Improving Peer Observations: Start With The Why

A 5-Star Saturday Workshop

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Introduction

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Why Talk about Course Observations?

- lots of different approaches; not a lot of training
- varying levels of confidence
- can be/feel high stakes

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Session Outcomes

- Recognize **three models** of course observations (and who they serve)
- Understand the **three steps** of the observation process
- Reflect on biases that may impact observations
- Understand *what* to watch and *how* to watch
- Be familiar with some useful observation protocols and tools

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Agenda

1. Presentation on Observation Basics: why, who, and how
2. Interactive presentation on various Problems of Practice, including:
   - **PoP 1: Biases**
   - **PoP 2: What to focus on during an observation?**
   - **PoP 3: How to offer critique and constructive feedback**

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Basics

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Why do observations?

(from Gosling, 2002)

Evaluation Model: primary purpose is to provide feedback for appraisal, quality assurance

Developmental Model: primary goal is to improve teaching and learning

Peer Review Model: goal is self- and mutual reflection

Share in Chat: Which of these models best reflects the work you've done, as an observer?

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How should observations be structured?

Ideally, three steps:

1. Pre-observation meeting or survey
2. Observation
3. Post-observation discussion (and possible action plan)

***With, Not To**: The process works best when it is collaborative. Instructors should be able to see the observation as something that is done with them; not something that is done to them (Danielson).*

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Pre-Observation

Building Trust and Preparing for the Observation

1. Focus on the purpose
2. Be transparent (share rubric, standards, process you will use)
3. Gather information about the course and class session
4. Invite participation (instructor's goals and methods, feedback requests)

Share in Chat: Given constraints on time, how do you accomplish this? (In-person meeting? Survey? Email?)

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Observation

Respecting their space and students' needs

- Arrive a few minutes early
- Sit in the back; be discreet while taking notes
- Do not participate or intervene
- Exit quietly
- Follow up to thank the instructor and provide next steps

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Objectivity?

"Observing is not a neutral process. It is influenced by circumstances, the method of observation as well as what the observer brings to the event."

"The observer . . . can influence what is observed."

Gosling, 2002

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Post-Observation

(In person or in writing)

Focus on strengths and self-reflection

1. Ask instructor to articulate their experience of the class session
2. Point out strengths you observed
3. Identify and discuss areas for growth and improvement
4. Focus on *dialogue and reflection* rather than advice-giving (unless asked)

Share in Chat: Given constraints on time, how do you accomplish this?
(In-person meeting? Survey? Email?)

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Dealing with Discomfort

- Acknowledge power dynamics
- Focus on the "why" of observation: fresh perspective
  - Spirit of inquiry
- Emphasize holistic view: classroom as ecosystem
- Emphasis on student learning

Reflection: What anxieties arise (for you, for the observee) and how might you mitigate them?

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PROBLEMS OF PRACTICE

Bias

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Everyone has Biases!

We all have biases. They are unconcious, fast, and pretty hard to eradicate.

Biases hold even when a behavior is no different

"**Blind spot bias**" is the bias that we don't have biases!

Consider: A high-stress mental state makes us more vulnerable to bias

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Example 1

"Observers are apt to assign high ratings to teachers they see leading high-ability classrooms [high achieving students], regardless of the teachers' actual performance" (Whitehurst et al.)

In other words we may be more likely to "see" high quality teaching to those instructors teaching advanced courses with highly-capable (privileged?) students, than see it in those instructors leading teaching lower level courses with struggling (or traditionally marginalized) students.

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Example 2: Availability Hueristic

Relying heavily on what is observed in the moment)to draw conclusions and generalizations) without also considering other aspects of the teacher's work.

- Single observation is only a snapshot in time. It may take "..two to four class visits to gain reliable data." (Bandy)
- The "invisible" work of teaching: homework assignments and projects, office hours, syllabi. (Lang)

Consider: How might you mitigate over-reliance on what you see on the particular day your observe a lesson?

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Example 3 - Negativity Bias

We remember the bad stuff more easily.

- "… greater attention tends to be given to negative than positive stimuli, negative information is weighted more heavily than positive information, and negative emotions tend to be more influential than positive emotions" (Kiken et al)
- "negative information …leads to impressions that are more resistant to change than those based on positive information" (Kiken et al)

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Example 4 - Peak-End Rule

We remember intense, high-energy moments more easily.
We remember the end of an experience more easily.

Consider on your own: How might you mitigate over-reliance on the one (or two) dynamic moments in during an observed lesson?

