

The Practice of Peer Observation

DiSanto, Jacqueline M. ^{1,a}; Figueroa, Sandy ^{1,b}; Guevara, Carlos ^{1,c}; Varelas, Antonios ^{1,d}; Macri, Diana ^{1,e}; Fabrizio, Andrea ^{1,f}; Mitchell, Sherese ^{1,g} and Gerrity, Sean ^{1,h}

¹ Hostos Community College of the City University of New York (CUNY)

^a jdisanto@hostos.cuny.edu, ^b sfigueroa@hostos.cuny.edu, ^c cguevara@hostos.cuny.edu,
^d avarelas@hostos.cuny.edu, ^e dmacri@hostos.cuny.edu, ^f afabrizio@hostos.cuny.edu,
^g smitchell@hostos.cuny.edu, ^h sgerrity@hostos.cuny.edu

Abstract

This paper discusses existing literature on peer observation. It also focuses on work done by an investigative, information-sharing committee at an urban community college in the South Bronx that was created to communicate best practices for conducting peer observations. The Peer Observation Improvement Network for Teaching (POINT) committee views peer observations as faculty-development opportunities that can lead to improved teaching. Using pre- and post-observation conversations to share pedagogy and resources, writing recommendations for growth, and conducting faculty observations in an online environment are examples of topics addressed by POINT.

Keywords: collegial conversations, faculty development, online learning, peer observation, professional growth.

The practice of peer faculty observations is intended specifically to improve teaching. Keig and Waggoner (1994) emphasized that the practice of faculty being assessed by a peer

should be a “component of formative evaluation of teaching” based on the shared experiences, bodies of knowledge, and professional practices that are specific to their academic departments.

Additionally, Adams’ (2009) support of inquiry-based teaching development can be applied to the use of peer observation as a vehicle for improving teaching, which creates an atmosphere conducive to individualized professional development for faculty based on their personal teaching areas and career trajectories.

Adams (2009, p. 17) included the following points illustrating specific assumptions of inquiry-based faculty development:

- A process of developing increasing sophistication of teaching process through sensing, examining, collecting evidence, and taking action.
- Directions of exploration and determinants of success reside predominantly with the participant.
- Explicit attention is paid to collaboration, interpersonal interactions, trust, and community building.
- Collaborative action research, generative goal setting based on continuing iterations of involvement and exploration of teaching practices.
- Peer dialogue, mentorships, and partnerships that are reciprocally exploratory.

Each institution defines the professional responsibilities for faculty based on its unique requirements. Faculty at institutions of higher education offering baccalaureate, graduate, and doctoral degrees typically are expected to teach, conduct research, publish, present, and write successful grants; community-college faculty may see less emphasis on scholarly work. The common denominator is teaching. The practice of peer observations is a method of assessing

teaching skills. A committee was formed at one community college in the South Bronx to serve as an investigative, information-sharing body that would communicate best practices for conducting peer observations.

POINT

The Peer Observation Improvement Network for Teaching (POINT) was convened in 2011 under the Office of Academic Affairs at Hostos Community College of The City University of New York (CUNY), to research and communicate the intricacies involved in peer observation. The committee is for the most part advisory but did revise the peer-observation report based on its research, which included focus groups and was approved by the Hostos Senate. According to the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs, “POINT 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” (DiSanto, personal communication, November 12, 2015).

The POINT Committee consists of six members comprised of faculty and staff; it meets twice monthly. POINT is housed under the advisory council for the college’s Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) and provides seminars on peer observation for faculty as part of CTL’s professional-development program. CTL’s mission states:

This cross-divisional faculty-driven committee . . . concentrates on meeting the professional needs of faculty from across the disciplines. A priority of this committee is to encourage faculty to rethink and put into practice innovative pedagogical methods that answer the basic and advanced needs of students to increase overall retention and graduation rates. The Council models

innovation through unconventional programming intended to inspire faculty to consistently recreate curriculum to enhance the learning environment throughout the course of the student's academic careers. The Council exists to refresh and invigorate all faculty including adjuncts, and push them to excel professionally" (HCC/OAA, 2018a).

Workshops provided by the POINT committee recently addressed conducting observations in online sections, writing intentional and effective recommendations, and holding collegial pre- and post-observation conversations.

Defining Peer Observation

A peer observation is conducted by a colleague who attends another instructor's class for one full period, at a pre-arranged date and time, in order to observe what takes place during that time. What is observed during the time spent in the class is used to write responses to various points addressed in a post-observation report and to provide recommendations for professional growth. According to Chism (1999, 2007), "peer review of teaching is informed colleague judgment about faculty teaching for either fostering improvement or making personnel decisions." As a committee that falls under the auspices of this college's CTL, POINT's on-going charge has been to facilitate the use of peer observations as professional-development opportunities.

