Peer observation for distance learning tutors: pro forma & guidance notes

Section 1a: About you

Your name, institution (York/Waikato/Otago), department/centre and contact details:
Your course programme and VLE platform:
Your role in relation to this programme, e.g. tutor; programme leader, etc.:
When do you want to be observed (delete as appropriate)? During which term? Summer/autumn? During a live/current interactive session? Y/N During a closed/past interactive session? Y/N

Section 1b: What would you like feedback from the observation to focus on?

Use these questions to guide your thoughts about what you want to achieve by being peer observed online, then list up to three aims: • Is there an aspect of your own teaching / support role that you would like to change or develop? • What are your goals in your use of technology to support learning? Are they currently being achieved? • What aspects of learning, use of technology, use of materials or use of online activities would you like feedback on? • Are there particular behaviours within your role as tutor that you would like the observer to feedback on? • Are there any areas of your practice in which you would welcome critical / challenging feedback from the observer?

Observation aims	**What will the observer need to look at?** E.g. which module/activity/VLE tool (s)/group(s)/ pathway or resource material etc.
• Aim 1	
• Aim 2	
• Aim 3	

Send a copy of this form to richard.walker@york.ac.uk at this point (to support programme monitoring and evaluation)

Section 2a: Observation and feedback arrangements - observer's name

Your name, department/centre and contact details:

Section 2b: How will the observation be conducted and feedback shared?
To be agreed directly between you and your observer.

• **When will the observation take place (approximate start and finish dates)?**	
• **Is any clarification of your observation aims needed?** E.g. to enable your observer to address them?	
• **Is any clarification of the things that need to be looked at needed**? E.g. does this involve real time synchronous discussion, a current 'live' asynchronous discussion or a closed asynchronous discussion?	
• **How does your observer gain access to your programme / module / collaboration or discussion space?**	
• **Is there anything else that your observer needs or wants to know before the observation begins?**	
• **Have you informed students that the observation is taking place and an external observer will be visiting the course site?** (for 'live' course)	
• **When and how will feedback be shared?** E.g. face to-face, by Skype / appear.in, in writing, a combination, etc.	

Section 3: Observer and person being observed
How will feedback/observations be used to inform future teaching?

• **How will feedback / observations be used to inform your own teaching?**	
• **How will feedback / observations be used to inform others' teaching?** E.g. those who teach on the same programme or module, those who teach on other programmes, etc?	
• **How will lessons learned be taken forward beyond personal actions?** E.g. lessons learned by both observer the person being observed, examples of good or innovative practice observed, ideas for the development of the technology in use or module design?	

Guidance notes

Principles of peer observation

Peer observation is primarily a developmental technique for the individuals involved. It facilitates the sharing of impartial and objective feedback based upon actual observations of teaching practice in order to:

- Enable the person being observed to better understand their behaviours and actions whilst teaching and so make informed decisions about how to behave and act differently in order to become a better teacher;
- Enable the observer to objectively describe and discuss the behaviours and actions of other teachers and to be informed by these observations. This will include the identification and sharing of good or innovative practices; and
- Enable diverse and innovative teaching methods and practices, including use of technology, to be opened up to external friendly scrutiny and discussion, in order to ensure that good and innovative practices are shared.

The person being observed owns the process in order to have confidence in it; hence self-selecting the materials to be observed, the timeframe of the observation and the aims of the observation are key.

Section 1 of the pro-forma encourages the person being observed to think deeply about what they require feedback on, why they want it and where the evidence is likely to be located.

Ideally both parties should meet prior to the observation to exchange the information set out in section 2 of the pro-forma, which should be seen as a prompt rather than as a checklist.

Context information refers to any important information about the group/activity/course that the observer will need to consider during the observation. This might include:

- The balance of online/face-to-face activities
- How the online activity/work fits into the overall course (timing / assessment criteria)
- Student mix
- Particular challenges and past experience

Focus for the observation

The person being observed may wish to reflect on the following questions to guide their thoughts about what they want to explore through peer observation:

- What are your goals in your use of technology and teaching approaches to support students' learning? Are they currently being achieved?
- What aspects of student online learning and use of technology would be most interesting for you to explore and why?
- Is there an aspect of your own online teaching and/or support role that you would like to change or develop?
- Are there particular aspects of your use of the technology, your online materials and/or the online activity that you would like feedback on? (Note: this might be to understand better why something works well as much as something that is not working successfully.)
- Are there aspects of your role as tutor that you would like the observer to focus on?

Select 2 or 3 specific areas, which might cover one of the following issues:

- **Materials, instructions & broader design issues**: e.g. site structure / materials presentation; content of online materials – level and clarity; assessment design; overall course design.
- **Tutor's online activity**: e.g. management of the online activity; tutor input into / contribution within student online discussion (quantity & quality); desirable behaviours; styles of questioning / prompting / developing student input; etc.
- **Student engagement in online activity**: e.g. amount of student participation; quality of student interaction; depth of student discussion.

