Principles of Classroom Observation at Allegheny College

This document articulates baseline, college-wide standards and principles by which departments and programs can formulate their own classroom observation policies.

Background. During a department chairs meeting in the fall of 2009 it was recommended that a task force be formed to draft “meta-guidelines” by which departments and programs can formulate their own policy for the classroom observation of faculty. What follows is the result of that work. In the course of its deliberations, the task force (Jennifer Hellwarth, Dan Willey, Jeff Hollerman, and Ben Slote) looked at classroom observation practices already in place in some Allegheny departments, along with the “best practices” of other institutions and other research and literature on the subject.

The following do not represent prescribed expectations; one uniform set of rules in this area would not suit all departments equally well, given the distinct size, culture, workload patterns, and discipline-specific pedagogies of each. On the other hand, these meta-guidelines represent important institutional principles and practices. Each department’s and program’s own classroom observation policy should therefore adhere to these guidelines as fully as possible. As the Faculty Handbook states and the Faculty Review Committee has underscored, one necessary source of evidence in the evaluation of faculty is “assessments by colleagues based on classroom observation.” The Handbook also acknowledges the value of such observation in the mentoring of colleagues (5.2, p. 43). Classroom observations should be happening every year in every department. What these meta-guidelines describe are ways to make that observing most useful, fair, and consistent, within and across departments.

Formulating classroom observation guidelines has other benefits as well:

- since many departments are doing some sort of classroom observation, it is only fair and right that ALL departments do it and that there is some basic commonality among these practices so untenured colleagues know the “playing field” to be relatively even;
- putting such a practice in writing helps demystify it, makes it more consistent, and holds senior colleagues to this responsibility;
- a college-wide “policy” further demonstrates an institutional commitment to teaching and (in the formative mode of classroom observation) to making good teachers better teachers.

Meta-guidelines for Classroom Observation. The college encourages faculty within and across departments and programs, and irrespective of rank, to routinely observe one another teach and have detailed, collegial conversations about what they have observed. Much can be learned, by observed and observer alike, when we watch each other teach.
Sections Two and Three of this document suggest such relatively time-intensive formative “best practices.” Section One contains less time-intensive classroom observation policies, our minimal expectations, crucial to effective summative and formative assessment of untenured faculty.

I. Minimal expectations. These are practices that all departments and programs should follow when undertaking summative evaluation.

- **Frequency.** Every tenure-track colleague should be observed teaching by at least one tenured colleague each year, for formative or summative purposes (depending on when the observations take place in the observed’s review schedule);

- **Sequence.** Classroom observations should happen on two sequential classes or as close together in the calendar as circumstances allow;

- **Scheduling.** The observed faculty member should help determine the dates of the visits at least a week ahead of time (no surprise visits). If the observed faculty member is visited by more than one tenured colleague in a semester, every effort should be made to avoid having more than one or two faculty observing the same class meeting;

- **Before-and-after meetings.** The observer should meet with the observed colleague both before the class observation sequence to put those classes into context, and afterwards (one day or at most a week after the last observed class). These before-and-after meetings should be understood as occasions during which the colleague getting observed can inform the observer about the course in general, what he or she is trying to accomplish in these particular class meetings, and what he/she would like the observer to look for. After the classroom visits, the observing faculty member should describe—orally, or both orally and in writing—what he or she observed in the areas the observed faculty member designated beforehand and in other areas where the observer discerned noteworthy strengths and challenges. (For a more detailed description of this process, see Section Three below.)

- **Team-teaching as classroom observation?** While teaching a class with a colleague can offer a unique and detailed sense of how that colleague teaches, it should not be substituted for the classroom observation process described in this document.

II. Best Practices, in brief. The College also encourages departments and programs to follow these guidelines and suggestions:
In summative observations, in any year before an untenured colleague’s departmental review, all tenured colleagues should observe him or her teach, with every effort being made not to have more than one or two faculty members attend the same individual class meeting. This period of observation can be spread out across the previous two semesters and, if necessary (if a tenured member is away during the previous academic year, for example, or otherwise indisposed), can include the semester in which the review takes place.

The observing faculty member should write up a summary of the classroom observations and, if the observed colleague prefers this, place it in the department file. If the summary is placed in the faculty member’s department file, a copy should also be placed in his or her Dean’s file.

The more routinely formative classroom observations happen in a department, the better. Successful formative observations procedures can include:

- Exchanging classroom observations
- Matching untenured and tenured colleagues in year-long mentoring arrangements
- Arranging classroom observations across departmental lines

Classroom observers should take detailed notes descriptive of the colleague’s teaching and of the classroom dynamics (including student behavior). Such details can be invaluable for formative assessment. Furthermore, effective departmental reviews (department letters) should include detailed observations about how the observed colleague teaches, not just statements of judgment, and such detailed reviews are typically based on the detailed notes of individual classroom observers.

III. Best practices: the before-and-after meeting—from Rick Holmgren, “A Class Visit Model,” 2002. (A copy of Rick’s complete essay is accessible on the Faculty Resources website, under the Assessment tab).