To start, the two colleagues involved in the observation determine a mutually convenient date and time for the observation to take place. This is indicated on the notice of observation form, which must be received by the observee at least 24 hours before the observation takes place. It is recommended that a conversation should occur so that the topic and intent of the

lesson can be shared as well as anything the observee would like to bring to the observer's attention, such as a new teaching strategy or activity. This discussion offers a point of focus that should lead to opportunities for growth.

The observer must arrive at the classroom before the start of class and remain until the end of the period. Notes should be taken during the class. The observer should not participate in activities. Although the observer must be aware of all aspects of the lesson, particular focus should be given to points raised during the pre-observation conversation, if taken place. A post-observation form must be completed and shared with the observee no later than two weeks from the observation.

Professional Development through Conversation

To foster a climate of dialogue and collegiality among faculty, POINT members strongly consider communication between the two faculty members involved in the observation to be of paramount importance. The POINT committee recommends that the two faculty members meet prior to the observation to discuss the student-learning objective(s) of the lesson and any particular aspect of the lesson that the observee wants the observer to notice. Research illustrates “the importance of the relationship between observer and teacher, with the relationship needing to be based on confidentiality and the creation of a non-judgmental environment” (Donnelly, 2007). Interactions between the observer and observee that are focused, positive and respectful, exhibiting a mutual commitment to collaboration, create sincere opportunities for growth. In fact, collegial conversations focused on improvement can support “fruitful discussions in which we learn from each other about ways to transform the climate in our classes” (Ammons & Lane, 2012).

Additionally, there is an overarching theme at Hostos of conversation as professional development, which has been supported by the CTL. The Hostos Teaching Institute and Mindful Conversations are two of the workshop series offered. Topics address “teaching pedagogy; classroom experiences and student outcomes; and scholarship of teaching and disciplinary research” (HCC/OAA, 2018b). Presenters cross rank, tenure, and all academic content areas. These workshops are designed to help faculty further develop their teaching strategies; each is inclusive of all faculty regardless of rank or academic specialty. This benefits those involved in peer observation because it can serve to minimize any bias or trepidation based on friendship, as peer observation and the desire to continue to grow as a teacher are inherent in the campus culture (Muchinsky, 1995).

The concept of peer observations as professional-development opportunities is introduced to new faculty during a year-long series of workshops. In the initial session, POINT members introduce their colleagues to the different components of the peer-observation process from completing or receiving the notice that the observation will take place on a specified date and time, through the prompts addressed in the report. Special attention is paid to participating in a pre- and post-observation conversation. Although the observer will write a recommendation for the observee, both peers have an opportunity to learn about new instructional techniques and resources during their discussions.

During the second workshop, time is spent discussing the new faculty’s first experiences being observed and observing a colleague. Role play and videotape is used to practice completing an observation form. It is here where faculty, especially those in their first year at the college, are counseled on how to conduct an observation in an online environment and write

effective recommendations. They also are informed of the role peer observations have in annual evaluations, reappointment, tenure and promotion.

Besides providing training for new faculty on how to conduct peer observations, POINT also works with colleagues who develop asynchronous and/or hybrid courses for the first time. There are specific and unique guidelines that must be considered when observing someone in an online-learning environment.

Conducting Peer Observations in Online Courses

What happens when the observation takes place in a virtual environment? With limited research available on conducting observations in online areas, the POINT committee raised a series of questions:

Asynchronous

1. When observing a faculty member teaching an asynchronous course, what is the observer to report in the observation form?
2. Since there is so much to view in the asynchronous course, where does the observer begin?
3. What should be the focus of the observation report in an asynchronous course?

Hybrid or Blended

1. If a faculty member teaches a hybrid course, should the observer concentrate on the online portion?
2. Will the observer report on the face-to-face classroom and skip the online portion?
3. How different is the observation for a face-to-face class than for an online course?

This became the epicenter of future discussions.

Conducting an observation online. The POINT committee was faced with the challenge of looking at observations and online teaching. Colleges and universities may have contractual obligations that mandate a specific schedule of observations. At Hostos, an urban community college within one of the largest public universities in the United States, non-tenured faculty are required to be observed once a semester during a single class session. Tenured faculty may be observed. The guidelines implemented at this institution for observations conducted in asynchronous courses address the uniqueness of having a classroom environment that only exists in cyberspace without any scheduled face-to-face contact (HCC/OAA, 2019a); an asynchronous class-session is defined by learning outcome(s) contained within one single unit addressed rather than a traditional bell schedule.

