



Hostos

Community College

Office of Academic Affairs
Faculty Observation Handbook

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INTRODUCTION

Peer observation of teaching enables educators to:

- Connect with their colleagues in collaborative working relationships,
- Reflect and gain insight on their instructional skills, and
- Engage in public discourse about best teaching practices.

At Eugenio María de Hostos Community College (Hostos) faculty observation, sometimes referred to as “peer observation”, occurs as a formal exercise which is part of a larger evaluation system. The observation is part of the faculty contract negotiated by the Professional Staff Conference (PSC), the union that represents faculty at the City University of New York (CUNY). Faculty members with prior training and experience observe each other teach and discuss what happened during a single teaching encounter. Hostos faculty utilize a Faculty Observation form which guides the observation; however, there is always a discussion afterwards to share feedback and exchange ideas about educational strategies, learner engagement, group dynamics, and time management.

This handbook describes the steps a peer observer should follow, based on a review of the literature and best practices, to effectively observe a peer teach and to provide meaningful feedback. The goals of any peer observation of teaching experience are the exchange of instructional insights, discussion of pedagogical methods, and the development of collaborative teaching relationships.

BACKGROUND

The Peer Observation Improvement Network for Teaching (POINT) Committee was developed to support the peer observation process by providing support to the faculty who are conducting the observation. The intention was to make the process more meaningful by providing constructive feedback and collegial guidance to the faculty being observed.

In the 2015-2016 AY, the members of POINT did an extensive review of the literature and explored best practices regarding peer observations. This review was followed by a series of focus groups, in the 2016-2017 AY, with Hostos faculty and administrators to gain an understanding of the current practice of peer observation at Hostos. Utilizing all the data gathered, especially the feedback from faculty, POINT updated the current faculty observation form and presented it to faculty for review. POINT devoted the 2017-2018 AY exclusively to analyzing the suggestions and requests received from all stakeholders and, in the fall of 2018, presented the final Faculty Observation form to the Hostos Faculty Senate for approval. In November of 2018 the revised Faculty Observation was approved by the Hostos Faculty Senate and will be used to conduct peer observations beginning in the fall 2019 semester.

PSC CUNY CONTRACT

While each college in the CUNY system has different forms which may guide the observation process, all colleges follow the mandates listed in Article 18.2 of the PSC CUNY. Below are the directions from the PSC CUNY contract which can be found online at <https://www.psc-cuny.org/contract/article-18-professional-evaluation>.

1. At least once during each academic semester, non-tenured and non-certificated members of the teaching staff shall be observed for a full classroom period. One observation shall take place during any scheduled class during the first ten weeks of a semester. The employee shall be given no less than 24 hours of prior notice of observation.
2. Each department P & B committee shall designate a panel, the size to be specified by the chairperson, of department observers (which shall include members of the P & B committee). The department chairperson shall schedule the members of this panel to conduct observations as necessary. Each observer shall submit, through the department chairperson, a written observation report to the department P & B committee within one week of the observation. These observation reports shall be considered by the committee in its total evaluation of the employee.
3. The department chairperson shall schedule the post-observation conference for the employee within two weeks after receipt of the written observation report. The post-observation conference shall include the employee and the observer. Either a member of the P & B committee or a member of the department with the rank of tenured Associate Professor or tenured Professor may be assigned by the chairperson to attend the post-observation conference at the request of the employee or the observer.
4. Following the post-observation conference, the assigned P & B representative or the assigned senior faculty member shall prepare a record of the discussion in memorandum form for submission to the chairperson. If the post-observation conference includes only the observer and the employee, then the observer shall prepare the record of the discussion in memorandum form. The original conference memorandum shall be placed in the employee's personal file. The employee may have a copy of this document provided a signed receipt is tendered. The observation report shall be placed in the personal file.

STEP 1: NOTICE OF OBSERVATION

Prior to the observation, the faculty assigned to observe (the *observer*) and the faculty being observed (the *observee*) should decide on the exact date, time and place of the teaching session. This information must be noted by the observer on the Notice of Observation Form and given to the observee at least 24 hours prior to the observation.

The observer should clarify that a formative assessment of teaching, directed toward areas the faculty member identifies as important and in need of improvement, will be conducted. Observers should stress that the observation results and discussion will be confidential and provided only to the faculty member being observed. Any written notes or documentation will not be shared with supervisory staff unless the faculty member so chooses.

