Recommendations for constructive teaching (class) visits

The Center for Innovations in Teaching and Learning (CITL) has provided an excellent guide for ways in which faculty members can augment their teaching file, beyond student evaluations of teaching. This guide mentions peer observations (class visits) that “provide colleagues with an opportunity to learn from the teaching practices of others and gain a fresh perspective on their own teaching practices. In peer observations, colleagues visit one another’s classes, and later meet to discuss the class observation.”

The purpose of the present document is to recommend appropriate processes and topics of consideration for constructive teaching visits in order to support this practice in all possible contexts (for example, when faculty wish to peer-review each other’s classes; when faculty wish to learn from another teacher’s expertise; when a faculty mentee requests feedback and guidance from a faculty mentor; or a department recommends a teaching visit session as part of the professional development of a new faculty member).

This document has been composed by the Committee on Career Advising (CCA) and integrates input from the Committee on Academic Personnel (CAP) and the founding Director of CITL, Jody Greene. It was finalized in Spring 2018.

Who should conduct the class visit?

Ideally, the faculty member being observed is the one requesting the teaching visit and has a say in who conducts it. The guest may be a peer, close-peer, or senior faculty in the same or another department. Pending future growth in staffing, the CITL may also visit classes and offer constructive advice to individual faculty. In 2018-19 CITL plans to foster group teaching visits (“teaching squares”) that will enhance dialogue among faculty on teaching practices.

CCA recommends that the inclusion of the follow-up report in a personnel file be voluntary, as a way to augment the file’s teaching evaluation material. In such cases, faculty under review are encouraged to include in the teaching section of their personal statement a reflection summary about the benefits of the class visit on their teaching and the steps they took to implement the recommendations they received by the guest.

If departments require teaching visits as part of their personnel review process, we strongly recommend that they use the same form for all their instructors, in order to ensure equity in the process. (The CITL can assist in the creation of such a form.) To further promote equity, departments may consider inviting faculty from other departments to provide evaluative teaching visits for personnel files (in such cases, ideally the guests are from departments which house related disciplines with similar styles of teaching). We recognize that visitors from the same department may provide more discipline-specific feedback that can lead to significant teaching improvements, so we encourage departments to offer optional formative teaching visits for interested faculty by other colleagues within the department. Another way to enhance equity, if teaching visits are done within the department, is to create a standing committee that conducts class visits and follow-up discussions. This model has the potential to provide more diverse feedback and in addition it allows for faculty labor to be recognized as departmental service.
**How often should a faculty's class be visited?**

It is valuable to visit more than one teaching session of the same course in order to get a fuller sample of the instructor's teaching style. Multiple visits make it possible to identify patterns in the instructor's teaching and to evaluate if they use the provided feedback to improve their instruction. If it is possible to attend two or three teaching sessions of the same course, it is advisable to spread them out during the quarter (e.g. third, sixth and ninth week), in order to gain insights into the development of the course and the implementation of its learning objectives, and allow the teacher adequate time to integrate received feedback into their teaching.

**Before the visit:**

Prior to attending a teaching session, it's important to establish the goals for the visit and discuss the strengths, needs, and challenges specific to the group of students present in the class. In particular, it is valuable to ask the instructor to identify their learning objectives for the class, as well as any specific concerns or aspects of their teaching on which they desire feedback (e.g., lesson structure, delivery, interaction with students, patterns of engagement). Referring to the suggested topics below might be useful for identifying specific aspects of instruction. Normally, during a given teaching session the visiting faculty might focus on 1-2 broad areas concerning pedagogy and effective instruction (for example, learning goals and classroom climate).

During the preparatory discussion, instructors should be reminded that the feedback they will receive is confidential (unless the visitor is providing feedback that will be used in a personnel review file). In any case, the purpose of the session should be to provide constructive recommendations and opportunities for improvement, not negative criticism.

Prior to the visit, the visitor may want to receive a copy of any visual materials or handouts used in class. This can facilitate review of those materials without distracting attention from the teaching session proper.

It's useful to schedule a time (~30 min.) to provide feedback after each teaching visit session. We recommend this is done sooner rather than later in order to maximize impact, but not immediately after the teaching session (because there is little time for reflection).

