Managing peer observation: timescales and responsibilities

This briefing note is intended to provide online tutors who are new to peer observation with guidance on timescales and responsibilities for managing their participation on the programme. Please note that there is no 'one way' of conducting the peer observation process, and timescales and deliverables will depend upon individual circumstances – e.g. tutoring activity, workload and availability. It is important though from the beginning to set expectations on how the peer observation process will run, covering timescales and deliverables in the learning contract that you negotiate with your partner. You should endeavour to honour these commitments as the process unfolds.

Preparing for the observation

Once you have been matched with a partner, you will need to discuss the objectives for the peer observation and expectations on what will be observed and by when, which will form the basis of the 'contract' between you both.

If a face-to-face meeting is not possible, a Skype or appear.in call is an excellent starting point in getting to know your partner, sharing information about your tutoring approaches and the context of your online courses - touching on your respective teaching cycles and the most suitable timing for when the observation(s) should take place - as well as your motivations for joining the programme. This conversation should help to establish a rapport between you both and may also lead to the identification of areas of common interest that you could explore together as part of the observation process. It is also a valuable way of building up trust and establishing confidences between you and your partner, enabling you to challenge each other's practice and deliver critical feedback in a constructive way, rather than simply endorsing the good practice that is observable within a course site.

You will then need to complete the **peer observation pro forma**. Assuming that you both wish to observe and be observed, you will need to highlight the objectives for the observation process and the module / unit(s) that will form the basis of the observation, providing guidance on how the observer will gain access to your course site and where s/he will need to look to review the targeted materials or activities for the observation. At this point it is also important to pass on any additional context information about the way your course runs and what is expected of students in terms of their online participation. Do highlight to the observer what's visible in terms of the learning and tutoring support provision that is made available to your students and what's happening off-line. Providing the right level of contextual information will save the observer time when reviewing your online practice and making sense of the activity that is taking place within your course, and will also reduce the need for clarifying questions via email as the observation progresses. Please provide ethical guidelines to your observer on what is / is not meant to be observed within a course site. Finally for 'live' sites you will also need to let your students know that an external observer is visiting their course site, with an explanation for why the observation process is taking place.

The preparatory tasks should ideally be completed within 2 – 3 weeks of the matching process.

Conducting the observation

The observation process typically takes place over a month if it is a ‘live’ observation and usually involves about a couple of days’ work in dropping into a course site, observing activity and taking notes on the interactions taking place there in response to the observee’s questions. An observation of an archived site will be quicker to complete, given that all the key information that you need should be in one place, so the observation may be conducted in a concentrated block of time.

Note-taking during the observation should take the form of “I noticed …. and I wondered / thought / wanted to ask you…” and should be supported by actual examples of observed activity. Depending on the rapport that you have developed with your partner during the preparatory phase, you may feel able to go beyond the questions and comment on broader aspects of the course that you are observing, delivering critical and challenging feedback in a constructive way.

The observation is typically conducted over a period of a month for a ‘live’ course. For an archived course, the timeframe could be considerably shorter.

Exchanging feedback with your partner

Once the observations have been completed, it is important to arrange a meeting within the next two / three weeks to discuss the outcomes with your partner, whilst the courses are still fresh in your minds. Some participants prefer to email their feedback in a document to their partner first, and then use the meeting to clarify any points that need further explanation. Others prefer to get together first, either face-to-face or via Skype / phone, discussing the outcomes and clarifying any uncertainties before exchanging reports on what they have observed.

Whichever approach you take, it is important to deliver a report within a short timeframe – roughly two / three weeks after the completion of the observation, providing closure on the peer observation process.

Evaluating your peer observation experience

Both observers and those being observed will be asked to participate in the post-observation evaluation and it is assumed that participation on the programme is tacit acceptance of a willingness to do so. No confidences will be broken in doing so. The evaluation takes the form of a structured interview (roughly thirty minutes) conducted by the programme manager with each participant, focusing on each stage of the observation process. The interview is geared towards identifying improvements to the observation process which can be introduced for future cohorts.

The evaluation process will help you to identify actions to be carried forward as part of your day-to-day practice. The change agenda that you identify may touch on tutoring skills or techniques for personal exploration, but equally could relate to wider issues for follow-up discussion with your programme team members.

The exit interview will ideally take place immediately after you have exchanged reports with your partner and have held the feedback meeting with your partner.

Managing peer observation: summary of timelines and responsibilities

Key steps	Activity / method	Timescale
Step 1: Preparing for the observation	(i) Get to know your partner (preferably 'real time' - e.g. f2f or Skype/appear.in call), sharing information on: - your tutoring approach - context of your online course - motivation for engaging in peer observation identifying common ground & shared interests (ii) With your partner: define objectives and roles for peer observation, including: - module / units forming basis of observation - access to online module /unit & context information on course (what is online and what is not visible) and what is expected of students - ethical guidelines on what is / is not meant to be observed - particularly for 'live' courses. Inform students if observation of a 'live' course site is taking place, explaining the rationale for the observation and role of the external observer.	Completed within 2-3 weeks of matching
Step 2: Conducting the observation	(i) Visit a 'live' or archived module or unit (ii) Observe activity and note-taking in response to observee's questions (iii) Broader note-taking and commentary on module / unit	Conducted over a period of a month for 'live' courses. An archived course will be considerably shorter

Step 3: Exchanging feedback with your partner	(i) Communicate feedback through textual exchange (e.g. by email) (ii) Interactive exchange (preferably real-time – e.g. f2f or Skype/appear.in), discussing the outcomes and clarifying any uncertainties. *Steps (i) and (ii) may be reversed in order, with textual feedback serving as a record of discussion points from the interactive exchange*	Completed 2/3 weeks after completion of the observation
Step 4: Evaluating your peer observation experience	(i) Personal evaluation of learning outcomes from peer observation process and consequences for tutoring practice. (ii) Identification of actions to be carried forward – 'change agenda' for personal exploration or for discussion with programme team members	Completed immediately after exchange of feedback with partner

Further information

Please consult the following companion resource:

- **Peer observation pro forma and guidance notes**
  This pro forma will help you to prepare for the peer observation - specifically the observation and feedback arrangements. The guidance notes provide further information on the steps involved in conducting an observation, both observing and being observed.

For further information on the peer observation programme and details on how to get involved, please contact Dr Richard Walker (E-Learning Development Team): richard.walker@york.ac.uk