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Example 5 - Epistemology

How an observer was "raised" or enculturated (e.g. by their discipline, their professional trajectory, departmental norms) can be a key determinant of evaluation quality and approach (Hines, 2015)

What are the standards of excellent teaching within the department or discipline?

- What are the observers' individual teaching styles and preferences?

What is the observer's conception of teaching, learning? What is the observer's teaching persona?

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Example 6

Gender, Race, Appearance

- Racial bias in evaluations is real
- Gender bias in evaluations is real
- Evaluators are more likely to rate physically attractive people higher than those deemed less attractive
- Evaluations are strongly influenced by non-teaching behaviors (e.g. perceived attractiveness, facial expressions, gestures, and speech patterns)

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Review

- We are more likely to "see" high quality teaching to those instructors teaching advanced courses with highly-capable (privileged?) students
- Relying heavily on what is observed in the moment…. without also considering other aspects of the teacher's work (Availability Heuristic)
- Negativity Bias, Peak-End Rule
- Epistemology, conceptions of learning, and one's own teaching persona
- Gender, race, appearance, affect/gestures, accents (etc.)

Discussion: As an observer, how can you mitigate and/or manage your own biases?

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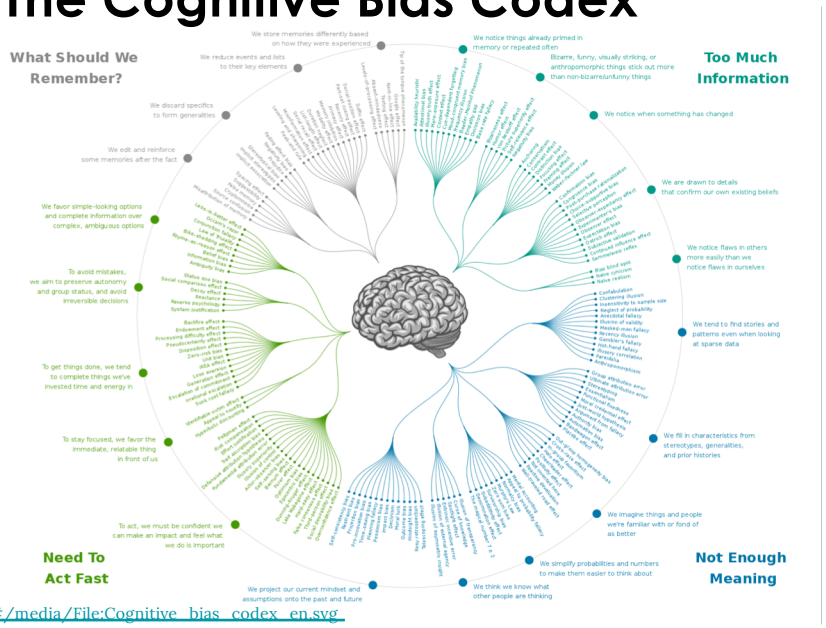
More to explore: The Cognitive Bias Codex



Source: Wikipedia
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_cognitive_biases#/media/File:Cognitive_bias_codex_en.svg

