

# **Developing “teacher’s eyes:” Observation activities for new teaching assistants**

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# Experienced TA observation

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# Objectives

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- Observe the teaching practices of a more experienced TA.
- Promote reflection about teaching.
- Learn strategies for taking observational notes during a class.

# Procedures

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- Visit experienced TA's class
- Take notes
- Use questions on handout to focus observations
- Write reflection

# Handout

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# Typical results

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- Noting similarities reassures TAs they are doing some things well.
- Observing gives TAs images of alternative ways of structuring class.
- Assuming student's perspective in class sensitizes TAs to impressions they are conveying to their own students.

# Challenges for the professional developer

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- Some TAs focus exclusively on the mechanics of teaching (clarity of boardwork, speaking voice, attendance-taking practices, etc.).
- Some TAs focus exclusively on mathematical content in class and neglect pedagogical issues.
- Taking notes proves challenging for some TAs.
- Some TA's write-ups are mostly evaluative and not analytic.

# Opportunities for the professional developer

- What TAs attend to in observations is often indicative of their own practices → gain insight into TA's teaching, identify potential issues.
- Feedback on write-ups create opportunities to help TAs learn how to describe, analyze, and critique teaching practices → prepares TAs to give and receive constructive feedback.



# Peer observation

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# Objectives

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- Experience *receiving and giving* constructive feedback about teaching.
- Promote reflection about teaching.
- Generate list of specific areas for improvement and strategies for change.

# Procedures

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- Assign partners to TAs.
- TAs select issues to receive feedback on.
- TAs visit each other's classes.
- TAs meet to exchange feedback and generate lists of specific issues to work on.

# Handouts

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# Typical results

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- Coming up with suggestions for partner generates confidence in TA's own teaching abilities.
- Having partner's list of areas for feedback helps focus TA's observations.
- Meeting with fellow TA to discuss teaching sanctions seeking out and having such conversations.

# Challenges for the professional developer

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- TAs sometimes request feedback only on mechanics of teaching.
- If partnered TAs' practices are very similar, receiving constructive feedback is not always possible.
- Talking about teaching practices in meaningful detail is challenging for some TAs.

# Opportunities for the professional developer

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- Each TA generates list of issues to work on → provides concrete issues for follow up observations and/or discussions.
- TAs sometimes report feedback they receive is not critical enough → creates opportunities to discuss characteristics of constructively critical feedback.

*-Bring this form with you-*

## Experienced TA Observation

Your first activity for the semester is to observe a class taught by an experienced TA.

Plan to visit the class by \_\_\_\_\_

Observation write-up due by \_\_\_\_\_

### **Before the visit**

- Look at the list of TAs and select the section that you will visit.
- Send the TA an email message saying that you are a new TA and let them know when (day and time) you will be visiting. **This is very important.**

### **During the class**

- Sit near the back of the room or along an edge of the classroom (so you can watch the students as well as the TA).
- Watch what the TA does and listen to what they are saying to the students.
- Take notes. A useful method is to write what is happening in class down the left side of the paper and your related thoughts/comments/ideas down the right side (either during class or afterwards).

In addition to making general observations about what the class is like, pay particular attention to the following issues:

1. In what ways are your teaching practices similar to those of the TA you observed? In what ways are they different?
2. What kind of questions did the TA ask the students? What did the TA do when students didn't know the answer to a question?
3. Are there any ideas that you picked up from watching the TA's class?

### **After the class**

Write up your observation. You may write about anything you wish, but your write up needs to include a discussion of questions 1-3 listed above.



**\*\*\*Bring this form with you\*\*\***

## Peer observation form

Your partner's name: \_\_\_\_\_

When you will be **visiting**  
**your partner's class:**

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Room: \_\_\_\_\_

When your partner will  
**observe you:**

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Room: \_\_\_\_\_

On **your form**, list three specific areas of teaching. You may choose anything you want but try to think of things that you wouldn't be able to get feedback on from your students (for example, the kinds of questions you ask and what you do with students' answers, the choice of problems/examples, encouraging student participation, encouraging communication between students, time management, etc.) that **your partner** would like to receive feedback on. Tell your partner the areas **you** want feedback on- this information goes on **your partner's form**.

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

## Peer observation

The goal of this activity is for you to give constructive feedback to your partner about their teaching and for you to receive constructive feedback from your partner about your teaching.

### Procedures

#### **Before the visit:**

1. Schedule a time when you will visit each other's class. Note the date, time, and room on **your** Peer Observation form.
2. Think of three specific things you would like feedback on. You may choose anything you want but try to think of things that you wouldn't be able to get feedback on from your students.
3. List the areas that **your partner** has asked you to pay particular attention to on **your form**.

#### **During the visit:**

Bring paper and take notes during the class. Your notes will be most useful if they are a description of what went on in class. They should be descriptive information that will be used during the discussion of how the class went. (You may want to divide your note paper in half with one column for the description of what happened in class and the other column for your comments, questions or suggestions. ) You should also make note of the time in one of the margins as the class progresses.

#### **After the visit:**

1. Arrange a time for you and your partner to meet to discuss both observations.
2. Before the discussion, review your notes and think about the areas that your partner wanted feedback on. Think about what kind of specific, constructive feedback you would like to give.

#### **During the discussion:**

1. It is best to start the conversation by discussing something positive about the class. Your job is to make constructive and specific comments and suggestions. Your feedback should be tactful and respectful, yet honest.
2. You should think of specific strategies to try to help your partner, building on strengths that were observed. Try to pick small, specific items that your partner can work on in the short term. For instance, focusing on improving communication could entail facing the students when speaking (rather than the board), speaking more slowly and checking for

student understanding more frequently. Pick strategies that you think can actually be implemented in the next few weeks.