

## TWELVE TIPS

# Twelve tips for peer observation of teaching

ZARRIN SEEMA SIDDIQUI, DIANA JONAS-DWYER &amp; SANDRA E. CARR

The University of Western Australia, Australia

## Abstract

This paper outlines twelve tips for undertaking peer observation of teaching in medical education, using the peer review model and the experiences of the authors. An accurate understanding of teaching effectiveness is required by individuals, medical schools, and universities to evaluate the learning environment and to substantiate academic and institutional performance. Peer Observation of Teaching is one tool that provides rich, qualitative evidence for teachers, quite different from closed-ended student evaluations. When Peer Observation of Teaching is incorporated into university practice and culture, and is conducted in a mutually respectful and supportive way, it has the potential to facilitate reflective change and growth for teachers.

## Introduction

Evaluation of teaching and teacher effectiveness has received renewed attention in higher education institutions. Some universities are using student evaluations as one of their performance indicators, linked to funding allocations. Despite recommendations that a range of formative and summative evaluation methods and tools (Elzubeir & Rizk 2002) be used to evaluate teacher effectiveness, many universities have not moved beyond reviews of individual course evaluations by students (Fitzpatrick & Joyce 2004).

It has recently been recognised in medical schools that the central role of the teacher should be evaluated (Harden & Crosby 2000; Elzubeir & Rizk 2002). Evidence of teaching effectiveness is not used only to evaluate student experience and outcomes, but also to substantiate applications for promotion. In a survey of medical schools, four methods for evaluating teaching were ranked as 'highly important' for the purposes of promotion: teaching awards; peer evaluation; learner evaluation; and teaching portfolios (Beasley et al. 1997). Of the 115 medical schools that participated in the survey, more than 70% were using these methods frequently or always.

Peer Observation of Teaching (POT) is one method of evaluating teaching, and can offer formative feedback to assist in the development of reflective processes of the teacher and to provide qualitative evidence to substantiate student evaluations (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond 2004). Academics might like POT if they have a curiosity about their colleagues' teaching methods and strategies, an interest in improving their own teaching effectiveness, or feel comfortable being observed in the classroom because they have previously experienced observations (Keig 2000).

Conversely, academic staff might resist POT if they have concerns about the objectivity of the observer or the accuracy and generalisability of what is reviewed, or if they feel that the

observation might restrict their academic freedom (Keig & Waggoner 1995).

In a questionnaire study of General Practitioner teachers, only half of the teachers were willing to take part in the peer-observation process. Time constraints, busy workloads, and fear of scrutiny and criticism were identified as hurdles that might inhibit participation in the process (Adshead et al. 2006). The level of resistance may alter, depending on the POT model chosen.

## Models

There are several models of POT. These models differ on the basis of either the number of observers (i.e. pairs, trios, or larger groups) or the purpose of the observation (Table 1). According to Gosling (2002), "peers can be colleagues from the same department, either of a similar status or there can be differentials of status, or the colleagues can be from another department or from a central educational development unit".

Three models have been developed according to the purpose of the observation: an evaluation model; a developmental model; and a peer-review model (Gosling 2002). In the evaluation model, it is usually a senior faculty member who observes others, while in the developmental model, the observer is an educational developer, expert or teaching practitioner. The essence of the peer-review model however, is that teachers observe each other, often in a reciprocal process. They are not being judged by any externally set criteria; instead, the assessment is based around a set of mutually agreed issues (Ewens & Orr 2002). One could even argue that the evaluation and developmental models are not actually peer models, because of existing power relationships in the earlier two models.