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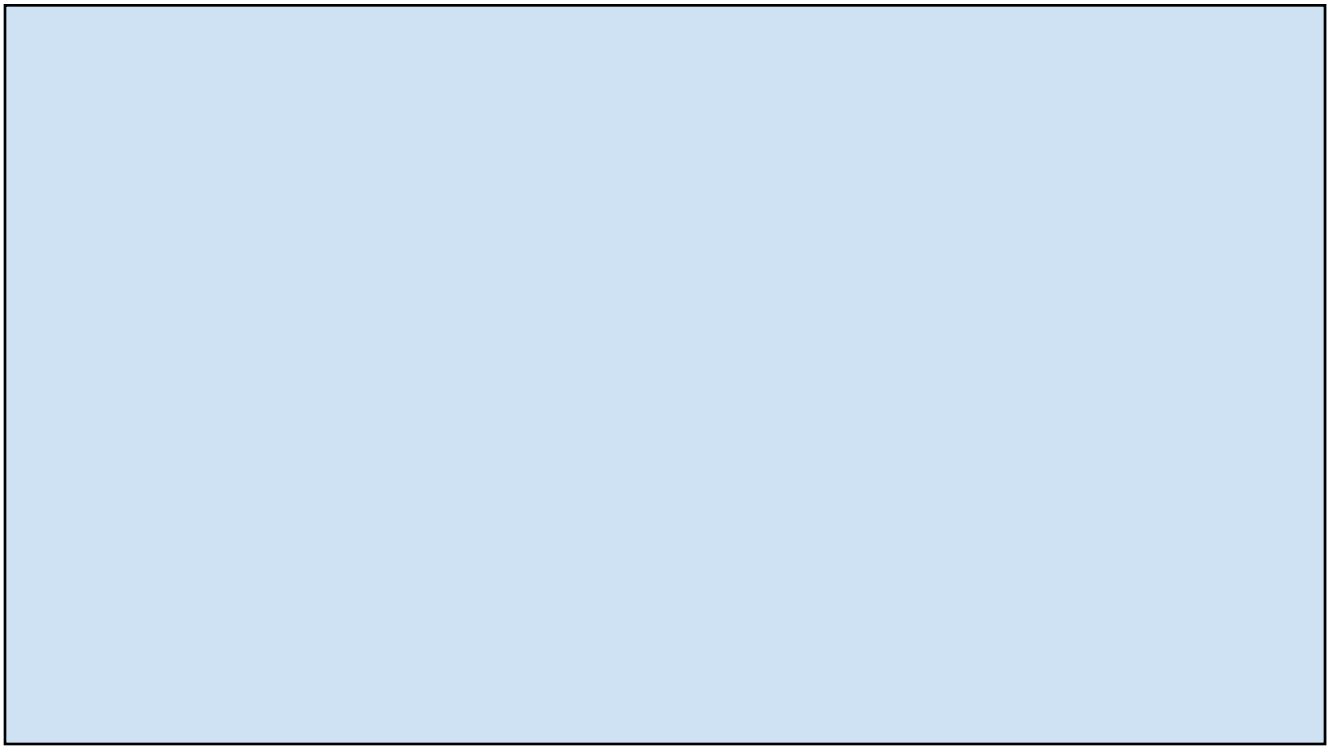

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PROBLEMS OF PRACTICE

What to Watch

(and how to capture it in the moment)

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What to Watch

- What is the instructor doing?
- What are the students doing?
- What is the level of engagement?
  - Engagement (academic, cognitive, relational) is a good proxy for student learning
  - Because there are links between academic, relational, and cognitive engagement in the classroom and increased persistence/improved success outcomes. Meta analysis: "There is a high relationship existing between student engagement and academic achievement" (Chang et. al, 2016).

How to Watch…

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Approach 1: Narrative Description

Narrative descriptions tell a story of what went on in the classroom.

- **Precise description of behaviors:** Professor A *asked*, Professor A *demonstrated*, Student A *responded*
- **Quantitative measures**: Professor A called on 7 *students* by name
- **Limited interpretations**: e.g. Students *seemed confused* about the quiz instructions

Share in Chat: Does your department use this approach? What are the benefits and drawbacks?

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Example of Narrative Description:

> Professor D asked, 'what is plagiarism? Who can tell me?' He waited for students to respond and repeated the question three times.
>
> When students still did not respond, he added, 'It's on your handout.' Students still did not respond. Finally, Professor D wrote the answer on the whiteboard.

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Approach 2: Chronological Notetaking

Capture observations minute-by-minute (~ field notes)

- Two-minute intervals
- Coded notes
- Captures instructor actions, student actions, level of engagement

Examples: "COPUS" and "TDOP"

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Interval #	1	2	3	4	5
Minute	0-1:59	2:00-3:59	4:00-5:59	6:00-7:59	8:00-9:59
What is the instructor doing?					
What are the students doing?					
What is the level of engagement?					
Notes					

Adapted from the Teaching Dimensions Observation Protocol (TDOP).
M.T. Hora, A. Oleson, J.J. Ferrare, Wisconsin Center for Education Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison

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Examples of codes

What is the instructor doing?	• **L** Lecturing • **SOC-L** Socratic lecture • **A** Assessment
What are the students doing?	• **SGW** Small group work/discussion • **PI** Peer interactions • **SQ** Student question to Instructor
What is the level of engagement?	*(next slide)*

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What is the level of engagement?	• **VHI Very High:** More than 75% of students are actively taking notes or looking at the instructor/course materials • **HI High:** Between 50% and 75% of students actively taking notes or looking at the instructor/course materials • **MED Medium**: Between 25% and 50% of students actively taking notes or looking at the instructor/course materials • **LO Low**: Less than 25% of students actively taking notes or looking at the instructor/course materials

TDOP does not take into account relational or emotional engagement, but there are some other rubrics that do (peer-to-peer interaction, affirming statements, even laughter)

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Table 1. Example of CCCO Protocol Qualitative Anchoring, Quantitative Scoring.
CCCO = Community College Classroom Observation.

