

CLASSROOM/TEACHING OBSERVATIONS



NAIT

Getting Started: Classroom/Teaching Observations

Teaching Observations allow both observers and instructors to develop, improve, and sustain teaching excellence. NAIT is not alone in moving toward providing teaching observations to support continual improvement in teaching. Institutions are beginning to recognize the value of providing more “substantive and formative instructional feedback to faculty” (Gormally, Evans & Brickman, 2014, p 188). Although instructors are observed every day by their students, teaching observations conducted by a peer offer a focused opportunity for instructors to receive and reflect on feedback from a different perspective to inform their practice. Peer observations - whether conducted by chairs or by colleagues - also provide programs with opportunities to explore how program culture is being maintained and fostered.

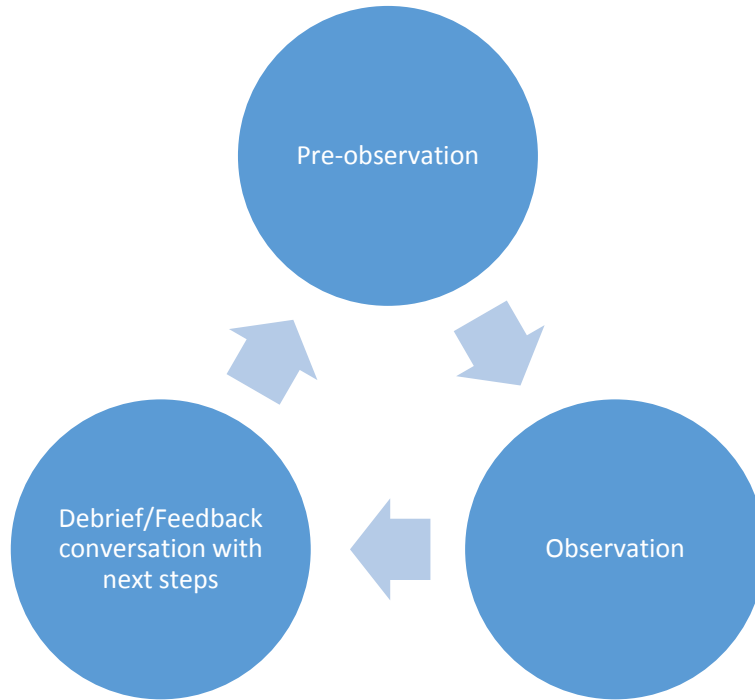
A teaching observation is neither an evaluation nor an assessment: it’s a way of sharing effective instructional practices, opening lines of communication, and informing professional development opportunities. Identifying instructors’ areas of proficiency and areas for development will help all program faculty determine how to contribute to and sustain a program culture of continual improvement in their teaching practice. Observations are a tool that plays a developmental role in the continuous improvement in the quality of teaching (Kemp & Gosling, 2000; Trach, 2014).

Teaching observations follow a suggested cycle of pre-observation, observation, instructor reflection, and feedback/debrief conversation that includes co-creating next steps (see Figure 1 below). This cycle supports continual development as one type of method for instructors to receive feedback and to



further their reflections on instructional practice. Observations play a critical role in providing a more detailed picture of instruction and curriculum in your program (Whitehurst, Chingos & Linnquist, 2015).

Figure 1. Classroom/Teaching Observation Cycle



Adapted from "Developing Higher Education Teaching Skills through Peer Observation and Collaborative Reflection" by Martin & Double, 1998.

Types of Teaching Observations

General and Targeted

The two broad categories of teaching observations are general and targeted. A general teaching observation provides an overall picture of what was observed, and does not limit the observation to a specific activity, skill, concern, or purpose. A targeted observation provides an opportunity for instructors to request focus on and feedback about specific areas of their instruction. For example, an instructor may have received previous feedback indicating they were not incorporating technology in a way that benefits student learning. In this case, the instructor may want to receive specific feedback on how they incorporate a new piece of technology. Both general and targeted observations are valid options, and provide significant benefits.