**During the visit:**

The visitor should take field notes, recording not only what the instructor is doing but also how the students are reacting and how they relate to each other. Particular emphasis should be placed on the focus areas identified by the instructor prior to the session.

It's useful if visitors consolidate their thoughts into a few main points that will be most beneficial to the instructor.

We recommend avoiding a focus on class content (unless the instructor has specifically requested that kind of feedback and the visitor's background may provide insight in this area). Productive feedback should be constructive, and can focus on issues of pedagogy and climate, structure, delivery and communication.
During the follow-up discussion:

Feedback should be structured with the goal of supporting instructors in their pedagogy, in order to support students in their learning. These sessions provide opportunities for constructive dialogue among colleagues.

Begin by inviting the instructor to reflect on their own teaching, asking if they thought they achieved their learning objective and what they saw as the strength of their lesson. Prompt them to reflect specifically on the session you visited, to consider what went well, what challenged them or surprised them, and why they think that happened. Did they learn anything new about their students and their learning process?

Accentuate the positive aspects of the instructor’s teaching first. If you found any of their teaching methods particularly effective and are planning to implement them in your own classes, it is important to acknowledge this and emphasize that the class visit has been a useful learning experience for you as well.

Give instructors specific feedback about the areas of interest identified in your preparatory meeting, before you address other areas that might have emerged during your visit.

When addressing potential improvements, we encourage you to be as specific as possible and to offer practical examples of how to implement instructional changes.

We recommend that you collaborate with the instructor to devise an action plan with specific steps for implementing instructional improvements. If you conduct subsequent visits later on, it is important to acknowledge any improvements and to offer additional feedback, if appropriate.

After your last visit, you can also encourage the instructor to write a reflection summary, integrating what was learned from the process and how this will influence future teaching. They can focus their reflection around questions such as the following:

- What was the most useful part of this experience for them?
- What specific things got reinforced as effective and what specific changes do they envision as a result of this feedback?
- Did they learn anything new about their students and their learning process?

A version of this document may be included in the teaching section of their personal statement, in their next personnel review.

Using a form/rubric for the teaching visit and follow-up discussion:

As mentioned above, if departments decide to develop teaching visits as a general policy, we recommend that they use the same form/rubric for all their instructors, in order to ensure equity in this process.

If the visit is not part of a general policy, it might be useful to create a customized form/rubric for the agreed upon focus areas. The Center for Innovations in Teaching and Learning (CITL) can help with the preparation of such a form/rubric. A sample is included below.
If visitors use a teaching visit form/rubric, they should provide the instructor with a blank copy prior to the visit and a copy including their comments at the end of the follow-up session.

**Suggested topics for effective teaching visit sessions**

The following topics concern possible areas of interest and consideration for teaching visits and related discussions (they are not meant to be used as a checklist). Feel free to consider other areas of interest. We recommend that visitors and instructors collaborate in advance to identify specific areas of interest on which instructors would like feedback, taking into account disciplinary conventions, constraints and teaching styles, class size and individual session goals, as well as the strengths and challenges of the enrolled students.

**Learning goals and inclusive classroom climate**

- Pursues clear learning objectives (e.g., uses class content to serve broader learning and skill development, shares goals and their importance with learners, explains the learning goals of readings, assignments, exams, and discussion topics or questions).
- Stimulates learners (e.g. shows enthusiasm for topic, demonstrates interest through body language and animated presentation, poses stimulating questions).
- Connects subject matter to real-life contexts and provides active learning experiences to engage student interest, support student motivation, and allow students to extend their learning.
- Makes effective use of instructional time to maximize learning opportunities for all students.
- Involves students in a participatory learning environment (e.g., looks/listens to learners, encourages participation in structured discussion or other learning activities, allows ample time for questions).
- Shows respect and promotes inclusivity (e.g., uses learners’ names, avoids ridicule/intimidation, clarifies misunderstandings without being judgmental, appreciates and answers questions, admits own limitations, encourages feedback and states respect for diverse opinions, whenever applicable).
- Responds to students’ nonverbal cues (e.g., excitement, boredom, confusion, apprehension) and adjusts instruction while teaching so that students continue to be actively engaged in learning.