1	2	3	4	5
CCCO academic engagement (attentiveness)				
• Over half the class appears to be inattentive (e.g., not looking at each other or instructor, sleeping, texting, talking,leaving class, doodling, or fidgeting in their seats). • Two thirds of class is passive. • Few students exhibit attentive body language.		• At least half of the students in the class exhibit attentive body language (i.e., look at speakers [instructors/students], lean forward in seat, take notes). • Few students in the class appear inattentive as indicated by ignoring the conversation, texting, sleeping, doodling, or fidgeting in their seats.		• Most students in class have attentive body language (i.e., following the conversation, leaning forward, taking notes, and raising hands to volunteer answer/initiate questions/make a comment). • No more than one or two students could be classified as inattentive.
CCCO cognitive engagement (curiosity)				
• Students only ask behavioral clarification questions. • Students rarely ask factual questions. • Students do not express opinions, guesses, and ideas related to content.		• A few students in the class ask *critical questions* (beginning with "how" or "why"). • A few students in the class express an opinion, guess, and/ or synthesizing idea related to content with some prompting from instructor.		• Several students in the class ask critical questions (beginning with "how" or "why"). • Several students in the class express opinions, guesses and ideas related to content. • At least one critical question is asked by a student who challenges the reading/ professor or provides alternate explanations.
CCCO relational engagement (validation)				
• Members of the class are silent, *ignore* each other, or may *put down* others' contributions. Members of the class put each other down.		• Members of the class may not praise or encourage each other when someone makes a positive contribution to the classroom, but		• Members of the class appropriately praise and encourage each other's contributions, acknowledge when someone makes a pos-

Alicia et. al, 2016

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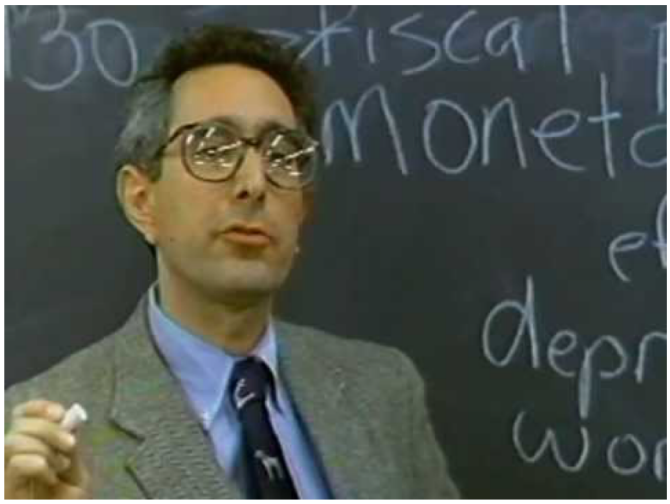
Not a Socratic Lecture



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Interval #	1	2	3	4	5
Minute	0-1:59	2:00-3:59	4:00-5:59	6:00-7:59	8:00-9:59
What is the instructor doing?	**AT**	**CR, IND**	**A, CR**	**A, CR**	**A, CR**
What are the students doing?	**PI**	**PI**	**A, DW**	**A, DW**	**A, DW**
What is the level of engagement?	**VHI**	**VHI**	**VHI**	**VHI**	**VHI**

Notes:

Lots of peer interaction on lesson-related topics before and at beginning of class. Students then settled into a quiz on the day's reading assignment. Engagement level is VHI, with 21 students present.