A variety of feedback tools exist and can be used for both general and targeted observations. The *Classroom Observation Feedback Checklist (figure 2)* can be used to give feedback in a variety of specified areas, or specific areas. You are encouraged to adapt the format and text in any way that meets your program’s needs. *The Constructive Feedback Quadrant (figure 3)* provides space capturing observation thoughts and connects feedback to learning is supported.

Figure 2. Sample of Observation Checklist (feel free to modify criteria)

CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT		
Criteria	Observed?	Comments
The instructor managed the learning environment effectively	<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No	
The instructor’s verbal and non-verbal communication strategies were appropriate	<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No	
The instructor and the students stayed on task	<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No	
The instructor used technology to enhance student learning (if appropriate)	<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No	
The instructor ensured equitable participation	<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No	
The instructor has created a respectful classroom environment	<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No	

Figure 3. Sample of a Constructive Feedback Form (Quadrant)

<u>What I observed:</u> →	<u>How it supports learning:</u>
<u>Supportive suggestions:</u> →	<u>Possible benefits to student learning:</u>



Online Teaching Observations

Many courses at NAIT are offered via online and blended (partially online, partially face-to-face) delivery. Instructors teaching within these various modes of delivery should also experience an opportunity to explore their teaching practices through an observation. As such, developing the skills to conduct online teaching observations as well as face-to-face (f2f) observations may open up some further opportunities for coaching and mentoring.

Conducting teaching observations for fully online courses and blended courses will require a slightly different focus than do face-to-face classroom observations. While the fundamentals of instruction will continue to apply, some aspects of online delivery cannot be observed in the same way as in a face-to-face classroom. One important aspect is that the logistics of being added to an online course in order to observe will require a different process than simply attending a face-to-face observation. Additionally, an observer and an instructor may want to clearly define the limits of the online observation to ensure it is a manageable task. Observing an entire online course would be very time-consuming, so an instructor and observer may decide upon a particular section, assignment, or activity upon which to focus. In a classroom observation, the instructor and students are aware of being observed; this is not the case in online learning (Bennett & Barp, 2008). The instructor and observer will have to outline when (in terms of the date the information was captured online) and what (synchronous or asynchronous discussions/activities) the observer will be observing. It should also be made clear to the students that a third party may be reading their discussions/online activities.

Knowing the Cycle

THE PRE-OBSERVATION DISCUSSION

What do we know about pre-observation discussions?

- Pre-observation discussions allow the instructor and the observer to collaboratively set a plan for the observation(s).
- Pre-observation discussions set the stage for the upcoming observation and post-observation debriefing.

Pre-Observation Tips

A pre-observation discussion is the initiation of the teaching observation cycle. In this discussion, the instructor and the observer select a time for the observation and discuss any other necessary details. The meeting is structured to develop open communication between observer and instructor and to establish observation guidelines and expectations.



A starting point for pre-observation discussion could be the instructor's sharing his/her lesson objective and plan to set the stage for the upcoming observation. Use the pre-observation discussion to:

- Determine whether the observation will be general or targeted.
- Discuss the observation process, such as where the observer will be located, time of arrival, safety equipment, options to move around class, etc.
- Determine how the observer's presence will be explained to the class.
- Schedule the post-observation meeting in a comfortable and private environment. This meeting should occur within a reasonable timeframe after the observation so each person can recollect the experience.
- Discuss the process for the instructor to include his/her reflections on the lesson, such as an email following the lesson or notes immediately after the class. Remind the instructor that reflections don't have to be long – they can be short, thoughtful bullet points.

THE OBSERVATION

Although these observations are not supervisor-led and have no disciplinary or punitive implications, they can cause some concern. A consistent, program-wide focus on feedback for instructional growth will help reinforce the fact that these are formative teaching observations, which can be used as opportunities for mentoring and coaching.

