

## Classroom Observations

Following the model below, a classroom observation\* may be split into six parts: establish purpose, select a reviewer, hold a pre-observation meeting, observe the class, hold a post-observation meeting, then reflect and develop an action plan. Each step is described in detail below.



ALT TEXT: A diagram showing six steps of an iterative cycle in the clockwise order: establish purpose and goals, select reviewer, hold pre-observation meeting, complete observation, hold pos-observation meeting, action plan and reflection.

### Establishing Purpose and Goals

Before you initiate the process for an observation, you should think about what you would like your reviewer to focus on during the observation. What are you hoping to get out of the observation? Is there an aspect of your teaching you'd like feedback on, such as a learning activity or use of an eLearning technology? Are you trying out something new? What are your goals for the students on the day you plan to have the reviewer visit? Lastly, though it may seem obvious, asking for a review means opening yourself up to critical feedback. Ask yourself if you are prepared to receive it—it may help, in this initial step, to brainstorm about possible weaknesses you have and then use those to aid in developing your goals for the observation.

Some purposes that you might have could include: an assessment of the general character of your interactions with students, pacing of lecture, slide presentation, engagement of students in activities, alignment of activities with lecture goals and content, the use of physical space or use of technology to create virtual spaces, usefulness of a particular innovation, etc.

You can find more prompts and things to consider in the [Guides, Rubrics & Templates](#) page.

## Selecting a Reviewer

In order to achieve an observation in which you can be reasonably sure that you will teach at your best that day, it is important to choose a reviewer whom you trust and feel comfortable with sharing your teaching. This may be someone whose practice aligns with your teaching philosophy or teaching goals and who does not hold a position of power over you, such as a department head or a formal member of a tenure review committee.

Having your observation goals in mind while choosing a reviewer may also help you get the most out of the review process. If you are experimenting with a new technique, perhaps there is someone in your department or faculty with experience in the same technique. Depending on your goals and the directions you'd like to take your teaching, it might be helpful to invite someone either familiar or unfamiliar with your discipline. Peer reviewers outside your discipline would, ideally, be informed of "signature pedagogies" to avoid unhelpful or irrelevant feedback (Hubball & Clarke, 2011); similarly, you might need to spend time explaining your teaching philosophy or beliefs about learning to someone from another discipline (Alabi & Weare, 2014). Reviewers outside your discipline, though, can bring a new lens to disciplinary pedagogical assumptions that may enable you to see gaps or challenges in your approach to student learning.

Lastly, it probably goes without saying that a reviewer who is organized, has experience and sufficient time to devote to the review, and can offer critical feedback gently and constructively, is an ideal choice.

## Pre-observation Meeting

When you meet with your reviewer, you will share your purposes and goals and establish a rapport. It is important that you trust your reviewer and that the reviewer is aware of your teaching philosophy and goals. It would be fruitful, too, to discuss with your reviewer how each of you perceive and understand your teaching contexts and the underlying assumptions about teaching that you, as individuals, have, that your department has, that your Faculty has, and so on. Further, it is important to establish ownership of the data collected from the reviewer—a stress-free observation within which the reviewee feels comfortable exploring their teaching means the reviewer's assessment will not travel to department heads, faculty chairs, or peers without the express permission of the reviewee. Having said that, formative peer reviews conducted over time can provide good evaluative evidence of an instructors engagement in the professional development of their teaching.

Additionally, you'll settle on the logistics and preparation of the observation/review. When and where will the review take place (see below for considerations for online course)? Are there course materials that the reviewer should read prior to the review, such as the syllabus or fundamental reading? How will you introduce the reviewer to the students, and if not, why not? Where should the reviewer sit in the classroom? This last is not so unimportant—the presence of the reviewer will change the classroom dynamic and how students engage with you and each other. You and your reviewer should discuss ways to either minimize the presence of the reviewer with respect to the goals for the observation. At the very least, the reviewer should be introduced so that students understand why they are present in the class. Students generally look favourably on an instructor's efforts to enhance their own teaching.

## **Observation**

And now for the main event! Reviewers should attend class prepared with the agreed-upon forms and to keep the reviewee's goals for the session in mind. If the reviewee has asked you to introduce yourself to the class, be prepared to do that as well; you may even wish to share the value of the process with the students to model the act of giving and receiving feedback. If the instructor has requested that the reviewer gather student feedback, perhaps through a focus-group type procedure or merely setting aside time to complete a survey online, come prepared to execute that step during the moment the reviewee has identified (the instructor should leave the classroom while student feedback is collected). When you arrive in the classroom check in with the instructor to touch base and to see if they would like to chat briefly after class has ended. If you have not decided on a time and place for the post-observation meeting, try to decide that now so that you know how long you have to collate and reflect on the feedback that you will be delivering.

