

Observation of Teaching in Higher Education – a brief overview

What is the issue?

Observation of Teaching is used in higher education (HE) institutions for development, performance management and progression purposes. Though the variations in approaches and the evolution of models make it somewhat difficult to articulate an unconditional definition of observation of teaching in higher education, for the purposes of this guide we use the term **observation of teaching** in its broadest interpretation, where we understand this to be **a process which may involve simply observation, or indeed observation, review and feedback, by a range of actors including potentially students**. We add to this working definition O’Leary and Price’s clarification that **‘the observation is not regarded as an end in itself but as a springboard for sharing ideas and stimulating reflective dialogue’** (O’Leary and Price 2016, pp. 114-115) and we emphasise with Gosling (2014) and O’Leary and Cui (2023) **the importance of enquiry**. In the literature both terms, peer review of teaching and peer observation of teaching are used. Johnston, Baik and Chester (2022) in their systematic review of this space in Australian higher education use the term peer review of teaching (PRT). They note that the term itself is contested but for the purpose of their work they draw on Harris et al. (2008) and define peer review of teaching as ‘a process where teaching academics provide feedback on one another’s practice to improve quality of teaching’ (2022, p. 391). Peer observation is described in the research as a peer watching a colleague teach without necessarily reviewing the practice (Bell and Thomson, 2018; Hendry, Bell and Thomson, 2014).

Why does it matter?

The increase in use of observation of teaching in higher education is reflective of the changes in the broader higher education context, both nationally and internationally. A greater emphasis on accountability and quality assurance has driven the development of processes and procedures associated with measuring and evidencing effectiveness in terms of teaching and learning practice. As Johnston, Baik and Chester (2022) note, peer review of teaching ‘functions both as a mechanism for enhancing teaching quality and a measure to indicate quality of teaching’ (p. 391). This is not an uncontroversial space and researchers such as Shortland (2004) have examined peer observation as a tool for staff development or compliance. Hand-in-hand with concerns around the performance management aspects possible in peer observation is a strong and compelling narrative around how observation of teaching provides the opportunity to enquire into and enhance one’s practice in order to impact positively on professional development and student learning. Observation of teaching may also be a part of formal Teaching and Learning (T&L) in HE courses or programmes, and the outputs of this process may be included as evidence in a teaching portfolio or other collection of documentation for promotion or awards.

What does the research say?

Benefits

The literature in this space suggests several benefits associated with observation of teaching for staff which extend to both observers and observees. Key benefits for observees noted in the research are the opportunities to reflect on and enquire into practice with a view to better understanding it, to solving problems, to making decisions, to enhancing practice and self-reflection on same, to growing in confidence and to contributing to student learning (Wass and Rogers, 2021; Warren, 2022; Hendry et al., 2021). Besides the potential benefits for the observee of receiving feedback on teaching (Georgiou, 2018), observers too may benefit from the process through: 'double-seeing' - thinking and making comparisons with one's own teaching, noting similarities and differences, observing problems and solutions (Tenenberg, 2016; Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond, 2004); new ideas to use in teaching (Hendry, Bell and Thomson, 2014); insights into how students behave in different disciplines or different T&L settings (Torres et al., 2017) and insights into the 'student perspective' on the learning experience (Hendry et al., 2021); insights into how different teachers interact with their students and how they foster 'students' motivation, engagement and independent learning' (Torres et al., 2017, p. 835). In turn, the processes around the act of observing or being observed are just as important as the observation itself as it is within these spaces that colleagues, and sometime staff and students together, engage in rich, scholarly dialogue around practice and T&L in HE more generally (Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond, 2004; Walker and Forbes, 2018). This is noted across the literature as a key benefit of peer observation and a contributing factor in the development of a culture of valuing teaching and learning and developing the teaching and learning community (Bell and Thomson, 2018; Hendry et al., 2021; Georgiou et al., 2018).

Key success factors

Positive approaches to observation require professional learning spaces which are both safe and courageous, with dedicated time for full engagement in the process and support for staff, including training, where required. While there is a balance to be struck between the formality and informality of the approach, in order to ensure transparency and clarity around expectations some structure is frequently recommended, as is a clear sense of the purpose of the process. The characteristics of positive approaches to observation include, amongst others, trust, collegiality, autonomy, authenticity, quality, ownership. These characteristics are intrinsically linked to the character of the colleagues involved and the relationships that are central to the process. Indeed, the relational element of observation of teaching is key to its success.

