

**Classroom Visits: Best Practices for Observing Junior Faculty**  
**LTC/FAC Session - March 29, 2012**  
**SUMMARY**

**General Requirements and Guidelines**

- The Faculty Handbook procedures for third-year and tenure reviews, special reviews, and PEAR reviews stipulate that every senior colleague must make “repeated personal visits” to the classes and equivalent activities (lab, studio, rehearsal, practice, game, performance) of the junior faculty member under review. There has been general consensus that this means at least two and not more than five total visits by each senior colleague during the official review period.
- Each kind of class (or activity) that the faculty member teaches should be visited by someone. Visits should be spread out over the entire review period and should not be bunched at the end of terms.
- Senior colleague class visits can often be uncomfortable for senior as well as junior faculty. Senior faculty are encouraged to help develop a more robust culture of mutual non-evaluative observation and feedback, both with each other (among colleagues within a department or in a “Teaching Circle” across departments) and with junior colleagues. Inviting junior colleagues to visit your classes, encouraging them to take advantage of the LTC’s student observer program, and suggesting that they join a Teaching Circle or trade visits with their extra-departmental mentor are all ways of making non-evaluative classroom observations more frequent and reducing the inevitable stress of the 3<sup>rd</sup> year and tenure reviews.

**Advice for Senior Faculty**

**Before the visit:**

- Never make surprise visits; arrange a time in advance for the visit. (Being observed is stressful enough without surprises!) Ask your junior colleague which classes/days would be best for him/her. If possible, begin your observations with the classes about which s/he feels most confident.
- Talk briefly with your junior colleague to ask about the context of the class you’ll see: where does it fit in the syllabus? what’s the context for the day’s activities? etc. Ask what your colleague would particularly like feedback on. This will help focus your observations and let you know of any concerns your junior colleague might have and ways you can be helpful.
- Confirm the day before the class that it’s still appropriate to visit.
- It’s also helpful to schedule the after-visit feedback session before you visit the class, so your junior colleague won’t wonder or worry about when that meeting will take place.

**During the class visit:**

- Don’t be a no-show for a class you said you’d visit! This is extremely disconcerting to a junior colleague at the very moment s/he needs to be completely focused on the students and the class.

- Arrive at the class you will be observing a bit early. The first few minutes of class are among the most important in terms of learning how your colleague “sets the table.” Additionally, coming in late models poor behavior for students and shows disrespect for the junior faculty member.
- Do not participate in the class in any fashion. Do not attempt to answer questions or to ask them. Do not engage the students around you in conversation about the class. Do not ask the students how they think the class is going. Sit in the back or a corner to make it clear you are observing and not participating. Avoid facial expressions that will distract or worry the instructor.
- Be attentive. Don’t do the things you don’t like students doing in class (reading a newspaper, texting, grading a paper, etc.). Don’t leave early but stay for the entire class.
- Think in advance about what you will look for in the class. This can include things like the atmosphere in the classroom, the level and sort of engagement of students, what kind of learning activities are going on, the degree to which students are “getting” what the faculty member wants them to, as well as clarity, content, structure, etc.
- Take good observational notes. Many seasoned visitors suggest making two or three columns on a piece of paper. In one column, take notes as if you were a student or jot down particular classroom events, and, in another, record your comments about what you’re seeing & hearing; a third column could be used to note the time so you can track pacing and distribution of class activities. A possible form for organizing feedback was developed a few years ago by JFAC and is available in the LTC. In any case, it’s important that your impressions be supported by actual classroom events.
- Be conscious of the effect your presence might have on the dynamics of a small class.

#### **Feedback session after the visit:**

- Some faculty have found it helpful to share their notes with the junior colleague before or during the feedback session.
- Have your feedback session as soon after the observation as possible, while things are fresh for both of you (normally within a day or two). Do not delay feedback until after you’ve made several visits, unless perhaps you’re visiting two successive classes.
- Begin the postn observation session by asking your colleague how s/he thought it went. Ask how the class period you observed was both typical and atypical and the ways the class met the instructor’s expectations and goals or not.
- Comments should be substantive. In addition to comments on clarity, content, and approaches taken by the instructor, also provide feedback on what you observed of student behaviors and interactions (which an instructor may not notice); comments about pacing, timing of breaks, student interactions or reactions can be helpful. Uses of technology can be a fruitful topic of discussion.
- Be candid. Don’t withhold criticism. Your job is to be an “honest mirror.” It is much better to discuss areas for improvement BEFORE they show up in student and colleague letters at third year review or tenure time. The stakes are much higher then, and your colleague will feel justifiably blindsided if things emerge at the end of the review that you never had the courage to discuss. You can do this diplomatically and descriptively (what was the effect of saying something or doing something in a particular way, or of failing to do something?) in a way that’s constructive and helpful. But don’t fail to bring up concerns.