The hybrid or blended course posed the greater challenge because an observer might be inclined to instinctively opt for the face-to-face session. Another observer may mistakenly choose to observe the in-person period as well as the online session.

A series of guidelines for observing the hybrid course (HCC/OAA, 2019b) was created based on those for the asynchronous courses. These guidelines include having the learning objective shared by the online and in-person components clearly stated and the scope of the learning unit to be observed be specified for the observer. The guidelines for the hybrid course state that only faculty with special training or experience with online teaching may conduct observations of hybrid courses. The committee members felt that only those trained could aptly observe another faculty teaching a hybrid course, which is also emphasized in the guidelines.

It was determined that the observation time should span a complete unit of learning and approximate the time allocated for a standard classroom observation. A learning unit was defined

as a distinct group of learning activities and course content that includes in-class and online activities centered on shared objectives. Faculty skilled in teaching a hybrid course have the ability and knowledge to recognize the scope of a hybrid unit, and, therefore, would be able to conduct an observation that would be equivalent to an in-person class conducted in a physical classroom.

Discussing the learning unit. According to the guidelines for the observation of asynchronous or hybrid courses, observers require a clear understanding of the course design and learning unit structure. The committee stresses that the observer discusses the context under which the learning unit was designed during both the pre- and post-observation conversations. The observee should share pertinent information about the course design, structure of the learning unit (location; scope and sequence; and discussion, assignment, and test components), use of external resources, and technologies used (e.g. discussion boards, blogs, wikis, lecture captures, etc.).

Additionally, the observer should be familiar with the development guidelines for asynchronous and hybrid courses. These guidelines were created to establish a baseline and to standardize design and development of these courses; therefore, it is very important that the observer uses them as parameters for what to expect in the learning unit of the online course being observed (HCC Online Learning, 2019).

Writing an Effective Recommendation

Throughout the POINT committee's numerous presentations, one thing is consistent: Platitudes such as "Keep up the good work!" and "Great job!" are to be avoided at all times. The purpose of a peer observation is to generate a narrative of what that instructor brings to the classroom; provide support to the observee as they move forward in their professional progress,

and address areas that need improvement. In an online course, the report must be worded so as to give a clear understanding of pedagogy, student engagement, and faculty presence in the online environment, so that an administrator who may not have experience teaching in hybrid or asynchronous courses can consider the information in the observation report.

The observer's recommendation must be based on the performance that was directly witnessed and must not include information learned at any other time. The colleague's reputation, contributions to the college, and personality cannot be considered during a peer observation. Differences between the teaching style of the observer and the observee should only be discussed in the recommendations if there is a strong reason for doing so that has been discussed under the prompts on the observation form.

The committee strongly urges that these suggestions for growth and/or change be the final item the observer addresses and should include supporting evidence from the narrative. For example, if the answers to the questions or prompts are all highly positive, the recommendations should also be positive. If the observer indicates that improvement is required, then the recommendations should include specific strategies for growth. This feedback should be purposeful, descriptive, and context-specific. If the lesson observed was superb, consider recommending that the person share their instructional method, content expertise, or classroom-management strategies with peers through an article, presentation, or peer mentoring. A recommendation can also be an alternative to what was used in the lesson. At the heart of a peer observation is mutual professional development, where both colleagues can share ideas, practices, and materials. Finally, the feedback meeting should be held as soon after the session as

possible, while the nuances of the experience are still fresh in both participants' minds (Martin & Double, 1998).

Why is the recommendation important? Pedagogy is constantly evolving and changing. Constructive feedback can offer new ideas and strategies for effective teaching (O'Keefe, Lecouteur, Miller, & McGowan, 2009). Recommendations can draw attention to whether students react favorably to the strategies and resources used to meet the learning objectives. A recommendation is written to support the growth of a colleague as a teacher.

These recommendations, whether written in support of continued professional growth or as a plan for improvement, must be rooted in the shared goal of improving teaching effectiveness. Chism (2004) described this cultural attitude toward teaching as:

. . . one in which it is desirable to seek to understand practice; admirable to be thorough and intentional in making judgments about teaching; and possible to learn from others about the behaviors, assumptions, and attitudes that have been found to be most productive in facilitating student learning. Such dialogue bridges the gap between definitional despair and certainty and turns it into an advantage (p. 20).

The recommendations offered in the observation are often considered during an annual evaluation; however, the observer has an obligation to be objective when conducting the observation and honest when writing the report. The recommendation must be rooted in what was witnessed during the observation and should offer specific suggestions for improvement and/or growth. If similar remarks are recorded during observations done in different semesters and the same recommendations are made, questions may arise as to whether or not the faculty member seriously considered them. Also, when writing statements for the annual portfolio,

faculty should address the recommendations in their narratives, particularly those that discuss teaching philosophy and future plans for growth.