Other considerations

Introducing and/or maintaining observation of teaching will invariably involve challenges. Where the process does not operate within safe spaces, where its approach is flimsy and/or unpredictable in terms of structure, where it is enacted without virtuous attributes, and where inadequate attention and care is given to the centrality of the relational aspects, it is

unlikely that the process will be considered a success by participants or that it will lead to the desired results for staff, students or the institution. There are a number of additional challenges associated with peer review of teaching not least where the emphasis in the process involves a 'judgement' or evaluation of the teaching of others which raises issues of 'a power relationship between the one who makes the judgement and the other who is judged' (Gosling, 2014). Staff may find the process intimidating or exposing. This may particularly be the case where observation is used for assessment of staff performance without an emphasis on the developmental nature of the work. This may be echoed in a hierarchical approach to observation where staff are observed by a 'superior' or manager. In turn, clarification regarding what 'good teaching' looks like comes into play, as does the fact that an observation is only a 'snapshot' of one's overall teaching which could be more reliably considered through a more comprehensive approach. In addition, a lack of time and resources means that the process can be rushed to the extent that its value is diminished, the process itself becomes a burden for those involved or, at worst, the process is an impossibility. The literature also notes challenges around engaging in reflection which is an important part of the process. Yiend et al. emphasise the need potentially for formal training or modelling of good practice in this regard possibly through a hybrid model involving peer review and expert review. In turn, the difficulty of keeping the process 'fresh' once it is has been in existence for a while can also be a concern: 'there were dangers identified if the process became stale' (Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond, 2004, p. 501). The majority of these concerns are addressed in the literature through a range of measures.

Models of Observation of Teaching

Yiend et al. (2014) note that 'observation, when implemented in practice, rarely follows a tight prescriptive single model. Rather, institutions and departments tend to use existing frameworks as a starting point from which to develop programmes suitable to their own and their staff's needs' (2014, p. 479). Johnston et al. (2022) concur. Their examination of the research into peer review of teaching in Australian higher education notes that there is no 'one-size-fits-all' programme. They note the need for adaptation according to context, culture and community in order for the process to be a success; 'Outcomes are dependent on context specific models sensitively led according to participant needs' (2022, p. 400).

Much of the literature refers to Gosling's original three models of peer observation of teaching (2002) which he subsequently developed (2014): evaluation model - where the observation is carried out by a senior colleague for the purpose of appraisal or quality assurance; developmental model - where the observation is carried out by a T&L expert or an expert teacher with a view to demonstrating competence or enhancing practice; peer review model, subsequently called collaborative peer supported review (P-SR) model - where the observation is carried out by a peer with the purposes of '[improving] teaching through dialogue; self and mutual reflection; [stimulating] improvement' (2014). Gosling argues for the effectiveness of the third of these and outlines its key features, where it:

- promotes reciprocal learning
- recognises professional autonomy of all parties
- is based on dialogue, or more simply conversation
- is non-judgemental

- focuses on changing or developing professional practice
- incorporates enquiry or investigation. (Gosling, 2014)

The Peer Supported Review model moves beyond standard peer review to open ‘a wider space for learning which can include those aspects of teaching and learning not accessible to observation, but which through conversation can be discussed, investigated and critiqued’ (Gosling, 2014).

Peer observation of teaching, or peer review of teaching, is one of the most common approaches under the broad heading of observation of teaching. O’Leary and Cui note that ‘peer-based models of observation have been used as a form of collaborative professional development by academic staff to stimulate reflection and provide a catalyst for thinking about and discussing teaching’ (2023, pp. 90-91). Peer observation, complete with variations, is commonly described in the literature, however, the scholarship also considers other forms of observation which share qualities with standard peer observation of teaching and have some distinctive features or differences. Table 1 lists some approaches which appear in the literature under the broad heading of observation of teaching

Approach	Brief description
Peer Observation/Review of Teaching	A peer observes a colleague teaching; often reciprocal; may involve review; generally involves dialogue at pre and post stages; typically uses standard approaches (e.g. ground rules, templates); variations exist re the configuration of the observers and observees (several descriptions in the literature).
Cycle of Collaborative Observation (CoCO)	Peer observation of teaching but with student collaboration and participation in the process as observers (O’Leary and Cui, 2020).
Teaching and Learning Circles	Circles of three or four colleagues who observe each other’s teaching, with or without review as agreed. Dialogue and reflection important (Rogers et al., 2019; Grooters, 2008).
Just watching Just teaching	Peers just watch a colleague teaching; no review is involved (Thomson, Bell and Hendry, 2015).
Video-reflection	Colleague is videoed teaching for own review or for sharing (McCoy and Lynam, 2020; Tripp and Rich, 2012).
Unseen observation	Colleague plans their teaching, discusses with a peer (called ‘collaborator’), teaches class, gathers student feedback, reflects, engages in professional dialogue with collaborator, writes feed forward action points (O’Leary, 2022).

