

**GENERIC POST-OBSERVATION REPORT,  
COMPILED FROM 4 OBSERVATIONS**

**MEMORANDUM**

**TO:** Professor X, Department of X

**FROM:** Professor Diana K. Ivy, Department of Communication & Media

**DATE:** 00/00/00

**RE:** Peer Observation of Teaching

Professor X, this report is based on an observation of your instruction on XXXX in your X undergraduate course. I have structured this report around the Class Observation Guide that I shared with you in our Pre-Observation meeting on XXXX. Please frame your interpretation of my comments around the fact that this was a one-time observation of a colleague's teaching, so my reflections should be viewed in that context; a more extensive periodic review of teaching is preferable, if not feasible given busy schedules. Once you have had a chance to go over this report, I'll be in touch for a follow up appointment with you to discuss it. If you have questions in the meantime, don't hesitate to ask.

**GENERAL COMMENTS:** In my opinion, Professor X is an accomplished classroom instructor who diligently prepares for class sessions; presents cogent, organized, cutting-edge, and well-documented information to students; and communicates material to students, verbally and nonverbally, in a manner that engages student learning.

**ATOMISTIC COMMENTS:** Instructional communication research shows that atomistic (detailed, minute) comments are preferable to general holistic feedback. The detail identifies behaviors we recognize as our strengths; moreover, details help us better understand what we may choose to work on to improve. Please use this frame of mind as you review my comments about details I noticed in the observation.

Pre-Class Behavior: Prof. X arrived to class five minutes ahead of time and set up the technology (PowerPoint slides) for the day's session. Prof. X worked continuously with the equipment on the main desk in the classroom as students arrived. Perhaps at other class sessions, she may choose to activate the system, then engage with students as they enter class. If not, I would encourage her to arrive earlier and to converse a bit with students as they arrive to class, just to set a more interactive tone if that is one of her goals for the day. She started the class session promptly at x.

Organization:

(1) Prof. X began by greeting the class and explaining that, while it's tempting to talk with one's friends in class, she would prefer cross conversations be avoided so that students could focus on the material for the day. This instruction is commendable, much as we might like to feel we don't have to remind students of this sort of behavioral expectation at the college level. It set a serious and professional tone for the class session.

(2) Next, Prof. X briefly reviewed class information from the previous session on XX topic, then transitioned logically into her material for the current session. This was an appropriate technique, in that it provided both continuity and a context for the current discussion.

(3) One thing students don't like is when professors use an outline or PowerPoint slides as organizing devices, but then veer from them and ignore the structure of their information. Prof. X used her slides effectively, providing a roadmap for students of the day's information and sticking to her plan.

(4) Pacing a course, as well as pacing individual class sessions, is an art form! This is a significant challenge instructors face and my view is that only through trial and error can we improve in this regard. Prof. X paced her class session well; her coverage of the day's material was thorough yet well suited for the time frame of 75 minutes. She was knowledgeable and comprehensive in her approach.

(5) I would encourage Prof. X to rethink her approach to concluding a class session, because students typically start packing up and heading out at the first inkling that a professor is ending a class. On the day I observed, Prof. X ended class 15 minutes early, announcing that she was wrapping up and would stay in the classroom to work one-on-one with any students who had questions, particularly since the next class session involved an exam. I applaud her offer of individual help, but the classroom became quite noisy and distracting as Prof. X ended her comments. No students stayed to ask questions, but this is also common as it seems students always have somewhere else to be.

In instructional communication research, packing up and doing other leave-taking behaviors (like talking to classmates) when the professor hasn't officially ended a class session is termed a "student misbehavior," although it's a common occurrence. In this situation, students were clued that class was ending, but I would encourage Prof. X to think of the class session the way communication scholars conceptualize speeches, as having an introduction, body, and conclusion. The conclusion is very important, as it is our last chance to reinforce learning, make an impression on our students, and provide information about "class business," like bringing Scantrons (or not) for the next class. Key information can be lost because students have permission to engage in leave-taking behavior and, typically, noise interferes with last-minute instructions or reminders.

#### Presentation/Delivery Skills:

(1) Prof. X was dressed professionally; he has a style that appeals to students but his style isn't too casual or too much like student dress. For newer professors or those early in their careers, this is an advisable approach. Students occasionally attempt to befriend professors or to develop camaraderie, which can be a detriment in a status-differentiated relationship such as teacher-student. We may wish that teacher appearance not be a factor in how we are viewed, but research shows that it matters and is noted by students, so Prof. X is to be commended on this issue.