Observation Tips

- Teaching observations should be focused on observable and describable events or behaviours, not on feelings or opinions.
- Be aware that your initial presence in the class can influence student and teacher behaviour.
- Remain as unobtrusive as possible.





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Ensuring a Successful Teaching Observation

One of the primary challenges in conducting a teaching observation is knowing what to look for. Focus on what the instructor is doing and how it is being done. In the beginning, it may be helpful to use the *Teaching Observation Feedback Checklist* as your guide for comments. For example:

- Did you observe the instructor using technology? In your comments, describe how it enhanced student learning.
- Did you observe the instructor appropriately pacing the lesson? In your comments, describe how the instructor transitioned between the beginning of the class and the activity.
- Did you observe the instructor linking the activity to the lesson objective? In your comments, describe how this feature added context to the lesson.

REFLECTION

As part of the observation cycle, reflection is critical in that both the instructor and observer has time to think about the observation and how they will respond to it. However, more importantly, learning how to reflect provides instructors with a tool to support continuous growth and development that is always readily available to them. Reflecting immediately after a lesson helps organize thoughts about the lesson, gather any insights about events in the classroom, and note any questions the instructor may want to ask (Mellow, Woolis, Klages-Bombich & Restler, 2015). Reflections can come in varying forms. Each person should be encouraged to capture their reflections in a manner that works for them.



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THE POST OBSERVATION DEBRIEF

The goal of the observation is to create a formative developmental experience for both instructor and observer. The post observation debrief is the time for “collaborative reflection” (Martin & Double, 1998) when both parties can identify instructional areas of strength and areas that need further focus.

- 1. Reflect** The observer begins by asking the instructor for personal reflections on the lesson. Consider asking questions that address how the instruction did/didn't support student learning success:
 - In general, what are your reflections on the class/lab/activity/etc.?
 - Did you accomplish the goals you had planned for this class/lab/activity/etc.?
 - What worked well for you in class/lab/activity/etc.?
 - What didn't work well?
 - If you could do this lesson/activity again tomorrow, what might you do differently?
 - How do you think the learner experienced the class/activity?
 - What did you observe about your students during this part of the lesson?
 - How do you think this class/lab/activity supported students in achieving the lesson objective(s)?

Both parties should be open to learning from the answers to these questions. An observer may not absorb everything during the lesson and reflective questions can often shed light on instructor actions that were missed or misunderstood.

- 2. Share** Both the instructor and observer share reflections on the lesson; use specific examples. Seek clarification where necessary by asking questions and actively listening to each other. The



observer should provide opportunities for the instructor to ask questions or discuss all feedback items. Remember that there is often more learning from sharing views on what is going well in class than there is from sharing areas for development. All feedback should be positive and coming from a place of support. For items of a developmental nature, ask for additional information such as:

- Was there something occurring in the class that I may have missed...
- What other options did you consider/might you consider...
- How did you feel about...
- What was your rationale for....

3. Create The instructor and observer should co-create next steps. The following questions support collaborative developmental planning:

- Are there particular skills/technologies you would like to focus on in the next observation?
- What do you want your students to say about your teaching?
- How might you leverage your strengths to support success in student learning?
- What can I do to support your teaching practice development

4. Activate Next steps should be captured by the instructor and the observer. Create a plan to follow through on what you co-create by:

- Aligning your next steps to the program's shared vision.
- Using it as a launch pad for further feedback gathering (either from peers or students).
- Discussing common issues and questions at staff meetings.
- Fostering coaching and mentoring relationships to provide support.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Teaching observations support quality instruction. Observations benefit the instructor who leads the process and determines what they would like the focus to be on as part of their professional development and growth. They also provide opportunities to showcase what they do very well and celebrate and share personal successes from the classroom! Reciprocally, observations benefit the observer by providing an opportunity to see what's happening in other courses that might enhance their own instructional practice. The feedback conversations and camaraderie that result from opening classroom doors to others throughout a program, school, and institution are real time learning opportunities for all stakeholders. Enjoy the process!



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