Table 1. Models of observation of teaching (OoT).

More expansive descriptions of these models are available [here](#).

Key Messages

- There is no 'one size fits all' – the approach adopted needs to be context, community and culturally specific.
- Clarity around the purpose of observation of teaching is essential (O'Leary and Cui, 2023). Observation of teaching can be used in a range of settings, for a variety of purposes including performance management, quality assurance and professional development. The purpose behind the process will greatly influence the approach adopted.
- A range of observation of teaching approaches/models exist which have pros and cons.
- Engaging in observation of teaching has many benefits for observers and observees particularly around professional learning and enhanced teaching and learning practice.
- A number of key success factors are largely applicable across a range of approaches and settings, for instance, clarity around the purpose, shared principles and values, importance of relationships particularly between observers and observees etc. (Hendry et al., 2021). Certain characteristics are considered very important in observation of teaching models including trustworthiness, collegiality, expertise, confidentiality, autonomy, respect.
- It is important that the approach has a clear ethos of 'encouraging collaborative inquiry, critical reflection and a commitment to using observation as a catalyst for professional dialogue between colleagues' (O'Leary and Cui, 2023, p. 119); and that the approach involves 'parity of power relations and ... reciprocity of learning.' (Gosling, 2014)
- Frameworks, templates, guidelines and/or structures around the process are important, however they must be balanced against being overly structured and managerial (Thomson, Bell and Hendry, 2015). Training and support may be needed for staff and this may involve the introduction and/or development of alternative methods such as coaching and mentoring.
- Participating in observation of teaching can be challenging and staff may feel nervous about it.
- Time, workload and resourcing are important factors to consider prior to implementing observation of teaching.
- Observation of teaching can be part of enquiry into practice, problem solving and decision-making.
- Ownership of the process by participants is essential, as is dialogue (O'Leary and Cui, 2023).
- Care needs to be given to the 'type, purpose and quality' of feedback where it is provided (Yiend et al., 2014).
- Challenges which exist include devising and delivering an appropriate and supportive model, capacity building for staff, time and resources for engagement with the process and the supporting of same, issues of power and performance, ongoing development of the approach etc.

- The process may be aligned with existing schemes (for example academic promotions) and programmes (for example professional development programmes or personal development plans).
- Clarification and agreement are needed regarding what happens beyond the observation process. For instance, are there development opportunities, is a digest of the findings shared across depts, faculties, the institution?
- Review of the process at agreed intervals would be beneficial.

References

Bell, A. and Thomson, K. (2018). 'Supporting peer observation of teaching: Collegiality, conversations, and autonomy', *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 55(3), pp. 276-284. DOI: [10.1080/14703297.2016.1212725](https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2016.1212725)

Cui, V., O'Leary, M., Pressick, I., Reynolds, S., Roberts, L., Turville, N. and White, N. (2020). 'Learning about learning and teaching: developing classroom consciousness and reimagining collaboration between students and staff', *PRACTICE*, 2(2), pp. 128-144. DOI: [10.1080/25783858.2020.1831737](https://doi.org/10.1080/25783858.2020.1831737)

Georgiou, H., Sharma, M. and Ling, A. (2018). 'Peer review of teaching: What features matter? A case study within STEM faculties', *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 55(2), pp. 190-200. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2017.1342557>

Gosling, D. (2002). *Models of peer observation of teaching*. LTSN Generic Centre. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/David-Gosling-4/publication/267687499_Models_of_Peer_Observation_of_Teaching/links/545b64810cf249070a7955d3/Models-of-Peer-Observation-of-Teaching.pdf

Gosling, D. (2014). 'Collaborative Peer-Supported Review of Teaching', in Sachs, J. and Parsell, M. (eds.) *Peer Review of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. Professional Learning and Development in Schools and Higher Education*, vol 9. Springer, Dordrecht. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-7639-5_2

