**Visiting Faculty Partners’ Classrooms and Taking Observation Notes**

In Chapter 6 of *Student-Faculty Pedagogical Partnerships in the Classroom and Curriculum: A How-To Guide for Faculty, Students, and Academic Developers in Higher Education*, we suggest that faculty partners need to decide whether their student partners visit their classrooms and take observation notes, or not. This resource provides guidelines for those who plan to have an observation component, addressing the following questions:

* How should student partners be introduced to the faculty member’s class?
* What should the student partner’s classroom observations notes look like?
* What form should observation notes take?
* What helps student partners gain confidence in notetaking?
* How might observation notes be written up?
* Sample Observation Notes

**How should student partners be introduced to the faculty member’s class?**

It is important that student partners be introduced to the class so that students enrolled in the course understand what is and is not part of the student partner role. Since “student partner” or “student consultant” is not a role that is familiar in most educational contexts, students enrolled in the course might initially be confused about what the student partner is doing there. In the SaLT program, we have found that the most effective approach is the following:

* The faculty partner explains to their class on the first day that they are choosing to take part in this partnership in order to engage in dialogue about teaching and learning in ways that they would not otherwise have the opportunity to do and that the project is not about evaluation in any remedial or punitive sense but rather about critical reflection on teaching and learning for the purpose of affirming and improving both, and then…
* The student partner introduces themselves. The student partner should reiterate that the purpose of this partnership is to foster dialogue about teaching and learning, and that they are there to hear from students (if the faculty partner has agreed to that) as well as work with the faculty member regarding what might help ensure that the course meets pedagogical goals and learning needs.

**What should the student partner’s classroom observations notes look like?**

In the section below called “What form should observation notes take?” we offer detailed guidelines for what the student partner’s notes can look like. That description is a suggested starting point for observation notes. Many faculty find such detailed observations extremely helpful for reflecting back what is happening in the classroom from one student’s perspective, whereas other faculty find these detailed notes overwhelming and less helpful. We recommend that student and faculty partners start out with the approach we describe below, but check in early and often about whether that approach is working for them.

Maggie Powers, a former student partner in the SaLT program, offers in the box below a reflection on how she sees observation notes:

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| “While consultants take notes with the goal of recording what is happening during the class and with the purpose of highlighting areas of potential growth or specific topics a professor is interested in focusing on, affirmations are also included in the notes. Students make a conscious effort to not simply view the class from a deficit perspective and ask ‘What is not working?’ or ‘What could change?’ but they also look for what is working well and take the time to record those practices and occurrences and explicitly affirm them for their faculty partners. This type of feedback is helpful so that faculty members do not become overwhelmed with only critical feedback and so that faculty can take the time to recognize what they are already doing well and the successes they have in each class.” - Powers, 2011 |

Observation notes taken by student partners and shared with faculty partners are one of the main forms of documentation and sources of reflection in classroom-focused pedagogical partnerships. Many students at first feel uncertain that they will do a good job with this task. We encourage program directors to assure them that what they notice will be helpful because they have an angle on the classroom that their faculty partners do not. Sophia Abbot, former student partner in SaLT and former Fellow for Collaborative Programs in the Collaborative for Learning and Teaching at Trinity University, Texas, reflects:

A phenomenon I've seen in the Tigers as Partners program at Trinity University is where a student notices something they think is small in their observations, but decides to include it anyway, and that ends up developing into the primary focus of the partnership -- e.g. in one instance a student partner noted that students in the class appeared anxious about a certain activity. The faculty partner had literally never considered that it might be a stressful component of the course, and he and his student partner discussed ways to give students opportunities to practice this activity to reduce their anxiety but continue to emphasize this skill.