(2) Prof. X has considerable energy in the classroom, but controls it well and uses it to great effect. He has an engaging style of delivery, with a powerful (but not anxious) vocal delivery. He uses his voice effectively to maintain class attention. His general style communicates, "Hey, I'm approachable and here for you, I like my subject matter, and I'm in charge of this classroom experience." Bravo.

(3) In terms of bodily delivery, Prof. X let me know in our Pre-Observation conversation that he'd been critiqued in the past for not being animated enough in the classroom. I somewhat agree and recommend that he try a bit more movement. Imagine students growing up with power-packed videogames. A static position in the classroom won't help him keep student attention. Plus, a bit of movement loosens

us up as well, thus we are likely more relaxed and effective. If obstacles exist in the classroom (like extra furniture, equipment, etc.), the professor should minimize those obstacles so that they don't impede his experiment with more movement. Try to bring vocal activity in synch with body movement, to max out energy in the classroom.

(4) Finally, as regards presentation/delivery skills, Prof. X used language that appeals to students, while also being clear, correct, and, at appropriate times, humorous. However, I would just offer a bit of caution in the use of male-related language. At one point, Prof. X referred to a generic administrator, then used the pronoun "he" in reference to that high-ranking administrator. It's important to model nonsexist or gender-neutral terminology in the classroom, as much as possible, so I would encourage her to practice using "she or he" and "his or her" terms (alternated by order, female first vs. male first) when referring to a generic person or a role that person plays, especially persons who hold power and status. Prof. X obviously doesn't favor one sex of student over others, but I encourage her to reconsider subtle uses of language; it might be in someone else's awareness besides mine.

Teaching Methods: Prof. X primarily relied on a blend of lecture, small group activities and discussion, and several question-and-answer segments to deliver course content. The multi-method approach is appropriate, given students' attention spans for a 75-minute class session. However, I do have one suggestion: Perhaps three rounds of small group discussion are too much of the same approach? I noticed a good deal less participation in the third of the three rounds. Some students didn't engage in the third round at all, choosing to let two classmates do the work while the third in the group got on their phones or strayed from class material on their laptops. Most students on the back row didn't do the third discussion activity, that is, until Prof. X moved up toward the back row and engaged a few male students sitting at the end of that row. (This was an effective technique, at least for those three students on the end.) If a professor notices that some students aren't engaged in a class exercise, what more can she or he do? I would suggest a bit more vigilance for Prof. X, moving more around the room, noticing who's doing the activity and who's not, and speaking up to get all students engaged. Another idea is to vary the activities, opting for one group discussion activity and subbing something else the second time.

Classroom Interaction: As stated, this class session included a mix of lecture and discussion; however, it seemed Prof. X didn't receive as much class participation as desired. (She said something to this effect during the class session.) I have three suggestions on expanding the student engagement front.

(1) Most of the time, the same clump of students in the room addressed Prof. X's questions. This is common; teachers are trained (or act on instinct) to respond to the students who respond to us. The downside of this is that the rest of the class can remain disengaged, knowing that the same students will "bail out" the professor each time a question is put to them. Sometimes I'll say something like, "Let's hear from some of you today who haven't yet chosen your moment to speak up. Some of you are quieter than others, but I'd like to hear from everyone. You folks who are more vocal, I appreciate you, but let your classmates jump in today before you do." (This doesn't always work—especially with communication majors!—but it creates a safe space for quieter or less assertive students to engage and causes more dominant communicators to practice patience and listening skills.)

(2) My second suggestion is for Prof. X to rethink or broaden her approach to questioning. Instructional communication research has determined that general "Do you have any questions?" types of prompts rarely elicit student response. Most professors ask if students have any questions, but more targeted questions—ones that include more detail or specificity, meaning they are tied to specific content—tend to work better if student interaction is the goal. Prof. X did use some specifically targeted questions,

especially when working to get students to respond to video clips. But it seemed like most students in the class were reluctant to respond, possibly waiting for others to engage.

(3) Instructional communication researchers recommend that teachers wait a full seven seconds for students to respond to a question in class, rather than jumping in and answering the question themselves, expanding on the question, or repeatedly asking students to respond. I encourage Prof. X to do this little experiment: When she has some private time, ask a question to herself out loud, then count off a full seven seconds (one thousand one, etc.)—it can feel like an eternity! But this amount of wait time allows students thought time, time to frame in their heads a response, and then try to will themselves to speak up. A lot is going on, so a bit more patience in waiting for student response is advisable here. When students did respond to Prof. X's questions, her affirming response back to them was commendable and constant. She rewards student involvement well.

