Suggestions for Observing Online Teaching
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Most of what you observe and give your colleague feedback on in online classes is the same as in in-person teaching: e.g., clarity of objectives for the class session, pedagogical toolkit employed and how effectively it promotes student engagement and learning, clarity of explanations and how well questions are answered, organization and effective use of class time, strategies for creating an inclusive learning environment, and so forth. All the guidelines for observing classes that are included in "*Classroom Visits: Best Practices for Observing Junior Faculty*" that is available on the LTC website apply to online courses as well. All colleagues should review these guidelines before any class visits. But there are some specific issues to consider in observing online classes.

- For classes that are taught synchronously, you can identify class sessions to observe in the same way that you would an in-person class.

- For predominantly asynchronous courses, you should plan on observing the complete set of activities/materials for a particular unit or topic. In short, if students will watch a podcast, participate in an online asynchronous discussion or group problem-solving, and perhaps a synchronous session with the instructor or Q&A with the instructor, all covering a particular unit or topic, you should observe the entire set of activities, and observe the set at the same time that the students are completing these activities. Think of it as similar to a long class period in which a professor delivers a short lecture, breaks students into small group discussions, reconvenes the group for a large group discussion. Observing only the small group discussions but not the rest of the class will provide only a very partial and inadequate picture of the class. So too if you observe only part of the package of materials designed to cover a particular topic or unit.

- It is particularly important when observing an asynchronous course to review the syllabus especially carefully, since it is usually the roadmap that guides the students through a series of activities.

- For asynchronous classes, the amount of material that the students are expected to cover in a single week should be thought of as equivalent to three Monday/Wednesday/Friday classes or two Tuesday/Thursday classes. Scale your number of observations accordingly. This may mean that you will need to discuss with your colleague what an appropriate "break" in a module might be, should that module require more than a week or so of time to complete.

- It will take a little more planning and preparation to observe an online class that an in-person class one. At minimum, the faculty member whose class you are observing will need to know in advance so that they can give you access to join the class. If you're observing a class that is taught partially or predominantly asynchronously, you should plan on meeting with the colleague whose class you're observing sufficiently in advance to make sure that the set of activities and materials you will observe make an appropriate unit/segment for observation, and make sure that you don't miss a key activity.

- In their work last spring, LTC student observers noted several challenges, especially with observing breakout rooms. Melissa Eblen-Zayas shared these suggestions, based on their experience.

  The student observers noted that it was particularly hard to "observe" breakout rooms. An observer sitting in a physical classroom observing breakout sessions can get a sense of how all the groups are working and how the instructor circulates between groups. The observer might even be able to eavesdrop on a couple of groups. In an online environment, that's not possible. In the spring, the LTC student observers generally were assigned to a breakout room and observed how the interactions went in that room, both when the students were working on their own and when the instructor dropped by the breakout room. They noted that it does feel somewhat awkward to be an observer sitting in a breakout room with a group of 3-4 students. If the observer were another faculty member it could feel disruptive to the students in the group. Here are a couple of alternatives:

  - If the instructor makes the faculty observer a meeting co-host, and assigns them to a breakout room, then the observer/co-host has the ability to hop between breakout rooms after their initial room assignment. That would allow the faculty observer to circulate between breakout rooms. Of course, this doesn't guarantee that the observer would see the instructor in action as they work with students in breakout rooms.
  - Another option might involve having the instructor, as the meeting host, move the faculty observer around to each of the breakout rooms the instructor will be visiting as they visit them. This requires a little more work, but in this case the observer will generally arrive in each breakout room with the instructor.

  In order to minimize confusion, when you meet with the colleague you are observing be sure to ask if they plan to use breakout rooms and if so, discuss how to set up your observation of those breakout rooms. We have had mixed experiences with co-hosting in zoom meetings, but glitches are also possible if the instructor moves the observer from room to room. Since observations and technology glitches are both stressful, it is advisable to make a plan in advance for what will happen if one of you gets dropped from the Zoom call or otherwise has problems with the technology.

Here are some of the "best practices" questions that have been developed for asynchronous course evaluation at other institutions. (These will not be surprising to you.)

- Is the plan for the module/unit clear, with a logical flow?
- Are there clear learning goals for the module/unit that are connected to the course learning objectives?
- Are instructions and due dates clear?
- Do the activities promote student interaction with peers, the content of the module/unit, and the instructor?
- How effectively is student participation encouraged? How does the instructor manage communication among students?

- How effectively has the instructor created a positive and inclusive environment for learning?
- Do the activities and instructor's practices encourage students to push deeper, develop their critical thinking skills, and develop communication skills?
- How effectively does the instructor answer questions? Are explanations clear and complete?

Guidelines for peer evaluation of asynchronous courses often also include questions about the appropriateness of the technology selected by the instructor and effectiveness of their use of it. Carleton has identified a limited set of technology tools for our online courses, so choice of technology is less relevant for us. But thoughtful and effective use of the technology available is certainly a relevant consideration. However, please keep in mind that internet failures or zoom glitches or other technology failures happen to everyone.