A date for a pre-observation conference should also be scheduled at this time.

STEP 2: PRE-OBSERVATION

INFORMATION/DISCUSSION - OPTIONAL

A brief discussion prior to the peer observation creates a collegial atmosphere that allows for the observation to be a professional development opportunity for both the observee and the observer. Furthermore, the information shared by the observee prior to the observation, including the goals and objectives for the teaching encounter, creates a context for the lesson. This context, in turn, permits the observer to better understand the observee's perspective and motives during the observed lesson, and provide more meaningful feedback in the observation report and during the post-observation conference.

This short pre-observation discussion should occur prior to the actual peer observation and can be accomplished with the use of the Pre-Observation Information form, virtually (e.g. email) or face-to-face. If the Pre-Observation Information form is used, it may be provided to the observee to complete along with the Notice of Observation form. If the Notice of Observation is accompanied by a virtual correspondence such as email, the observee may provide their responses via that exchange.

In whatever form the pre-observation discussion takes place, the observee should provide any information for the observer to consider while observing the lesson. Among the details the observee should include are the TOPIC and OBJECTIVE(S) of the lesson to be observed. Additional information may include, among other things:

- Continuation of an earlier class session or project discussion.
- The use of new technology.
- Attempting a new class activity or pedagogical technique, specific scenarios and skills with which the observee has had difficulties in the past, and/or information about students.

STEP 3: CONDUCT THE OBSERVATION

To capture what happens during the teaching session it is best to review the form ahead of time and take notes about the learning environment, learner engagement, teaching methods, and management of the session. Later, you can look over the form and your notes, paying particular attention to areas which the observee asked you to focus your attention. It is helpful during the observation to record questions the learners ask, interesting comments, points of confusion, etc.

When conducting the observation, take note of the following:

LESSON ORGANIZATION AND PREPARATION

- Does the instructor provide a clear statement of lesson objectives?
- Does the instructor connect the lesson to previous course material?
- Does the instructor reference materials assigned to students in preparation for the lesson?
- Was the lesson sequential, logical, and planned?
- Did the instructor use more than one strategy to address different learning modalities?
- Did the instructor use the board and/or technologies to support the lesson?
- Were the instructor's follow-up activities based on the lesson?

Asynchronous/Hybrid Courses

- Did the instructor provide a logical path through the lesson on the course site (e.g. Blackboard)?
- Did the instructor provide content directly or through active links for this unit?
- If this is a hybrid course, did the instructor post announcements and directions to enable transitions between the face-to-face session and online component?

KNOWLEDGE OF THE SUBJECT MATTER

- Was the information the instructor provided in the lesson accurate?
- Did the instructor incorporate the vocabulary and language of the discipline in the lesson?
- Did the content of the lesson reflect awareness of current trends and developments?
- Did the instructor direct students to reference material and texts during the discussion?
- Did the instructor demonstrate familiarity with the technology that was incorporated into the lesson?
- Was the content aligned with the lesson's objectives?
- Did the instructor use language appropriate for the audience?

Asynchronous/Hybrid Courses

- If this is a hybrid section, is there a connection between the content in the online portion of this unit and the content in the face-to-face sessions?

INTERACTION WITH STUDENTS

- Did the instructor allow time for student responses?
- Did the instructor provide feedback to students?
- Did the instructor facilitate student participation by using a variety of active learning strategies such as, but not limited to, group work, paired discussion, and polling?
- Did the instructor provide directions for each learning activity?
- Did the instructor allow time to complete in-class assignments?
- Did the instructor have all the necessary materials and equipment readily available?
- Was the instructor able to engage the students in meaningful discussion in an open and respectful manner?

Asynchronous/Hybrid Courses

- Did the instructor provide instructions for the assignment to be completed by the students, including due dates?
- Did the instructor provide opportunities for online student discussion and encourage participation through the use of forums, blogs, wikis, etc.?
- Did the instructor state the point value of student discussion and participation?
- Did the instructor offer additional assistance to students during this unit (e.g. through an announcement)?
- Is there evidence that Netiquette was followed in this unit?

OVERALL SUMMARY

- What was your overall impression of the lesson? What are your reasons for this impression? Use supporting examples from the lesson to support your response.
- What recommendations for the instructor and/or alternatives to improve pedagogy would you offer the instructor based specifically on what was observed?

