Partners for Improved Teaching and Learning
Qatar University Peer Observation Program

Introduction

The Office of Faculty and Instructional Development (OFID) offered numerous workshops covering a wide range of topics including teaching methodologies, assessment and technology. To encourage faculty members to fully benefit from their involvement in PD activities, OFID initiated *Partners for Improved Teaching and Learning*, a peer observation program designed to support faculty members in their effort to continuously improve their pedagogical skills. The purpose of the program is to provide an opportunity for faculty peers to hold reflective conversations about teaching.

Observations

Currently 40 percent of colleges and universities use some form of peer observation. Peer observation can be defined as a “[two-way trust] process through which two or more professional colleagues work together to reflect on current practices; expand, refine, and build new skills; share ideas; teach one another; conduct classroom research; or solve problems in the workplace.”

The objectives of the program are to critically reflect on current teaching practices, improve teaching by sharing new ideas, expanding, refining and developing new skills, and solving problems in the classroom by discussing and learning from colleagues.

*Partners for Improved Teaching and Learning* is based on the philosophical underpinnings that peer observation must be a non-evaluative voluntary process that is designed based on the initiators’ pedagogical needs and interests. There are no names reported to administrators or academic departments. There is no evaluation report or any official or unofficial forms. Observers are required to provide the participant with data on what was observed and engage in discussion regarding possible responses.

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1 From: “Peer Coaching for Improved Teaching” presented during the 1st OFID DAYS: Sharing Experiences for Excellence in Teaching and Learning
Participants

Participants are QU Faculty members who desire to improve their pedagogical skills by engaging in interaction with colleagues who in turn provide support, guidance, assistance and professional insights. Unlike most professional development programs, Partners for Improved Teaching and Learning is a more individual program designed to meet a faculty member’s particular needs. OFID would like to support any faculty member who thinks he/she might need assistance or insight regarding their teaching. Participants are assured that what happens in the classroom during the observation and what is communicated later in the post-conference remains confidential.

Observers

Observers are a team of faculty members who regularly work with OFID. Colleagues who observe your class are not there to look for “problems.” Rather, the observer is there to provide their perspective on what the participant decides to be observed. Nothing will be forced on the participants and the participant has the right to decide the conditions of the observation and the topics addressed in the post-conference. Observers will possess the following skills:

- Discretion and confidentially
- Ability to acknowledge and appreciate your performance and pedagogical skills
- Provide effective professional response
- Provide a balanced review of your teaching in that particular classroom
- Effectively coach and encourage others
- Provide effective and constructive feedback

All observers will participate in a short professional development session that addresses the complete Partners for Improved Teaching and Learning program and important issues such as providing feedback, identifying characteristics of effective teachers, developing coaching skills and other relevant aspects of the program.
Benefits of the Program

The program is designed to assist faculty members in improving various aspects of their teaching, enhancing collaboration between colleagues, and helping OFID better meet QU faculty needs. *Partners for Improved Teaching and Learning* promotes a university culture that encourages quality teachers who are accountable to students for adequate performance. It also provides a developed structure and a collaborative environment where faculty can learn and develop professionally.

Process

The process involved in *Partners for Improved Teaching and Learning* is rather simple. There are initially 4 stages in the program (see figure below). First, any faculty member who desires a peer observation and professional discussion should contact OFID to set an appointment. OFID will provide a colleague to observe his/her class based on their and the observers’ class schedules.

Second, a pre-observation meeting is scheduled where faculty members discuss the specific needs of the participant and develop a plan for the observation. For example, the plan might include one or two particular areas that the observer will focus on while other plans might entail a more general overview of the whole class. Plans will greatly vary depending on the individual faculty member’s professional needs. Participants will be provided with pre-observation reflection questions in advance (attached). These questions are only suggestions that should be used to start the reflection process and aid the participant in deciding what areas of their teaching they want to examine and discuss. Keep in mind these are simply questions that can be used as a tool to begin thinking about your teaching.
Third, the participants’ classes will be observed. Prior to the observation, OFID requests that you inform your students that there will be a visitor observing the class prior to the observation. The goal is to make the students comfortable so that the class on observation day goes as usual.

Also the advanced notice for students reduces distractions caused by a ‘stranger’ in the class and avoids students making assumptions about the purpose of the observation. We suggest sending an email with the following statement:

*Qatar University encourages collegial collaboration in both teaching and scholarship. I have invited a colleague to attend our next [course title] class in order to examine several aspects of my teaching. Class will be conducted as usual. Please see me with questions or concerns.*

The plan, agreed upon in the pre-observation session will provide guidance for the observation. The observer should arrive early to the class. Observers should not ask questions or participate in classroom activities.

Fourth, upon completion of the lesson and before meeting with the observer, we ask you to take some time to think about how the class went and make a few notes. Consider what went well, what you might want to improve, and reflect on the agreed upon areas that were observed. Also consider other aspects of the class that you may want to discuss with the observer.

Fifth, as soon as possible after the observation, the participant and the observer should schedule a time for a post-observation conference to talk and reflect about what happened. This opens the possibility for the improvement of teaching and learning. At this time, the participant can decide if there is a need for another observation.

Finally after the process is complete, the participant will kindly be requested to take time to respond to the peer-observation program evaluation. We value participants’ input and would like to use their insight to improve future peer observations. The evaluation is anonymous and can be completed either on paper or online as OFID will make it available.