- Adopt an open mind as you observe, recognizing that there are many ways to teach effectively. It is often helpful to share one's own experiences in the classroom, but don't try to persuade junior colleagues that they must do just what you do. Be open to what you can learn from junior colleagues both in terms of content and pedagogy. If the junior faculty member shares feedback that's been given by other colleagues, do what you can to help synthesize the various comments and suggestions.
- Be sure to note strengths in the faculty member's teaching and discuss ways to build on them.
- Begin and end each conversation with something positive. Remember that your observations are formative, not summative – at this point you're a mentor, not a judge. Your job is to help your junior colleagues become the very best teachers they can be through specific and constructive feedback.

### **Advice for Junior Faculty**

#### **Before the visits:**

- Make your class schedules and syllabi available to senior colleagues to facilitate scheduling their class visits; indicate which days are unsuitable for visits (tests or field trips or whatever) and which days you might particularly like to be observed (they might not take you up on the latter, but they might).
- After a visit is scheduled, you can take the initiative regarding a pre-visit conversation to set the context. You might want to provide Moodle access to a prospective visitor, explain what happened in the prior class that you'll be following up on, or provide other kinds of context. Be sure to ask for whatever particular kind of feedback you want – think of your senior colleagues as consultants who can help with what *you're* concerned about.

#### **During the visits:**

- Faculty differ in their decisions about whether to acknowledge the presence of senior faculty visitors in their classes; some mention that “we have a guest today” and others choose not to say anything. You might want to ask the Chair if there is a departmental norm, but the important thing is to decide what you're comfortable with and go with it.

#### **The feedback meetings:**

- Share your reactions and analysis of the class; provide information that will help your colleague understand the dynamics or the substance of the class.
- Ask follow-up questions to be sure you understand the feedback you are getting. Ask how to translate any criticisms you might hear into suggestions for the future. Again, use your senior colleagues as consultants.
- Try to keep an open mind to the suggestions and feedback that your senior colleagues give you. Try to explain your thinking behind particular decisions you made in the classroom without being defensive.

### **Advice for department chairs**

- The Department chair is responsible for ensuring that all senior colleagues visit classes as required, and that all the kinds of classes the junior colleague teaches during the review

period are visited by someone. It's also desirable that only one colleague visit at a time (though this may be difficult in some large departments). There's no sure-fire way to coordinate a review, and practices differ across departments; in some, the administrative assistant keeps a sign-up schedule and in others the junior faculty post their syllabi on which senior colleagues sign up. In any case, communication between the chair and junior faculty is of paramount importance and the chair needs to be timely in reminders to senior faculty. It is your responsibility to be sure that your colleagues follow Faculty Handbook procedures properly and that an accurate record of visits is kept (to fill out the required record-of-visits form for the Dean when the departmental letter is submitted).

- Try to set the proper tone for the review in all interactions with colleagues (senior and junior), remembering that the goal is to be supportive and constructive, even when offering criticisms. Studiously avoid saying or doing something that might be construed as aggressive, punitive, or threatening.
- Consider hosting your own "kick-off" meeting of third-year and tenure reviews with all senior members and your junior colleague. Discuss timeline and class observations, making sure that you give your junior colleague ample opportunity to ask specific questions. This might be a good time to schedule visits. Such a meeting would be especially helpful if the review is conducted by a committee rather than (just) a department.
- Consider also a separate review meeting for senior colleagues. Go over the Faculty Handbook on third year reviews and tenure and share guidelines from the LTC and the Department Chairs' Handbook. Remember, as Chair it is your responsibility to shepherd the review process in a way that is fair, procedurally appropriate, and as clear and comfortable as possible for your junior colleague.
- Deborah Appleman, Chair of Educational Studies, offers this suggestion for after visits are complete: "Consider having an informal conversation with senior colleagues and the junior colleagues about patterns and themes that seem to emerge across observations. This may sound potentially intimidating, but if you create a supportive tone, it can be a good way to share observations not only with your junior colleague, but also with each other." This would be especially helpful in synthesizing disparate comments that colleagues might make. The suggestion is a reminder that we should all be working to create a larger culture of collegial observing and talking about teaching.
- Reviews are not a time to build relationships; you should be reaping the benefits of a solid relationship that you have already created with your junior colleague. Consider now what kind of relationship building your department needs to do before the next formal review begins.