Grooters, S. (2008). *Teaching squares: Participant handbook*. Centre for Teaching and Learning. Stonehill College. Easton, Massachusetts. Available at: <https://stonehill-website.s3.amazonaws.com/files/resources/participant-handbook-08-09.pdf>

Hendry, G.D., Bell, A. and Thomson, K. (2014). 'Learning by observing a peer's teaching situation', *International Journal for Academic Development*, 19(4), pp. 318-329. DOI: [10.1080/1360144X.2013.848806](https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2013.848806)

Hendry, G.D., Georgiou, H., Lloyd, H., Tzioumis, V., Sharon Herkes, S., and Sharma, M.D. (2021). "'It's hard to grow when you're stuck on your own": enhancing teaching through a peer observation and review of teaching program', *International Journal for Academic Development*, 26(1), pp. 54-68. DOI: [10.1080/1360144X.2020.1819816](https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2020.1819816)

Johnston, A.L., Baik, C. and Chester, A. (2022). 'Peer review of teaching in Australian higher education: a systematic review', *Higher Education Research and Development*, 41(2), pp. 390-404, DOI: [10.1080/07294360.2020.1845124](https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1845124)

McCoy, S. and Lynam, A.M. (2021). 'Video-based self-reflection among pre-service teachers in Ireland: A qualitative study', *Education and Informations Technologies*, 26, pp. 921–944, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-020-10299-w>

O'Leary, M. (2022). 'Rethinking teachers' professional learning through unseen observation', *Professional Development in Education*. DOI: [10.1080/19415257.2022.2125551](https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2022.2125551)

O'Leary, M. and Price, D. (2016). 'Peer Observation as a Springboard for Teacher Learning' in O'Leary, M. (ed) *Reclaiming Lesson Observation: Supporting Excellence in Teacher Learning*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 114-123.

O'Leary, M. and Cui, V. (2020). 'Reconceptualising Teaching and learning in higher education: challenging neoliberal narratives of teaching excellence through collaborative observation', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 25(2), pp. 141-156. DOI: [10.1080/13562517.2018.1543262](https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2018.1543262)

O'Leary, M. and Savage, S. (2020). 'Breathing new life into the observation of teaching and learning in higher education: moving from the performative to the informative', *Professional Development in Education*, 46(1), pp. 145-159. DOI: [10.1080/19415257.2019.1633386](https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2019.1633386)

O'Leary, M. and Cui, V. (2023). *Developing Excellence in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education Through Observation*. London: Routledge.

Rogers, T., Wass, R., Timmermans, J. and Golding, C. (2019). *A framework for enhancing teaching culture and practice*. Wellington: Ako Aotearoa.

Shortland, S. (2004). 'Peer observation: a tool for staff development or compliance?', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 28(2), pp. 219-228. DOI: [10.1080/0309877042000206778](https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877042000206778)

Thomson, K., Bell, A. and Hendry, G. (2015). 'Peer observation of teaching: the case for learning just by watching', *Higher Education Research and Development*, 34(5), pp. 1060-1062. DOI: [10.1080/07294360.2015.1034349](https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2015.1034349)

Tripp, T.R. and Rich, P.J. (2012). 'The influence of video analysis on the process of teacher change', *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 28 (5), pp. 728-739. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2012.01.011>

Warren, F. (2022). 'Diffracting peer observation: talking about differences, not looking for perfection', *International Journal for Academic Development*. 27 pp/1-5. DOI: [10.1080/1360144X.2021.1998903](https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2021.1998903).

Wass, R. and Rogers, T. (2021). 'Using video-reflection and peer mentoring to enhance tutors' teaching', *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 58(1), pp. 36-46. DOI: [10.1080/14703297.2019.1695646](https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2019.1695646)

Yiend, J., Weller, S. and Kinchin, I. (2014). 'Peer observation of teaching: The interaction between peer review and developmental models of practice', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 38(4), pp. 465-484, DOI: [10.1080/0309877X.2012.726967](https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2012.726967)



How to cite this document: Farrell, A. (2023). *Observation of Teaching in Higher Education - a brief guide*, Centre for Teaching and Learning, Maynooth: Maynooth University.



[CC BY-NC-SA](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/): This license allows reusers to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the material in any medium or format for noncommercial purposes only, and only so long as attribution is given to the creator. If you remix, adapt, or build upon the material, you must license the modified material under identical terms.