The Pre-Observation Conversation The goal of the pre-observation discussion is to identify the instructor’s learning goals for the students, her or his strategies for meeting those goals, and areas of concern to the instructor. Learning is more effective if the learner is motivated to learn the material, and a class observation will be more helpful if it focuses on issues of interest to the instructor. For example, if my intent is to create a learning environment that stimulates students to ask questions and then explore those questions with me (the instructor), then an observation report that details how I might present the material in a lecture format may not be as helpful as one that addresses the ways in which I facilitated the questioning and investigative process. To help the observer focus on issues that are important to the instructor, the instructor should be encouraged to answer the following questions in the pre-observation discussion:

- What is your teaching/learning philosophy? (Or, how do you describe your approach to facilitating student learning?)
• What are your learning goals for the students in this course?
• What are the learning goals for the class session to be observed?
• What will be happening in the class? Are you trying any instructional techniques in this class session that you have not used before?
• What do you see as your primary role in this class session (e.g., leading discussion, moderating a debate, organizing activities, presenting material)?
• What do you expect students to be doing in this class session (e.g., discussing, creating models, taking notes)?
• Is there anything in particular you would like the observer to be watching for in the class session to be observed?

It is often helpful if the instructor shares a syllabus or other class materials with the observer. It also helps develop mutual trust if the observer answers some of these questions for his or her own courses during the conversation. A written summary of the learning goals, teaching strategies, and issues of particular interest can help focus the observation and provide a starting point for the post-observation discussion.

The Class Visit

Before the class visit, the instructor prepares the students for the observation and clarifies the role that the observer will play in the classroom. It is impossible for an observer to sit in a classroom without being noticed by the students, and if no reference is made to the observer’s presence, the students will supply their own interpretations, which may or may not reflect positively on the instructor. On the other hand, students are likely to react positively if the instructor informs the students in the class period before the observations that he or she is exchanging class visits with another faculty member for the purposes of developing the teaching skills of both faculty.

Problems might also arise if the role of the observer in the classroom has not been identified. In particular, the instructor needs to decide whether she or he intends to introduce the observer to the class and whether the observer will participate in class activities or simply observe. And of course, the observer should honor the instructor’s wishes in this regard.

During the class visit, the observer takes notes both on what he or she observes (describing what the instructor and students are doing at each moment) and his or her response to the behaviors (e.g., comments about the observer’s level of understanding of the material and what aspects of the class help or hinder that understanding, questions that come up in the observer's mind, the observer’s emotional reactions to the material or classroom behaviors, inferences about student understanding or reactions drawn from student behaviors, etc.) An effective way to take notes is to use a split-page format: A line is drawn down the middle of the paper. On the left, the observer makes notes on the content and the instructor’s actions. On the right, the observer notes her or his response to the material or situation, questions that come up for her or him, or other commentary. Ideally, responses are lined up across from the content moment during which they occurred. Some observers find it helpful to write the time in the left margin occasionally so that class events can be more easily located in the post-observation discussion. Often, the notes are given to the instructor during the post-observation discussion.
In general, the observer attempts to disturb the normal flow of the class as little as possible, which implies that the observer arrives a few minutes early to find a seat, stays for the whole class or until a class break, and refrains from speaking to students during class activities. The transition from a break to class is a particularly important period for setting the tone of a class and arriving early will provide the observer the opportunity to observe how the instructor manages this transition. Late arrivals or early departures are disruptive and send negative signals to the class about the perceived value of the class. In addition, although students are a good source of information about the class, the observer should refrain from talking with them about the class, especially during class as that could impart negative messages about the class or the instructor to the students, and any feedback gathered in this manner is likely to be skewed by the small sample size and the tendency of students with similar attitudes to sit next to one another.

The Post-Observation Meeting The instructor and the observer should discuss the class as soon after the class as possible. Ideally, the discussion occurs immediately after the observed class session when the session is still fresh in both their minds. An early meeting also helps to relieve any anxiety related to the visit that is felt by the instructor.

The instructor begins the follow-up meeting by describing her or his experience of the class and asking for feedback on specific issues, after which the observer can share her or his observations and answer any questions raised by the instructor. Since unsolicited advice often provokes defensiveness and is seldom useful to the instructor, the observer should refrain from offering advice or solutions (“This is what I would do . . .”) unless specifically asked to do so. The observer’s role is to serve as a mirror or recorder for the instructor; the observer’s role is not that of a teaching expert. The observer should bear in mind that students are often ill equipped to describe their experience in the classroom in a way that can help the instructor appreciate the triumphs and difficulties students experience. Consequently, the observer can usually best help the instructor by reflecting the student experience for the instructor, something an observer is often well equipped to do, especially when he or she is from outside the instructor’s discipline. Information about the student experience can then become a resource for the instructor in shaping her or his courses. As a side benefit of this approach to consultation, the observer may find that she or he will develop an increased appreciation for the joys and challenges of her or his own students. Indeed, many faculty with experience in class observation report that they learn more about their own teaching from observing the classes of others than from being observed themselves.