Navigating the (Potential) Minefield of Peer Observation

At some point between being hired and submitting your dossier for tenure, there’s a good chance you’ll have to undergo a “peer observation” of your teaching. If you’re in a department that has a clear policy, guidelines, procedures, criteria, standards, and an articulated set of best practices, you’re in excellent shape. It’s a good idea to ask for those documents in your first year, so that you’ll be on track and will not be surprised by last minute, pressurized classroom visits in the months just before you go up for tenure.

But what if your department has not yet written clear guidelines? What if there are no published criteria, standards, or set of procedures? This is a red flag, but you can exert some control over the situation. We recommend that you not wait and simply let things happen to you. It will be necessary for you to take some initiative to ensure that the process is transparent, valid and fair.

Recognize the difference between feedback on and evaluation of your teaching.
A fatal error we see regularly (and a reason for failed tenure cases) among pre-tenure faculty members is holding the assumption that all peer observations are evaluative and are therefore scary and to be avoided at all costs. Here’s a healthier perspective that more often leads to success: “I want all the feedback I can get—from multiple sources—so that when it’s time for a real evaluation I’ll be ready.”

Get in the habit of being observed by others.
If teaching “in public” gives you the slightest amount of anxiety, you’ll want to make sure you are over this by the time your official evaluation rolls around. How? Start in year one with low-stakes observations that allow you to receive friendly and helpful feedback. Here are some possible ways to get into the habit, ordered from lowest to highest stakes.

• Ask the students in your class to provide you with feedback on your teaching several times during the semester, by having them jot down on a piece of paper their answers to two questions: “What’s working well in this class? What would you like to change?”

• You can also take advantage of ITLAL’s “Midterm Feedback” instrument to collect data a little more formally, but the goal is the same: open the regular flow of information between you and observers.

• If you are working with GTA’s, ask for their feedback after each class.

• If you are working with or teaching other graduate students, invite them to visit your class on various days, and to meet with you to share with you what they observed.

• Partner with someone who is at the same approximate rank as yourself, and do an exchange of visits, providing feedback to each other. This can be someone outside your department—an observer doesn’t have to be an expert in your content area to provide useful feedback on your teaching methods.

• Ask a member of the ITLAL staff to come and observe your class once a semester. The feedback you get from them is strictly confidential, and the visits serve the purpose of giving you non-judgmental feedback as well as the experience of teaching in front of your peers.

• Arrange for a video recording of one of your class meetings, and watch it with a colleague or with an ITLAL staff member.

• Finally, starting in the first year, invite your faculty mentor or other trusted, senior faculty member to visit your class and ask him/her to evaluate your teaching. This will serve as a friendly “dry run” of a more formal observation as you get closer to tenure time.

If you do all of these things every year, you will be an old pro by the time formal evaluation comes around…and with all the feedback you’ll have received, you’ll have confidence that what you do is effective. No anxiety. No butterflies.

Know the Anatomy of an Effective Peer Observation.
Above all you want to avoid “drive by” (unannounced, drop-in) observations when a colleague is assigned to evaluate
your teaching. This can be politically tricky because there are departments where faculty members collectively believe that this time-honored practice is objective and fair. If so, you’ll need to have a conversation with the department chair and make the case that a fair evaluation of teaching requires sharing of information about the class meeting in advance. Otherwise, if the observer has no idea what the purpose of the class meeting for that day is, or what the strategy of the instructor is, the evaluation is very likely to remain at the superficial level. An effective peer observation process has a three-part structure.

1. **BEFORE THE CLASS MEETING.** Share relevant course materials with the observer, at least 2-3 days before the observation, and a “pre-observation” meeting before the class that will be observed. At that meeting the observee should communicate the following:
   - What are your objectives for the students in the activity being observed? (What changes do you want students to undergo? What skills, knowledge, and perspectives will they be developing?)
   - What will be your role (your own function) in the process?
   - What have you chosen to do (and how does this choice connect to your objective and role)?
   - What are your expectations for what students will actually do, and for what will actually happen in the classroom?
   - How will you know if you have been successful?
   - In what format would you like to receive feedback?

2. **DURING THE CLASS MEETING.** Armed with information from the pre-observation meeting, the observer will take notes on the class activities. The observer will act in part as an ethnographer, starting by taking note of what is happening in the classroom, without judgment, so that there is a body of information to reflect on and discuss in the post-observation meeting.

3. **AFTER THE CLASS MEETING.** Both parties will need the opportunity to reflect on what happened in the class before engaging in an in-depth discussion. As an observer, you will be tempted to ask for your observer’s feedback right away, and an observer often wants to have a conversation while the class is still fresh in your mind. Keep in mind, though, that the observer has just been exposed to a lot of data in a relatively short time, so it is best to wait a day or two before your “post-observation” meeting. At that point, both of you will be ready to have a more fruitful conversation. At this meeting, the observer may bring along a draft of a written assessment (if this is part of a formal evaluation), which should include the opportunity for the observee to respond to the observer’s comments.

**Get in the habit of observing others.**
What you learn from observing others funnels directly in your own reflection upon the nature of effective teaching. If you visit a class by someone who is highly effective, you’ll gain immediate ideas you can use in your own classroom. If you watch a class where someone is struggling, you’ll gain confidence that what you’re doing isn’t all that bad. Either way, the experience will make your more comfortable with the idea of transparency of the classroom. And what better way to open a collegial dialogue on teaching with members of your department than to ask—as a form of flattery—if you can visit their class? Once you visit theirs, the door will be open for you to ask them to visit yours as a favor and provide you with feedback.

**Make sure your syllabi are models for effective teaching and effective communication with students.**
Your syllabi say a lot about who you are and what you value. The learning goals for each one should serve as a template for how you expect students to learn and how you will facilitate that process. Make it a habit to share your syllabi with colleagues for feedback, or bring drafts to ITLAL if you want an impartial opinion. ITLAL staff can also provide some additional models and language that might be of use to you. Having these materials at the ready for potential observers can help you to avoid misunderstandings about your goals for your classroom teaching.

**In year one draft the teaching statement that will be the cover for your teaching dossier for tenure.**
This will get you in the habit of “reflective practice” from the beginning, which is the key to developing a strong portfolio. Writing down what you value and how you intend to teach will clarify your challenges and provide ideas for where you want to invest your time to teach well and efficiently. Getting feedback about your teaching can be a tremendous help in drafting and revising this document as well; often an “outside” opinion about your classroom practice can help you to see your teaching in new ways (and to realize that you are doing a lot of things well!)

**Would you like more information about Peer Observation?**
Check out the Peer Observation Resource Manual, available on ITLAL’s website: http://www.itlal.org. If you’d like to invite ITLAL staff to your class, email us at teachingandlearning@albany.edu, or calling 442-5521.