For example, an observee might identify a perceived problem with students' engagement with a discussion exercise e.g. exhibiting behaviour such as the 'yes man' format or the 'post and run' or mini-essay, format within a discussion board activity. A guided observation might help to identify:

- the level and nature of interaction between tutor and student group? E.g. which behaviours encourage and discourage interaction?
- where to begin if the group has already started…"sometimes I wonder if they actually need me to say anything at all but I feel compelled to make a posting just to highlight that I am here"
- whether there is a student to student problem and, if so, whether and how it may be addressed.

Cross-institutional peer observation

A **cross-institutional** exchange might consider institutional differences in course design and technology usage, or differences in assessment practices, as a way in to discussing what's possible in online tutoring practice and examining transferable techniques which might work in a different context – challenging accepted institutional norms.

Cross-cultural exchanges from the 2015 York-Waikato exchange also considered communication and engagement strategies with students and drew attention to the nature of the teacher voice in facilitated discussion, in terms of the language and tone of tutor interventions in discussion forums.

For further ideas on themes for the observation, please take a look at the record of issues explored by participants from previous peer observation programmes (2011-2014) at the University of York, which are set out in the Appendix to this document.

Don't forget: The observee should provide advice to the observer on where to look for evidence. Please also consider your students. If you wish to use a 'live' module site as the basis for the observation, your students should be informed about the presence of an external observer in the course site and the observer's role, addressing the rationale for the observation that will be taking place.

Delivering feedback to the observee

Ideally feedback should be shared face to face, in private, where possible. The observer should seek to use non-judgemental language, which helps to foster a mutual learning process between observee and observer. Note taking during the observation would take the form of "I noticed …. and I wondered / thought / wanted to ask you…" and should be supported by actual examples.

Both those being observed and those doing the observing should be prepared and plan to practise what they learn as individuals, but also to share their learning with their immediate team colleagues and the wider distance learning community, including colleagues who support distance learning such as the eLearning team.

Post-observation evaluation

Both observers and those being observed will be asked to participate in the post-observation evaluation process, which has been established to identify improvements for future programmes. It is assumed that participation in the programme is tacit acceptance of a willingness to do so. No confidences will be broken in doing so.

APPENDIX

Observation themes explored in York peer observation programmes (2011-14)

Theme	Reported outcomes & issues under consideration		
Theme 1: Discussion Management			
Discussion management & organisation: • Encouraging student participation • Rounding off discussions • Responding when issues arise	Handling over-assertive students. Learning when to intervene and when to back off. Managing discussions – techniques & language	Techniques for controlling focus & pace of discussion Techniques for setting boundaries / ground rules for discussion Bringing students into discussion / closing discussions	Participation requirements for group discussion Strategies for drawing out quieter students Strategies for assessing group discussion
Methods for supporting student learning • Balance of feedback to individuals & group	Developing 1:1 support provision Developing provision for weaker students	Supervision techniques Feedback techniques to individual & group	Learning when to respond to a group rather than to individuals
Contribution of posts to discussion • Value of tutor's input to discussion • Tone & delivery of feedback • Length / style of tutor's posts • Balance between teaching & facilitation	Reflection on tutoring style Posing questions which really engage students	Use of humour Injecting challenge into postings – inviting students to justify their viewpoints	Tone & emotion in tutoring interventions Style vs. substance in tutoring interventions
Methods for stimulating group interaction • Stimulating student – student interaction	Managing group interaction	Design of tasks to stimulate student: student interaction	
Theme 2: Course design			
Course content • Building engaging materials • Presentation & content of course	Introduce video 'talking heads'; create personal stamp on course Different use of resources		Tips on improving visual structure of module
Activity design • Balance of tasks (individual vs.	Introduction of individual tasks as	Set up of discussions	Peer review exercises.

group) and use of media	springboard for learning.		
• Expectations made of students	Replacing discussion tasks with research exercises to encourage background reading.	Tips on structure and pacing of task – what to do and when.	Balance between personal reflective activities and discussion board postings.
Induction provision • Scope of induction (available materials & technology; allocated time)	Time allocation and preparatory study activities.	Interaction space and communication channels	
Theme 3: Tutor's skills (general)			
Language development • Use of language with non-English language native speakers	Being explicit in task design	Scaffolding learners to look for different perspectives in literature	
Pastoral support	Getting the right balance between academic guidance & pastoral support		
Time management • Managing delivery of feedback to students	Rotating mode of feedback delivery (audio vs. written feedback) between groups		
Technology usage • Alternative tools / delivery modes	Role & purpose of spaces: discussion & coffee areas Wikis to manage smaller group discussion Use of media & emoticons	Difference between Bb & Moodle Use of web conferencing – when and how to do this.	Difference between Bb & Moodle & 'adaptive release' Use of Twitter as starting point for pacing and structure of assessment responses.
Technology help & guidance • Layout of blog / forum discussion space			
Theme 4: Programme management			
Supporting associate tutors • Supporting & monitoring associate tutors			

• Quality assurance procedures			
Emergent themes			
Miscellaneous	Support for overseas students Preparation for writing at Masters level Modularisation	Helping students to build their own social media presence.	Delivering audio feedback through podcasts.