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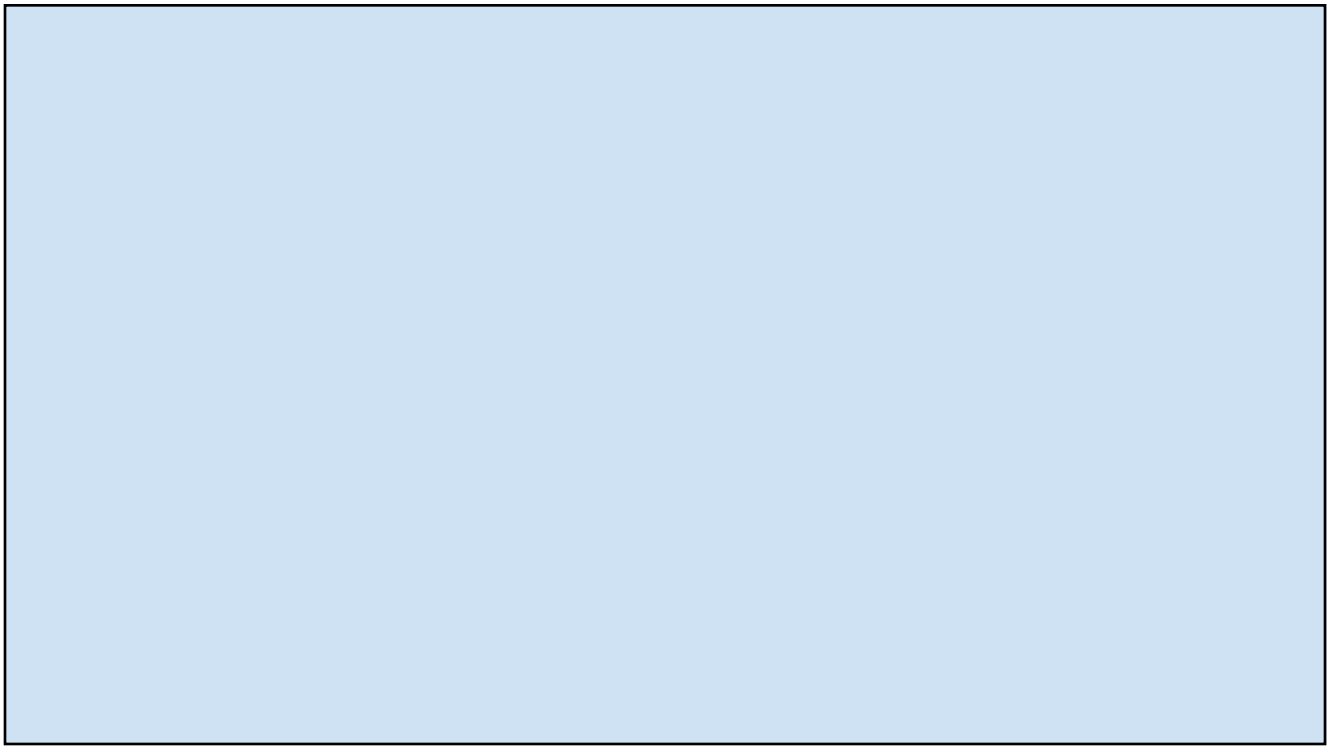

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Approach 3: Rubric(s)

Captures observed behavior in a binary or scaled manner:

- Binary: Did the instructor do this? (Yes/No)
- Scaled, by level of level of competence (E.g. "**developing** this skill", **proficient** in this skill, "**strong** demonstration of this skill")
- Scaled, by recommendations (E.g. "needs major revision", "moderate revision", "only minor revisions needed")

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Sample Rubric

https://docs.google.com/document/d/13PzujLdwPHye2sQFDiMnBMpwXpDgdl8Y7gx2H2l-ghE/edit

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Review of What to Watch

- What is the instructor doing?
- What are the students doing?
- What is the level of engagement? (academic, cognitive, relational)

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Review of How to Watch

- Narrative Description
- Chronological Notetaking
- Rubric or Checklist

Share in Chat: Which of these methods have you used? How well have the worked? What other observational methods and tools have you tried?

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PROBLEMS OF PRACTICE

Constructive Feedback

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Ideally…

What you give feedback on is informed by the observee wants feedback on, informed by the pre-observation discussion

Focuses on what serves students

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Tips for feedback

1. **Describe observations; avoid judgement and inference.** Be specific. Focus on behaviors, rather than person/persona

   E.g. “I heard students asking deep questions of each other”

   E.g. “I noticed you more often called on students who raised their hands first.”

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2. Describe effect (or possible effect)

E.g. “Students were really engaged with each other, and challenging each other’s ideas in a respectful manner. It appeared there was well-distributed participation. Students seemed to feel safe to stretch in that discussion.”

E.g. “The student may feel that they were not heard, and that their voice not respected or welcomed.”

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3. **Invite comment and reflection** from the instructor. Ask what changes they wish to try, or resources they'd like to explore.

4. **Offer constructive feedback.**

   E.g. "I encourage you make more use of "probing" type questions, to elicit student reasoning."

   E.g. "You used think-pair-share effectively, so keep that up."

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Review:

1. Describe observations; avoid judgement and inference.
2. Describe effect (or possible effect)
3. Invite comment and reflection from the instructor
4. Offer constructive feedback.

Discussion: What has worked well in the past, for you? Are there differences to consider, depending on the medium (e.g. in-person vs. written feedback)?

