Professional Development Observations for UofL Online Composition Courses

As the Composition Program website states, “The observation process should be **a constructive dialogue** between the observer and the instructor being observed. This Composition Program values a variety of approaches to teaching writing and regards this process as **a way for teachers to reflect on and articulate the teaching philosophies and strategies that shape their work**.”

This document adapts the procedure for the observation process [described on our website](http://louisville.edu/english/composition/professional-development-observations.html), which was designed for face-to-face classes, for online courses. In particular, it draws on the recommendations in Mechenbier and Warnock’s (2019) *Forum* article, “A Collaborative Method for Observing/Evaluating Online Writing Courses,” that observers “read” an online class, logging in from the student’s perspective, and write a narrative describing what they have seen.

\*\*Note: The observer should ideally be someone who has taught an online course before.\*\*

1. Initial email conversation

* The instructor and observer agree on a two-week period of time for the observation, a period that will give the observer a sense of the range of activities and communications/interactions happening in the course.
  + Note: If the instructor is teaching a synchronous (“remote”) composition course and there will be a synchronous meeting over this two-week period, then the observer should make sure to attend a synchronous class meeting; however, the amount of course content that the observer should read on Blackboard is up for discussion. If this were a face-to-face observation, after all, the observer would not have access to the Blackboard course.
* The instructor and observer set days/times and locations (in person, phone, or videoconference) for two meetings:
  + Pre-observation meeting and course website walkthrough
  + Post-observation meeting
* The observer sends the instructor their userID (e.g., arolin01). The instructor then adds the observer to their Blackboard course as follows:
* In Blackboard, go to the Control Panel on the left and select Course Tools🡪Manage Users🡪Add user by role
* Enter the observer’s userID and indicate their course role as “Course Builder.” Press submit.
  + The “Course Builder” role means the observer will NOT have access to the Gradebook but will be able to view other parts of the course (e.g., discussion board posts).

*Note to instructors: “Course Builders” are able to edit the course. Although observers should not be doing this, there’s always a chance that it could happen unintentionally. If you wish to avoid even the possibility of a mistake like that, contact Linda Leake of the Delphi Center and ask for her to give your observer “student level” access. This would mean that Linda Leake would assign your observer a special username and password.*

2. Pre-observation conversation and course website walkthrough

The instructor and observer meet (in person, by phone, or by videoconference) to discuss the instructor’s goals for the observation; the instructor will also give the observer a “walkthrough” of the Blackboard site or other course website.

3. Observation period

The instructor will follow the course interactions during that two-week period. If the course is in Blackboard, they should log in under the student view so they can get a sense of the course from the student’s perspective. In the upper right-hand side of the top ribbon, click on the following icon to get into “student preview” mode:

A screenshot of a cell phone

Description automatically generated

4. Post-observation conversation

The observer and instructor will meet (in person, by phone, or by videoconference) to discuss the course interactions over that two-week period.

5. Observation report

The observer will write a narrative that summarizes the conversations and their observations. It describes the pre-observation meeting, summarizes what they see in the two weeks of the course, and concludes with a discussion of instructor strengths and suggestions of areas for improvement. The observer should use the following template:

Instructor’s Name:

Observer’s Name:

Course:

Date:

Focus of observation: (List the two weeks you observed)

Context:

Describe the pre-observation conversation. What are the instructor’s goals for the course, unit, and the two weeks you’ll be observing? What do they want you to look for as you “read” the course from a student’s perspective? What do they want feedback on?

Course Activity in Weeks X and Y:

Describe what you see happening in those two weeks. What is the instructor’s goal for each week? What kinds of reading and writing are the students doing? How are they interacting with the content, their peers, the instructor?

Instructor Strengths:

Areas for Improvement?

For strengths and areas for improvement, feel free to consider the “seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education” (Chickering & Gamson, 1987), which [Penn State has adapted for online courses](https://facdev.e-education.psu.edu/sites/default/files/PeerReview_OnlineCourses_PSU_Guide_13June2017.pdf). Some of these principles, and examples of evidence to look for, are as follows:

* Good practice encourages contact between students and faculty
  + e.g., the instructor “establishes a consistent online presence in the course” (p. 2)
* Good practice develops reciprocity and cooperation among students
  + e.g., “discussion prompts…help to guide and elicit student participation in class discussion activities” (p. 3)
  + e.g., the instructor “facilitate[s] class discussions by encouraging, probing, questioning, summarizing, etc.” (p. 3)
* Good practice communicates high expectations
  + e.g., the instructor explains “course learning goals and how assignments are designed to help students achieve those goals” (p. 7)
  + e.g., the instructor shares “examples and non-examples of high quality work, along with a discussion of the differences between these” (p. 7)
* Good practice respects diverse talents and ways of learning
  + e.g., the instructor uses “a variety of assessment tools that gauge student progress” (p. 8)

The observer should email this report to the instructor as well as to Linda Baldwin. This is due within three weeks of the post-observation conversation or by the last day of the semester.

The instructor has the option to write a response to accompany the report in the files; if instructors choose to write such a response, they must do so within two weeks of the date of the observation report. Once any response has been made available to the observer, the report will be turned in to the Composition Program office and reviewed by the director.

6. Removing the observer from the Blackboard course

To remove the observer from their course, the instructor should email [BBsupport@louisville.edu](mailto:BBsupport@louisville.edu). Include the course ID (e.g., ENGL-101-53-4192) and the observer’s full name.