The purpose of this paper is to provide twelve tips for the peer-review observation of teaching in medical

*Correspondence:* Z.S. Siddiqui, Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry & Health Sciences, Education Centre, The University of Western Australia, M515, 35 Stirling Highway, Crawley, Perth, WA 6009, Australia. Tel: 61 8 93464864; fax: 61 8 93463120; email: zarrin.siddiqui@uwa.edu.au

**Table 1.** Models for peer observation of teaching (Gosling 2002).

| Model               | Objective   |
|---------------------|---|
| Evaluation model    | Identify under-performance, confirm probation, Appraisal, promotion, quality assurance, assessment.                 |
| Developmental model | Demonstrate competency, improve teaching competencies; assessment quality enhancement and professional development. |
| Peer-review model   | Engagement in discussion about teaching; self and mutual reflection on good practice amongst academic staff.        |

1. Choose the observer carefully
2. Set aside time for the peer observation
3. Clarify expectations
4. Familiarise yourself with the course
5. Select the instrument wisely
6. Include students
7. Be objective
8. Resist the urge to compare with your own teaching style
9. Do not intervene
10. Follow the general principles of feedback
11. Maintain confidentiality
12. Make it a learning experience

**Figure 1.** Twelve tips for peer observation of teaching.

education (Figure 1). These tips may also be relevant to the developmental model. Although primarily written for the observer, these tips may be equally helpful to the observed teacher, as well as to institutions aiming to introduce peer-review observation.

## Tip 1

### Choose the observer carefully

The observation process should be a collaborative effort among colleagues who trust and respect each other. Therefore, careful consideration is required in choosing the observer. For example, academic rank may influence the process, if a good rapport does not exist between the colleagues. The first author experienced the importance of rapport when the Teaching Assistants Program at Aga Khan University was implemented in 2002. Concerns had been raised by the regular faculty members about the quality of facilitation by the graduate teaching assistants, so the decision was made to observe the teaching assistants. As the author had developed the training program for the teaching assistants and was regularly interacting with them, the participants felt comfortable with the author being the observer.

In an informal discussion among participants of the Foundations of Teaching and Learning (FTL) Program at the University of Western Australia (Perth, Australia, July 2005), one participant related how she had invited two people to observe her teaching. One of the people was from the same department, and the other was another member of FTL Program. The participant felt at more ease with the other participant from the FTL Program, because they could relate

well to each other, both being new to the university. Hawkey (1995) describes it as 'shared empathy': where peers are involved in a parallel experience.

## Tip 2

### Set aside time for the peer observation

The process of peer observation comprises three stages: pre-observation; observation; and post-observation. The pre-observation stage involves discussing the process and gaining an understanding of the session to be observed. The second stage is the actual observation. The post-observation stage involves reflection and debriefing. These three stages require approximately 45-60 minutes both before and after observation, plus the duration of the observed session.

## Tip 3

### Clarify expectations

It is helpful to meet before the observation and clarify the roles of the observer and the observed teacher, and to agree on the process and evaluation criteria. This will help to alleviate concerns about the observation process. For example, in the FTL Program, the following concerns were raised about an observer being present: students might lose respect for the teacher; it could have a negative impact on group dynamics; there might be disagreement on the content; and the session may end up as a total mess.

If peers are not comfortable observing or being observed, they will not learn from the experience. Another way to reduce the anxiety is for the novice to observe the more experienced peer's session prior to their session being observed.

## Tip 4

### Familiarise yourself with the course

Review the learning outcomes, type and content of learning resources, and the number of students in the course. If it is available, review previous student feedback about the course prior to the observation (Goody 2005). This information can be used later, in conjunction with your own observations.

## Tip 5

### Select the instrument wisely

A range of instruments is identified in the literature (Beckman et al. 2003; Fry & Morris 2004; Bell 2005). Many universities conduct their own evaluations of teaching units, which might offer assistance, either by allowing the development of an instrument from their existing item pool, or by providing a pre-existing instrument for the observation. If selecting instruments for an observation session, the emphasis should be on selecting the ones that match your session format.

## Tip 6

### Include students

If a large class is being observed, an observer may not be noticed. In cases of small groups, such as tutorials or problem-based learning, the presence of an observer can cause anxiety among students. It is best to inform students beforehand that there will be an observer present, and explain that the observer is not there to assess the students; rather, they are there as part of the professional development of the academic staff.