## **Post-observation Meeting**

After the observation, you and the reviewer will meet again to discuss the observation in detail, share reflections, create a plan for providing written feedback, and ask questions. In this post-observation meeting, while discussing what the reviewer saw, focus on the original goals for the observation.

## **Reflection and Action**

After the post-observation meeting, you (and, optionally, your reviewer) will come up with an action plan to continue the work of assessing your teaching. Part of the plan may include plans to engage in an ongoing process of observation data collection and analysis, and self-reflection.

See [Guides, Rubrics & Templates](#) for additional resources for each of these phases.

## Considerations for Online Courses

Much of the approach, and many of the steps, outlined above remain in place for an observation of an online class. For asynchronous courses, the learning management system (this is Brightspace at Dalhousie) is the only space where student-instructor interactions occur and where the reviewer will focus their attention; with synchronous courses, it is the secondary, or parallel, space for interactions. For classroom observations specifically, you should determine, for the observer/reviewer, which parts of Brightspace (and over what time period) are equivalent to a “class”.

For a holistic review of teaching in which the reviewer assesses a bundle of teaching artifacts (syllabi, course content, assessments, rubrics/instructions, etc.), the peer reviewer should examine all parts of the Brightspace course to discern the whole picture of the learner experience, taking into special consideration [the ways online learning and teaching require different, or additional, approaches](#). While in-person teaching skills transfer to the online environment, in many ways you are a different instructor when you teach online as compared to teaching face-to-face—the online environment can augment, limit and distort elements of teaching such that you must adjust your own dials while, at the same time, your students have additional or different needs when learning online. A review of an online course, then, should have a slightly different critical framework.

### Asynchronous

There are two big challenges in observing an asynchronous class: the lack of a discrete time and place in which a lesson occurs, and that the online environment obscures typically observable teaching practices (eye contact, vocal expressiveness, etc.). Additionally, as anyone who has taught or taken an online course knows, everything takes longer, and this extends to a peer review as well—it is time consuming to read through dozens of discussion posts, for example. You and the reviewer should take time in the pre-observation meeting to discuss the scopes of the “classroom” observation in terms of which aspects of Brightspace constitute a “class”, which things can and should be observed online, and the limits of work for the reviewer.

Recognizing how online teaching requires emphasizing some teaching practices over others, a rubric assessing an asynchronous class might include categories such as social presence, quality and frequency of communications in addition to the more typical categories such as alignment between lesson objectives and activities, for example. Authors Vega Garcia, Stacey-Bates, Alger and Marupova (2017) astutely observe that, when evaluating teaching online, the distinction between course design, instructional delivery and online teaching practices must be made within evaluative rubrics to be able to see the quality of online teaching.

## Synchronous

Classroom observation of a synchronous course can be more straightforward. Many of the assessment categories for an in-person classroom observation can be brought to bear on a synchronous observation, with the addition of categories that assess instructional delivery, such as appropriate and skilled use of the video conferencing technology.

## Blended

The blended classroom integrates, to varying degrees, online and in-person approaches to course delivery. General approaches to observing online classrooms can carry over to the blended classroom, though there are pedagogical concerns unique to blended courses that you and the reviewer will want to account for in any forms or rubrics to guide the observation. These include: the level of correspondence and complementarity between the in-person and online elements; the choice of in-person versus digital mechanisms for learning activities and that these align with course learning outcomes; and the thoughtfully constructed balance between the two modalities resulting in appropriate work loads for both instructor and students.

Look for additional resources in the [Guides, Rubrics & Templates](#) page.

*\*The CLT is happy to provide **formative** feedback on course design or conduct a classroom observation; we do not, however, offer teaching reviews for purposes of official review, tenure and promotion, etc. Contact us at [clt@dal.ca](mailto:clt@dal.ca) to arrange a meeting.*

## References

Alabi, J., & Weare, J., William. (2014). Peer Review of Teaching: Best Practices for a Non-Programmatic Approach. *Communications in Information Literacy*, 8(2), 180–191.  
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Vega García, S. A., Stacy-Bates, K. K., Alger, J., & Marupova, R. (2017). Peer Evaluation of Teaching in an Online Information Literacy Course. *Portal (Baltimore, Md.)*, 17(3), 471–483.  
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