**Promotion of comprehension/retention**

- Provides clear focus of class session (e.g., sets an agenda and defines/prioritizes goals, states relevance of goals to learner, avoids digressions, uses relevant material).
- Provides clear organization of class material (e.g., presents material in a clear order, guides learners through opening and closing remarks, highlights main points throughout the class, uses overviews/summaries/transition).
• Clarifies point of presentation (e.g., uses examples, provides relevant context, explains relationships between different aspects of the material, provides clear explanations or arguments, repeats or rephrases student questions as needed, provides clear and concise answers).

• Clarifies emphasis of presentation (e.g., uses visual aids, emphasizes and repeats important points, varies voice color/speed).

• Controls pace of session (e.g., does not rush through material, remains mindful of time during discussion when needed, asks learners to help pace session).

• Fosters active learning (e.g., relates material to learners’ experiences or prior knowledge; provides opportunities for skill practice; asks questions that promote critical thinking; if applicable, encourages learners’ participation; experiments with different learning modalities such as group activities, tests, or assignments; encourages note taking).

• Plans for and effectively orchestrates opportunities for students to support each other in learning.

• Plans and implements strategies of inclusive learning and makes appropriate modifications in order to provide access to the curriculum for all students.

• Explicitly encourages further learning and recommends additional resources (e.g., books, journal articles or online resources, films, events, activities, internships, etc.).

Assessing student learning

• Uses effective questioning or other techniques to assess learners’ knowledge/skills/understanding of the material and encourage deeper critical engagement.

• Uses effective assignments or testing methods for learners to deepen and demonstrate their understanding of the material.

• If applicable, provides learners with feedback during class interaction (e.g., provides constructive feedback and recommendations for improvement, explains to learners the reason(s) their statements are convincing or might need further elaboration or rethinking, contextualizes the material to help learners develop their understanding of course material).

• Collects and analyzes assessment data from multiple measures and sources to plan and modify instruction and document students’ learning over time.

• Offers opportunities for learners to provide feedback on the class and to reflect on their learning experience (e.g., through mid-quarter feedback/reflection questionnaires, or through periodic brief feedback sessions in the classroom). Takes student comments into consideration, implements changes as appropriate, or explains why certain aspects of teaching are necessary.
Further resources

- UCSC Center for Innovations in Teaching and Learning (CITL), citl@ucsc.edu
- Northeastern University, Center for Advancing Teaching and Learning Through Research – “Faculty Peer Observation and Feedback” (recommended by CITL)

The above is largely based on material from:

- Peer Review of Course Instruction Form, Sources and Methods for Evaluating Teaching, Policy for the Evaluation of Teaching (for Advancement and Promotion), 1987, Committee on Teaching – Berkeley Division, Academic Senate
- Faculty Peer Observation and Feedback, Northeastern University, https://www.northeastern.edu/learningresearch/teaching-support/improving-and-documenting-teaching-effectiveness/faculty-peer-observation-feedback/
- Haile T. Debas Academy of Medical Educators • 4 Koret Way, LR-102, Box 0563 • San Francisco, CA 94143-0563 http://medschool2.ucsf.edu/academy
Sample Teaching Visit Form for Peer Feedback

Instructor Name ________________________               Visitor Name ________________________
Class ________________________________            Date_______________________

The instructor and visitor agreed to focus feedback on the following areas of interest. The comments use this rubric:

1: Students’ learning experience could benefit greatly by an in-depth consideration and effective implementation of the relevant teaching approach. See narrative comments for specific recommendations.

2: The instructor is aware of and occasionally uses the relevant knowledge, skill, and/or practice. It would be beneficial to reflect more on this issue and take steps to implement the relevant teaching approach in a more consistent and extensive manner, in order to support a richer learning experience among students. See narrative comments for specific recommendations.

3: The instructor consistently uses the knowledge, skill, and/or practice appropriately and competently and supports student’s learning experience and development effectively. See narrative comments for further observations.

NA: Evidence is too limited to evaluate knowledge, skill, and/or practice

UN: Visitor unqualified to address this aspect of teaching
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**Comments**

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Suggestions for future implementation:
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