive. One of the ways this can be achieved is by having a short meeting before the observation takes place. The advantages of such a meeting are that it can:

- Provide the teacher with an opportunity to set the lesson in context, explain the aims of the lesson and give an outline of how the observation may be organised.
- Enable the observer to request any additional information they would like to be made available during the observation, such as a scheme of work, lesson plan, copies of handouts etc.
- Enables the observer to check that the teacher is familiar with the criteria and protocols of lesson observation and to identify points during the lesson where it may be possible to talk informally with students or to look at their work.
- Allows the observer and teacher to arrange a mutually convenient time and place for the feedback.

Observing the lesson

Teaching and learning, whether in further or higher education involves a wide range of activities, For example, whole class teaching, group work, tutorials, formal lectures, practical work etc. In all teaching situations, the role of the observer is to:

- Focus on the effectiveness of the learning taking place.
- Evaluate how well the teaching promotes learning for all students in the group.

In order to assess the effectiveness of students' learning and to place it in the context of what has gone before and what is to come, the observer needs to:

- Sit or stand somewhere that provides a good view of the activities of the teacher and the students. This should be as unobtrusive as possible.
- Seek opportunities to talk to a sample of students about their current (and past) work and to look at their files (where appropriate). This could be done either during or after the observation. However, it is important that this has been agreed with the teacher in advance and care is taken not to disrupt the progress of the lesson.
- Look at the attendance records to gain an overview of attendance and retention patterns.

The choice of teaching method and style should be dependant on the purpose of the lesson and the nature of the task. Be careful not to assume that a variety of activity in itself means that effective learning is taking place or that some styles of teaching are more desirable than others.

Duration of observation

When deciding how long to stay in the lesson the following factors should be born in mind:

- There are considerable advantages in observing the whole session. Judgements can be made with greater confidence and challenges to summary statements or grading can be minimised
- The teacher will feel that the longer the observer spends in the lesson, the more soundly based their assessment will be.
- The nature of the activities taking place may also have a bearing on the length of the observation.
- Inspectors, particularly in FE inspections, are under great pressure to limit observation time (nominally around 40 minutes) due to the limited time available for the inspection process. As internal observers we are not as time constrained as inspectors and are using observation as a supportive development mechanism and not solely for performance assessment.
- However the practicalities of College duties and the length of some sessions will result in choices having to be made. It may be a good idea for the observer and the teacher to agree in the pre-observation meeting which part(s) of the lesson would be most useful to observe. A common choice is to observe the beginning and end of a long session. This enables the

introduction to be observed, the attendance monitoring, the résumé of previous work, the stating of session objectives within the context of a continuous learning and so on. Observing the end, enables the summary to be assessed, the determination of the level of learning achieved, the achievement of session objectives and the possible questioning of students. It may also be that the observer has agreed to provide feedback to the teacher at the end of the session. Issues may be clarified at this stage; for example, questions the observer may have with regard to the middle part of the lesson etc. The key factor in deciding observation duration is that the observer must feel confident that they have been able to make a sound and objective assessment of the learning that has taken place and how the teaching has contributed to this.

Observation protocol

For observers to concentrate fully on making an objective assessment of the session, it is important that they do not take part in the delivery of the lesson or join in any practical activity as a participant. The observer should not interrupt a teaching session, even if the teacher has made a mistake. The only exception is where the safety of students or the teacher is being put at risk.

Note taking during the observation

Notes should be taken during the observation rather than relying on memory after the session. The standard observation form has a set of clear criteria against which the progress of the session may be assessed. Some aspects of the lesson may not be clear to the observer immediately and notes should be made of issues to clarify with the teacher after the lesson or at the start of the feedback session. Some observers find the writing of a continuous 'commentary' on the lesson a useful basis for completing the form, and feedback.

Considerations for Grading

Aspects of the session in objective summary form must be noted on the observation form. This will lead the observer through a common and comprehensive list of good teaching practice. Strengths and weaknesses will become apparent against each of the criteria and in the determination of a grade – on the appropriate scale, the 'weighting' of the relevant strengths and weaknesses and not just a 'numerical count' must be considered. One or two fundamental weaknesses will have a greater impact on the choice of grade than several minor weaknesses. Always consider the relative significance of the aspects you are recording.

The observer must be careful not to jump to conclusions about the grade too early in the lesson. In many cases observers will find that the evidence leaves them uncertain as to which of two possible grades might be appropriate. It is the evidence about students' learning and the appropriateness of that learning (and associated aims and objectives of the lesson) that must be decisive. It may be that a final grade cannot be determined until key issues are clarified by the teacher after the lesson or at the start of the feedback session. Always be sure – that your notes and hence your feedback comments, accurately reflect your chosen grade and hence justify it. Copies of the form are given to the observed teacher.

The Feedback Session

Feedback following a lesson observation should enable teachers to build on what they are doing well and feel confident about introducing change where necessary. Giving feedback in a fair, constructive and supportive way is a highly skilled and complex activity, which will be honed with time and experience. Whether the feedback is on a lesson with many strengths or a lesson with serious weaknesses, there are considerable advantages in adopting a standard framework for feedback delivery. Always remember the purpose of observation – the acknowledgement and sharing of good practice, the identification of development needs through the link with appraisal, as well as performance assessment/recording.