Assessing the Process

Although peer observations are a contractual requirement at this college and the process of conducting them is transparent and well communicated, it is important to take the time to assess the criteria and documents used (Chism, 1999, 2007). This becomes apparent when faculty have difficulty interpreting prompts within online learning-environments, such as asynchronous or hybrid course sections.

As a direct result of discussions with colleagues at POINT events, the committee formed focus groups to investigate whether changes to the peer-observation form were warranted, specifically concerning the relevance of the prompts and the usability of the document. Based on research and input from their colleagues, a revised form was created, which has been approved through governance. This updated version includes specific prompts for online environments.

Conclusion

The objective of peer observations is to foster reflection on the primary purpose for the existence of any college--teaching and learning. When observations are conducted according to established and communicated guidelines in a nurturing environment they can “directly benefit the individual teacher, can enhance collegiality and can have a significant effect on changing departmental culture” (Martin & Double, 1998). Feedback is offered through peer observations, student evaluations, and grade reports; however, peer observation is the only one of those three that offers witnessed information that supports a recommendation for growth. Also, when both parties--the observed colleague and the observer--use pre- and post-observation conversations to

share perspectives on best practices, trends, and issues, the peer-observation process becomes an opportunity for personal reflection and intentional professional development, all of which contribute to enhance student success.

The authors wish to extend special thanks to Dr. Loreto Porte, a founding member of POINT, for her expertise and participation; and to the members of the 2006 Hostos Assessment Committee for creating the guidelines under which asynchronous courses are observed.

References

- Adams, P. (2009). The role of scholarship of teaching in faculty development: Exploring an inquiry-based model. *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 3(1).
- Ammons, J. L., & Lane, S. J. (2012). Proceedings from the Allied Academies International Conference: *Making Teaching Visible: Sharing & Valuating Using Peer Observation*. New Orleans: Academy of Educational Leadership.
- California State University Chico Rubric for Online Instruction. (2016). Exemplary online instruction. Retrieved from http://www.csuchico.edu/roi/the_rubric.shtml.
- Chism, N. V. N. (1999, 2007). *Peer review of teaching* (2nd ed.) San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Chism, N. V. N. (2004). Characteristics of effective teaching in higher education: Between definitional despair and certainty. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, 15(3), 5-36.
- Donnelly, R. (2007). Perceived impact of peer observation of teaching in higher education. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 19(2), 117-129.
- Hostos Community College, Office of Academic Affairs (HCC/OAA). (2018a). *Center for Teaching and Learning Advisory Council*. Retrieved from <http://www.hostos.cuny.edu/Administrative-Offices/Office-of-Academic-Affairs/OAA-Committees>
- Hostos Community College, Office of Academic Affairs (HCC/OAA). (2018b). *Center for Teaching and Learning*. Retrieved from <http://www.hostos.cuny.edu/Administrative-Offices/Office-of-Academic-Affairs/Center-for-Teaching-and-Learning>

- Hostos Community College, Office of Educational Technology (HCC/OAA). (2019a). *Guidelines for the observation of an asynchronous course*. Retrieved from <http://commons.hostos.cuny.edu/online/faculty/guidelines/asynchronous-observation-guidelines>
- Hostos Community College, Office of Educational Technology (HCC/OAA). (2019b). *Guidelines for the observation of a hybrid course*. Retrieved from <http://commons.hostos.cuny.edu/online/faculty/guidelines/hybrid-observation-guidelines>
- Hostos Community College, Online Learning (HCC/Online Learning). (2019). *Welcome to online learning*. Retrieved from <https://commons.hostos.cuny.edu/online/faculty/>
- Keig, L., & Waggoner, M. D. (1994). Collaborative peer review: The role of faculty in improving college teaching. *ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report*, 2.
- Martin, G., & Double, J. (1998). Developing higher education teaching skills through peer observation and collaborative reflection. *Innovations in Education and Training International*, 35(2), 161-170.
- Muchinsky, P. M. (1995). Peer review of teaching: Lessons learned from military and industrial research on peer assessment. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, 6(3), 17-30.
- Nixon, S., Maynard, C., & Vickerman, P. (2012). Tired of teaching observations? A case study of one approach with a focus on communication and collaboration. *AISHE-J: The All Ireland Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 4(2).
- O'Keefe, M., Lecouteur, A., Miller, J., & McGowan, U. (2009). The colleague development program: A multidisciplinary program of peer observation partnerships. *Medical Teacher*, 31, 1060.
- Quality Matters. (2016). Higher education > Rubrics. Retrieved from <https://www.qualitymatters.org/rubric>