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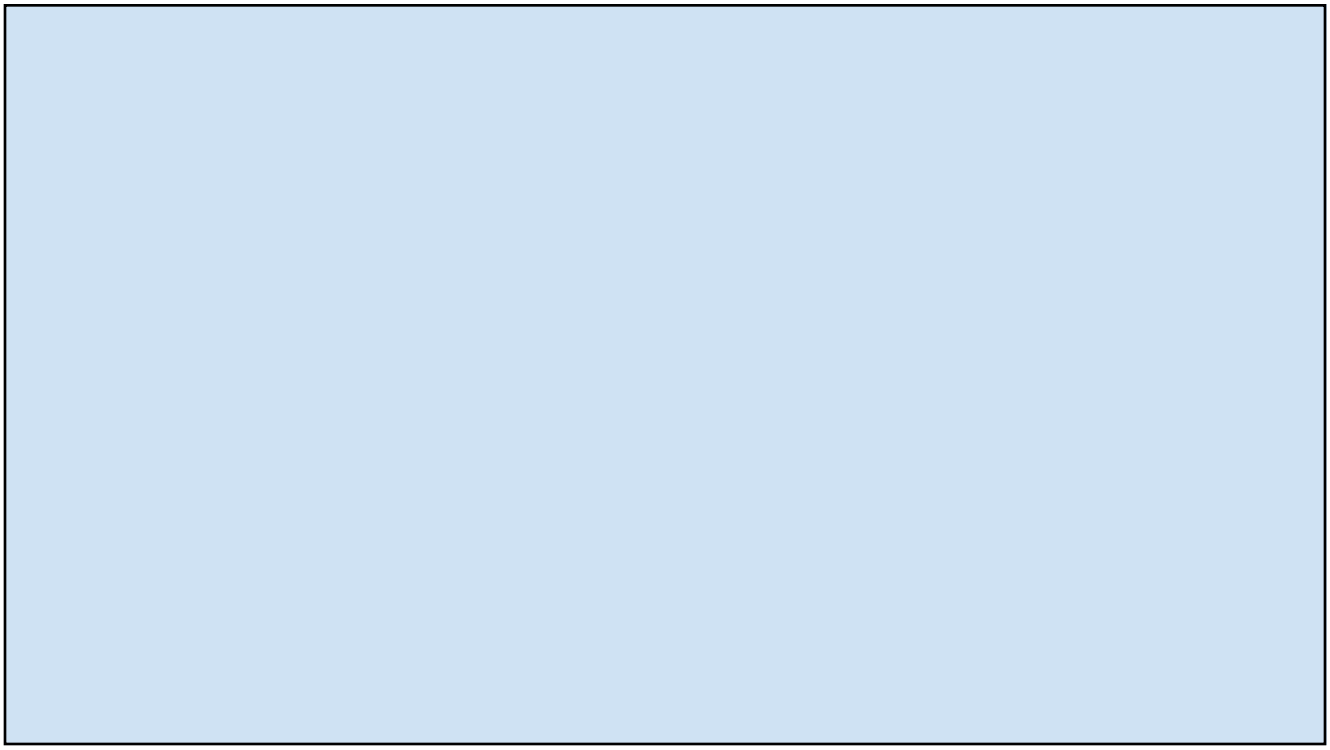

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Closing

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Session Outcomes

- Recognize **three models** of course observations (and who they serve)
- Understand the **three steps** of the observation process
- Reflect on biases that may impact observations
- Understand *what* to watch and *how* to watch (and why)
- Be familiar with some useful observation protocols and tools

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Outline

Presentation on why, who, how

Interactive presentation on various Problems of Practice, including:

PoP 1: Biases

PoP 2: What to focus on during an observation?

PoP 3: How to offer critique and constructive feedback

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Feedback

This was our first offering on this topic - we would like your feedback.

We selected **three Problems of Practice** to focus on. *Did we pick the right three? What other significant challenges would you have liked addressed?*

This workshop was primarily didactic (presentation) with some opportunities for discussion. *Was this an effective format? What activities would you have liked to participate in?*

Where there moments when you felt particular engaged, and learned something new? Tell us about it, please.

Where there moments when you felt particularly dis-engaged? Tell us about it, please.

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Resources

All materials and resources, including a references list, will be housed online, in Canvas:

Cascadia.Instructure.com/Courses/1527838

Module: "Saturday Workshop - Improving Peer Observations"

This is a free and open Canvas site, hosted by Cascadia, for 5-Star.

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