## Tip 7

### Be objective

While you are observing the session, work within the previously agreed observational framework (see Tip 3). It is equally important to consider the students' perspectives; for example, observe whether they are enthusiastic or bored (Bell 2005). You should make notes during the observation—this information will be useful when providing feedback to your colleague.

## Tip 8

### Resist the urge to compare with your own teaching style

Being peers does not necessarily mean that the two of you will have the same teaching style. Concentrate on the teaching style of the person and the interactions that you observe.

## Tip 9

### Do not intervene

Whilst observing, you may feel like intervening at times. However, it is important to remember that your role is just to observe. You may not know what the observed teacher has planned. For example, in a problem-based learning session, the observer noticed that the students had misinterpreted a fundamental aspect of atherosclerosis. She refrained from intervening, although she found this difficult. Later, she realised the facilitator had deliberately not corrected the students' misconception—instead, she asked several pertinent questions that led the group to identify the gap in their knowledge and discuss it further as a learning issue.

If an observer intervenes, an uncomfortable situation may arise. This can reduce the credibility of observed teacher in the students' view and may lead to resistance towards peer observation. As Slade (2002) pointed out, it is harder to observe than to be observed.

## Tip 10

### Follow the general principles for feedback

This is the crucial step in the process. Observation itself does not lead to improved teaching; rather, it is the process of

debriefing and feedback that is so helpful. Encourage the observed teacher to articulate their experience of the session. Self-reflection helps to create a positive learning climate, which in turn encourages discussion. Inform your peer about their strengths and identify areas where improvement may be required. Avoid any direct advice about future actions unless the observed teacher requests it (Munson 1998). Discussion, in the form of questions and comments, will encourage the observed teacher to explain their intent, and give them an opportunity for them to reflect and to enact subsequent change. Schon (1987) describes a 'reflection on action' approach that involves thinking about what has happened, what may have contributed to that event, whether appropriate actions were taken, and how the event may affect future practice.

## Tip 11

### Respect confidentiality

It is important to respect the confidentiality of this relationship, and both peers should show integrity and maintain the highest professional and ethical standards. It is likely that your observations will lead you to make judgements about the person's teaching abilities, but these thoughts should not be shared or discussed with colleagues.

## Tip 12

### Make it a learning experience

Giving supportive feedback and constructive advice is an extremely challenging skill (Cosh 1998). The observational experience is a great learning experience for the observer, who can build or enhance skills such as teaching techniques, managing students, and asking questions. Complete the observation process by sending a note of thanks to the observed teacher.

## Conclusion

Peer review of teaching provides academic staff with an opportunity to reflect on and improve their teaching practices and can promote supportive teaching relationships between staff. Medical schools that plan to introduce POT must implement it in such a way that it can truly foster a culture of personal questioning, reflection, adaptation, and improvement (Peel 2005). If it is adopted in a superficial, mechanistic manner, it is unlikely to effect change. When POT is conducted in a mutually respectful and supportive way, it is a valuable and worthwhile practice.

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## Notes on contributors

The authors are all affiliated with the Education Centre, Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry & Health Science, at the University of Western Australia.

ZARRIN SEEMA SIDDIQUI, MBBS, MCPS (Psychiatry), MEd Studies, is a Lecturer in Assessment & Evaluation. She has previously been involved with faculty development activities in Pakistan and has been associated with College of Physicians & Surgeons Pakistan and Higher Education Commission Pakistan.

DIANA JONAS-DWYER, BAppSc (Hons), MSc, GradDip(IS), is a Senior Lecturer in Medical Education, is currently pursuing a PhD in Information Technology, and is actively involved in faculty development programmes. She was previously involved in the Foundations of Teaching and Learning Programme at the University of Western Australia.

SANDRA E. CARR, RN, RM, BSc, MPH, is a Senior Lecturer in Medical Education and Deputy Head of The Education Centre. She has worked as a curriculum developer and educational researcher since joining the Faculty Education Centre in 2002.

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