Technology: Prof. X used PowerPoint slides effectively; for the most part they were well chosen and well used, enhancing his ability to get material across to students. One slide seemed too dark to be effective, but this is easily remedied. In another slide, some of the type or printing was too small for me to read (but my eyes are older than that of most students!). He used the computer cursor well to highlight elements in slides, but might find the use of a remote clicker more helpful. He also moved to other slides when students asked questions. This was a highly effective technique, showing mastery of subject matter as well as technological skill. Finally, he was facile in his use of the doc cam, which he prefers to working with the white board in the room (having to alternate from board to screen).

Notes about Student Behavior: This isn't a category formally indicated on the form I use during observations, but I want to address the topic of student behavior. In the class session I observed I saw a good deal of what research terms "student misbehavior" (as first mentioned in the Organization section of this report). Granted, what I might consider misbehavior in my classroom doesn't necessarily correspond with other professors' views—this comment has to be contextualized according to rules and norms of individual courses and a professor's preferences. But in a medium-sized class (around 50 students), some students feel they're invisible, especially because of the physical setup of the classroom and the instructor's tendency to stay down front. This sense of invisibility can lead to poor class attendance. I don't know if Prof. X has an attendance policy, but she might consider instituting one. Having less than half of students on the rolls attend class no doubt has a negative effect on student learning and grades, but perhaps the low attendance was a fluke of the day I visited, not a regularity.

When I visited, student misbehaviors a lot of non-class related laptop and phone use (e.g., students pre-registering for spring classes; one student on the front row who spent the entire 60 minutes on Pinterest, scrolling page after page of images; another student toward the back busily emailing, clicking away on her keyboard most of the 60-minute class, that is during times she wasn't texting on her phone; another student surfing YouTube clips, finally landing on an animated video). I don't know if any of this behavior bothers Prof. X, but it can be distracting to classmates (some of whom were ardently taking notes); sometimes there is a contagion effect. Student attention spans aren't what they used to be and laptop and other device usage is more acceptable in the classroom than it used to be, but some students will no doubt be distracted when they see non-class related stimuli on classmates' screens.

How do we cope with this? Should we do or say something to reduce this behavior? Some professors tire of student inattention such that they instill "no laptop/no phone" policies in their syllabi. But this approach is less tenable now, given how many students download reading materials or prefer to log in to Blackboard during class sessions. (I dropped my policy about this a few years ago.) One technique I

often use is to ask students only on certain days to stow their computers, tablets, and/or phones; typically these are days when classmates are making presentations or when I've just had it with them being buried in their devices (especially given poor quiz grades). Asking such things is our right as the professor of record for our courses; we have a right to maintain civility and encourage good behavior in our classrooms. Restricting certain behaviors may violate some students' expectations or preferences, but when done with intent that is in students' best interests, it will likely enhance student attention and diminish distracting misbehavior. Another suggestion is, rather than staying behind the podium/desk (power symbol) and watching video clips from that position, Prof. X might consider moving up the stairs to the back of the room to watch amidst the students. Granted, students know how to shift their screens quickly as a professor approaches, but it does work to put students a bit on their guard when a teacher comes near enough to detect if a student is engaged in non-class tasks.

It's often disappointing to realize that we may have to discipline college students—adults who pay for (or whose parents pay for) the privilege to attend university classes. Pointing out unacceptable behavior isn't pleasant and may be something Prof. X isn't comfortable doing. Sometimes such discipline sets an adversarial tone that is unintended and unfortunate. But at other times, reminding and enforcing one's standards for student behavior enhances perceptions of respect by other non-misbehaving students and reinforces the fact that the professor, not the student, is in control of a class session. Given what I described seeing, Prof. X might contemplate addressing students on the issue of appropriate class behavior that leads to learning; she may need to set parameters for acceptable device usage.

SUMMARY: In sum, I commend Prof. X's choice of material, along with her level of preparation, knowledge of subject matter, organizational skills, energy and demeanor, responses to students, communication skills (both across the entire group and one-on-one with students), varied teaching methods, and facile use of technology. In short, Prof. X is an extraordinary university instructor.