Planning the Feedback

Feedback should be given as soon as possible after the observation and preferably on the same day. It should always be out of the hearing of others and where distractions and interruptions can be minimised. The observer needs time to reflect on the lesson and to identify the key messages from the notes. The teacher also benefits from a little time to collect their thoughts on the lesson. The feedback should not be overlong and should concentrate on the key messages. It is important to allow time for the teacher to comment on the assessment and seek clarification if they wish. Remember, observation feedback is a precursor to the teacher's appraisal meeting and separate to it i.e. keep observation feedback focused on observed teaching and learning and do not be drawn into issues which are better discussed in the appraisal meeting

Delivering the Feedback

To ensure consistency, fairness and to minimise the possibility of disagreement, it is suggested the following standard format is used when feeding back observation outcomes to teachers:

- STEP 1 **Give thanks**
(for being allowed to “invade” the teacher’s space)

- STEP 2 **Explain the feedback process and achieve agreement on it**
(be clear on whether any element or sequencing is negotiable – or not!)

- STEP 3 **Encourage self-assessment** (how would you summarise it?)
(encourage reflection on strengths and weaknesses the teacher perceives, or at least get them to comment on what things went well ... or not so well, or what they would do differently with hindsight? Why not try and tease out a self-assessed grade?)

- STEP 4 **Give the Grade**
(ensuring that the descriptors – linked to the inspection framework for the chosen grade are given)
- STEP 5 **Run through the strengths UNINTERRUPTED**
- STEP 6 **Run through the weaknesses UNINTERRUPTED**
(keep them separate and don't 'dance' between the two)
- STEP 7 **Invite questions/comments and refer to observation evidence when challenged (be objective)**
- STEP 8 **Seek agreement on the grade**
(or at least agree which areas you disagree on, and agreement on the basis of your list of strengths and weaknesses)
- STEP 9 **Agree a further meeting (where appropriate)**
(this may be the appraisal or pre-appraisal meeting for example)
- STEP 10 **Thank again and close the meeting**
(Remember to copy the observation form – copies to the observer, the teacher and to the Personnel Unit)

At the beginning it is helpful to clarify the structure and purpose of the feedback session and, where necessary, clarify any issues outstanding from the observed lesson. It is important the teacher knows that the feedback framework gives them an opportunity to comment and there are steps where the observer will not accept any interruptions. Make it clear when moving from step to step, particularly when the feedback is beginning.

At all times, be positive, be objective, refer to the written evidence on the observation form and frame your language in terms of the relevant inspection criteria for teaching and learning.

The most effective feedback is where the observer:

- Ensures that the feedback clearly conveys the key assessments being given
- Focuses on the key issues and avoids feeding back every detail observed
- Makes use of questions and prompts to encourage reflection, discussion and analysis
- Enables the teacher to feel that the experience has contributed to their professional development.

Less effective feedback is where the observer:

- Doesn't give the teacher their full attention
- Is apologetic about the assessment or over prescriptive in their suggestions
- Bases the assessment on personal views rather than the objective criteria
- Avoids giving difficult messages

A challenge for observers can be giving feedback to a teacher where the class has been particularly effective. Sometimes the observer feels they haven't got much to say in this situation. How can you ensure that the feedback to the teacher encourages them to build on their skills?

Some suggestions for giving feedback on an excellent teaching session:

- Go through the key strengths and illustrate how effective learning took place (not all teachers are aware of how their strengths impact on learning)
- If the lesson was really excellent then say so – don't be afraid to give praise
- Don't try to find weaknesses for weaknesses sake – there may be none of any significance
- Discuss ways in which the good practice you have observed might be built on and disseminated more widely

Giving difficult messages

It can be tempting to refrain from giving difficult messages in order to avoid possible confrontation and the risk of upsetting the teacher. Some observers will take a circuitous route to the issues rather than stating them clearly; others will simply ignore them in the hope they will go away. Both these approaches imply that the issues are not really important.

There are particular challenges for an observer who sees a class where limited learning has taken place. The feedback becomes especially difficult when it becomes clear that the teacher does not recognise this fact or disagrees with the assessment.

Some guidelines for giving difficult messages include:

- Concentrate on students' learning and what did or did not contribute to this
- Be succinct and direct, avoiding ambiguities
- Illustrate the points being made with objective examples for the observed lesson (and recorded on the observation form)
- Own the message. Do not become apologetic or defensive

- Allow the teacher time to respond and to give their assessment
- Listen carefully and acknowledge what the teacher has to say. However, don't be drawn into an argument – simply stay with the facts
- Reiterate the evidence in a quiet, assertive manner, if the teacher refutes the findings
- Try to work with the teacher to devise solutions. Pick on one or two key weaknesses and discuss practical ways in which these might be tackled. Seek to identify an agreed outcome for action.
- End on a positive note by reminding them of what worked well and what they could move forward on

Follow Up

The final stage of the observation and feedback process comes when the teacher and observer agree what action, if any, needs to be taken in the light of the strengths and weaknesses identified. This discussion, and the more considered evaluation of development need, may continue in the teacher's appraisal meeting (which logically should follow fairly soon) where relevant. For probationary staff, the Line Manager (observer) will identify with the teacher ongoing support and coaching in addition to any development requirements to ensure as far as possible a satisfactory outcome to the probationary period.

It is important that the observation feedback should end with agreement between both the observer and the teacher on the identified strengths and weaknesses of the session (not necessarily agreement with the grade). It is not desirable for this discussion to continue and to dominate any following appraisal meeting.

If the observer and the teacher are in agreement that the observation is invalid due to any unfair circumstance beyond the control of the teacher, another observation should be arranged as soon as possible.

If the teacher has valid objections to the process of the observation or conduct of the observer, they may raise these with the observer in the first instance and if a satisfactory resolution cannot be reached, then by direct appeal to the Deputy Principal stating full reasons why the observation and outcomes are unfair.

The following references were used in preparing these guidelines and the authors would like to acknowledge their valuable contribution. "Constructive Observation", Supporting Quality Improvement in Colleges by the External Quality Review Consortium of Colleges (Sandra Nicholls and the EQR Consortium 2000)

John Tidball of John Tidball Associates (quality in education consultancy)