***What form should observation notes take?***

Student and faculty partners in the SaLT program have developed various formats for notes. Most student partners use a form of clinical observation notes, but some prefer a different format. Clinical observation notes have the time in the far left column, observations in the next column, and reflections and questions in the right column. We include a sample below in the section: *How might observation notes be written up?* Below Sophia Abbot offers an important reminder to student partners that all observations can be relevant and even transformative:

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When student partners visit the classroom, they should be on time, respectful, and stay focused on what the faculty partner wants them to focus on. Typically, unless they and their faculty partner decide to change the focus of the visits, student partners should not focus on issues they were not invited to examine because this can prompt faculty to feel too vulnerable or defensive. At the same time, it is important for student partners to follow their gut and use their discretion if there is something that is affecting students’ participation, focus, and engagement that their faculty partner may not realize. They can raise such issues with their faculty partner in a thoughtful, respectful way and see how they feel about it. A lot of student partners in the SaLT program have raised valuable points to their faculty partners, which their partners had previously overlooked and which have made a difference in their pedagogy. Also, as noted in the quote from Sophia Abbot above, sometimes what student partners initially think of as a throw-away observation can completely change the way their faculty partner thinks about their class.

The student partner should take detailed notes for themselves with the goal of documenting and making sense of what they see. These notes will not be shared with the faculty partner (unless both agree this is the better way to go); rather, the student partner will draw on the raw notes to prepare a set of written observations and thoughts that they will share with the faculty partner at (or before) their subsequent meeting. Student partners can use the following structure for note-taking (the guidelines below are addressed directly to student partners):

* Draw a line down the center of each page and label the left side “Observations” and the right side “Reflections.”
* During the classroom observation,
  + note the **time** in this column to document how much time is spent on what kinds of activities in the class, and
  + write notes that **describe** in as much detail as possible, without analyzing, examples or instances of the issue the faculty member has asked you to focus on.
* During and after the classroom visit , write in the right column thoughts, reflections, questions, ideas, and suggestions for your faculty partner based on what you have observed and written in the left column.
  + Write notes ***to*** you faculty partner (i.e., use “you”; “You ask the students…”) rather than ***about*** them (i.e., “Prof X asks the students…”). This will make the exchange more of a dialogue and more constructive.
  + Do not feel that you need to add comments or reflections in the right column for everything you describe in the left column. The purpose of the left column is to give faculty a play-by-play representation of how the class session unfolded, and not every moment requires analysis and comment.
  + Consider writing down themes or main ideas or goals that are set. This is a great reminder of what to keep track of.
* When you leave the class, say something about how you enjoyed, learned from, appreciated, etc. what you saw — something true and validating. This isn’t just being “nice.” Rather, it smoothes the way for the conversations between student and faculty partners.

Amani Bell, at the University of Sydney, Australia, writes: “Maureen Bell’s peer observation guide [“<http://herdsa.org.au/publications/guides/peer-observation-partnerships-higher-education>”] offers several proformas for peer observation of teaching.”

**What helps student partners gain confidence in notetaking?**

Some student partners, when faced with the prospect of putting what they see down in observation note format, experience a form of their initial concern that they won’t notice anything important or, more generally, do not have a valuable perspective. Others worry that they will not take notes in the “right” way. These concerns are understandable, since this kind of observation and documentation is a new experience for most student partners.

Sharing examples of observation notes during weekly meetings helps students see the various things their peers note and also gives them the opportunity to affirm or improve their own approaches. Another way to help student partners develop confidence in their notetaking is to offer them a practice experience, as Leslie Ortquist-Ahrens describes in the box below:

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| **Practicing observation**  “When we piloted the partnership program at Berea College, the student partners were very timid--unsure what would be involved in observation and how to go about it. Three weeks into the program, despite having seen and discussed models, they had still not trusted themselves to make notes as they observed. They asked for more guidance, so I developed a role-play activity using a video of Harvard's Eric Mazur teaching (from 11 sec to 2:45 on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ol3WabrXcR4; and for their note taking especially, from 55 sec. on, where there is sustained focus on a student group at work). I gave students some information about his pedagogical approach, and I asked them to imagine together what he might like to know. They then used the three-column note-taking approach, which we discussed together first.  The discussion after this exercise proved to be highly productive. The students realized they could consider the atmosphere in the room during the group work. They could take stock of how students were working in their groups from what they could see up close as well as from a general overall impression. Practicing together made them realize that they might have to ignore content, which they were tempted to try to decipher, in order to focus on process. They identified a need to develop a shorthand system for note-taking. And they realized from the limited perspective offered by the recording—but also one that would be likely in a classroom—that one's location affects what one can see, and that choosing where to sit was an important strategic decision for a student partner. They wondered about what to take note of, and they realized it was important to think about whether to ‘plan ahead or go with the flow.’ They realized that it was important to have a goal or a focus for their observations, and, as this was early in their partnerships, they came up with a plan in the event the faculty partner hadn't identified such a goal or focus in their one-on-one meetings: they could arrive a few minutes early and ask their partner, ‘Is there anything today you would like to have me look at?’ For an early observation to be conducted by our first cohort, this was a generative activity, and we've included it in the course ever since.  After students engage in the first observations, we have them bring in samples of their notes for workshopping. This series of activities has helped our reticent students gain confidence and, from there, take off on their own.” - Leslie Ortquist-Ahrens, Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning and Director of Faculty Development, Berea College |

**How might observation notes be written up?**

We recommend that student partners start out the partnership using the following format. They may want to revise it as they move through the semester. After completing the observation notes, they look those over and write or type up a version of the observations and reflections to share with their faculty partners. In the version they share, they should be sure to do the following (the guidelines below are again addressed directly to student partners):

* Make sure the left column is descriptive—that you simply describe what you saw happening without analyzing or commenting on it. This is important because it gives faculty partners the opportunity to analyze the observed events of the class themselves rather than having an interpretation already imposed.
* Include in the right column positive, validating, supportive comments as well as questions and suggestions. It’s easy to notice and comment on “problems” or issues, but it is harder—and as important—to comment on what appears to be working well.
  + Frame questions or suggestions in the right column as respectful inquiries that invite further reflection and dialogue using such phrases as: “I wonder about…” or “If I were a student in this class, it might make me feel X when you do Y…” or “I wonder what would happen if you tried…” Constructive suggestions framed in this way are best received and most beneficial.
  + Convey to your faculty partners that if they are looking for more critical comments, they need to invite those. Some faculty might learn more from explicit critiques. But regardless, it is important that you emphasize *why* you phrase your criticism in a particular way.
  + In addition to your observation notes, you might want to generate a list of points that capture the main themes or issues you address. You can start with ways you think your faculty partner is successful at addressing the focal issue identified, then name 2 or 3 (not 10 or 20 or some overwhelming number) ways the faculty member might address the focal issue differently. As with your observation notes, be sure you are respectful and supportive in this section (and again, use phrases such as “I wonder what would happen if you tried…”).
  + It’s helpful if you imagine yourselves in the position of receiving the you they have generated and read the entire document over to see how you would feel were you to receive it. You can make any revisions necessary to produce a document that will promote constructive dialogue and learning.
  + Discuss with your faculty partners whether this approach to notetaking is the most useful or if you might develop a different approach.

**Sample Observation Notes**

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| **TIME** | **OBSERVATIONS** | **REFLECTIONS** |
| 12:22 | You ask a question that relates the reading to the presentation. | It’s really helpful that you bring the material that the presenter is covering back to the text. Not only are you making good connections, but you are setting an example that the reading is an active and necessary part of the class. |
| 12:28 | You interrupt the speaker a few times to provide additional information. | It’s important realize that there will be some connections that you cannot make in order to maintain the fluidity. Also, the fewer comments you make, the more powerful the ones you do make will be.    You were really supportive of your students’ perspectives, but not overly so. In future classes, you might actually want to play the devil’s advocate more. It seems like all your students are really on the same page about the issues that you are talking about (with some small variations); it will strengthen their ability to bring the arguments into the real world if they have to argue to defend and verify their beliefs. |
| 12:45 | You ask a question and then wait a few moments in silence to wait for people answer, and then a student who has not yet spoken answers. | This student clearly just needed a little bit of time to formulate her answer, and once she spoke she had good thoughts. It was really important and beneficial that you embraced this “wait time.” |