STEP 4: POST-OBSERVATION CONFERENCE

Feedback is most useful when given at the earliest opportunity so that reflections on the faculty member's teaching are not forgotten or become vague.

Start by inviting the faculty member to share their own reflections. Use the questions listed under Step 3 to guide the discussion. Be sure to address: 1) the specific areas on which the faculty member asked you to focus during the observation; 2) the faculty member's instructional strengths and ways these may be leveraged while teaching; 3) opportunities for growth, addressing specifically those areas that would yield the greatest improvement in teaching effectiveness; 4) key moments or turning points in the session; 5) specific, constructive recommendations for future teaching experiences; 6) specific techniques or skills that you witnessed during the session.

In giving feedback:

- Structure your feedback so that you are sharing reflections rather than giving advice. By sharing information, you give the faculty member the option of deciding for themselves the most appropriate changes or improvements to make.
- Begin on a positive note. Identify one teaching skill or behavior that the faculty member did well. By doing so, faculty members will relax and be able to hear ways to improve.
- Ask the faculty member to describe the experience and relay what went well and areas to improve. If they are extremely self-critical or conversely feel everything went well, ask, "At what point in the session did you feel the learners were most engaged?" and "At what point did you sense the learners losing interest?"
- If possible, focus on what was discussed in the pre-observation discussion. For example, "You mentioned that you were interested in managing the time of the session better. I noticed that the session went 10 minutes over. What do you think might have happened?"
- Avoid judgments and stick to observed behavior. Instead of, "You really know your students," try, "I noticed how you greeted the students by their first names and even asked how things

were going.” Instead of, “You need to give the students a chance to speak” try, “I noticed that after asking a question, you immediately answered it yourself.”

- Be as specific as possible. Instead of “You really include your learners!” try “I noticed how you engaged the students by allowing them to speak up frequently and share their own ideas during class.”
- Ask the faculty member to explore and consider alternatives for areas that need improvement. For example, “Did you notice that the student spent most of the time texting in the corner of the room? The student appeared bored and disengaged. What are ways to include the student during a class session?”
- Provide direct quotes or concrete examples of behavior. For example, “When you said to the student, ‘Good insight. What other factors might be at play here?’ I noticed that the student was able to expand their thinking.”
- Notice the faculty member’s receptivity and understanding of your feedback. Individuals often have emotional responses to feedback, especially about situations in which they feel most publicly exposed. Faculty members will appreciate constructive feedback.
- Invite faculty members to summarize what insights they gained during your discussion and identify the areas of improvement they want to pursue. Publicly stating how they intend to achieve their learning goals can enhance a sense of commitment to these goals and improve the chance of behavioral change.

STEP 5: AVOID COMMON FEEDBACK PITFALLS

It is important to remember that the peer observation process may feel challenging or threatening for many faculty members as it involves opening themselves up to review and potential criticism. Given that both being observed and receiving feedback may be novel experiences for faculty members, it is best to avoid these common pitfalls when delivering peer feedback:

- Launching immediately into what you would have done in the same situation.
- Focusing solely on identifying and describing “problems” observed.
- Providing an overwhelming list of what to do and what not to do in future sessions.
- Leading a one-way conversation without asking for the faculty member’s reflections or thoughts.
- Comparing the faculty member with another instructor.
- Pointing out skills that need further improvement, without providing suggestions or solutions on how these areas may be developed.

STEP 6: REAP THE BENEFITS OF PROVIDING FEEDBACK

Conducting an observation can be an extremely positive experience, for you and the faculty member, because doing so:

- Increases confidence in teaching.
- Reinforces best teaching methods.
- Solves recurring dilemmas.
- Prompts self-reflection.
- Starts a conversation regarding teaching and learning.
- Establishes teaching partnerships.

This document, the peer observation form and additional resources can be found on the Center for Teaching and Learning website: <https://commons.hostos.cuny.edu/ctl/peer-observation/>

This handbook has been adapted from the Peer Observation of Teaching Handbook created by Lori R. Newman, MEd, David H. Roberts, MD and Richard M. Schwartzstein, MD of the Shapiro Institute for Education and Research at Harvard Medical School and Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center which is available at: www.mededportal.org/publication/9150.

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