

# Peer observation of teaching (POT) in the School of Physics & Astronomy

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## Background and introduction

In 2019, the IOP re-accredited all of the degrees that we offer here in P&A. There were a series of recommendations made, though, which the panel felt would improve our teaching provision. Included in this was the following ...

“9 Peer monitoring is only carried out formally as part of the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PGCAP), which is taken by early career staff, or when staff request it for training needs. The panel strongly recommend that peer observation be considered for all as this is increasingly becoming expected practice. The students had highlighted a number of incidences of poor teaching that had clearly been an issue for some time that could benefit from effective peer observation.”

The School Teaching Committee considered this suggestion in late 2019, and it was agreed that the School would re-introduce a more regular peer observation of teaching (POT) system. The IOP’s comment does not specify which form of teaching they feel should be observed. At this stage, we are going to focus on lectures, though the intension is that this will be widened to encompass all forms of our teaching in the future.

This document outlines the proposed way of conducting POT, with the aim to make it useful to observer and observee, and sustainable in the longer term. Previous systems have failed due to “single point failures” where the role of observer fell on too few shoulders. The model detailed below is based on the scheme that is used in

the PHYS4045 Peer to Peer Teaching & Learning in Physics course that some of our 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> year students take. This model was, in turn, based on an earlier iteration of the lecture-focussed POT. What goes around comes around ...

The proposed POT system:

It is intended that members of staff will be put into pairs or triads – normally within a particular course (e.g. Physics 1). Each member of the group will be observed, and in turn observe, another member. How these groups are determined will be left to individual class heads. It is not intended that everyone is observed every year. A more realistic goal would be to aim for all members of a particular year's teaching team to be involved over a three-year period. Obviously, since most staff members teach at multiple levels, there will need to be some sensible co-ordination to make sure no-one ends up being overly observed. (Unless they actually want to be overly observed.).

Class heads are have overall responsibility for keeping an eye on who is observed and when; those observed are not be required to share the results of their observation with anyone other than their observer unless they wanted to. A member of the School's Learning & Teaching Committee – currently Dr Peter H. Sneddon – will keep an “oversight” on the whole scheme, to ensure a consistent coverage across staff and courses.

## POT – How it will work

During this academic year you will observe one of your colleagues during one of their lectures; you, in turn, will be observed. Your class head will put you into groups of 2 or 3 to facilitate this. This process will give all of you the chance to both provide and respond to constructive feedback on a teaching session. It is up to you to decide which session you will observe, and on which one you wish observed. The feedback you receive is entirely for *your* benefit – there is no connection between this process and PDRs/promotions. This is about giving you the chance to have someone comment on your teaching, and for you to see how others teach. The goal is that everyone learns from the best practice of others. There is no requirement to share the results of your observation with anyone other than your observer. If you want to discuss the results with your class head, then they will be delighted to speak to you.

Below is a suggestion of a structure – derived from a similar scheme used by newly recruited lecturers to this university – which should help you carry out the observations successfully.

Ideally, each observation should be a three-part process.

### 1 The Briefing Meeting

First, you should meet to discuss how you will organise the observation. This can be face to face, or on-line, whichever you are most comfortable with.

- Which lecture will the observation take place at?
- What are the aims and intended learning outcomes of the session, i.e. what does the lecturer hope to achieve?
- How will the observer be introduced to the students?
- What, if anything, does the lecturer want specific feedback on?

## 2 The Observation

- The observer should arrive early and place themselves as unobtrusively as possible. (The observer's location is not relevant if the session being observed is running remotely.)
- The observer should not take part in the class but the reason for their presence should be explained to the students (i.e. they are there to observe and give feedback to their colleague; they are not there to observe the students).
- The students should be given the option to refuse to allow the observation to take place.
- The lecturer then implements the session trying, as far as possible, to undertake the session without regard of the fact that they are being observed.
- The observer should focus on the process of the facilitation of learning rather than the content of the session. It is wise to take detailed notes to aid memory later on.

## 3 Post-observation meeting

**IT IS GOOD PRACTICE TO ARRANGE THIS MEETING AS SOON AFTER THE OBSERVATION AS POSSIBLE.**

- This meeting can take place immediately after the observed session, or at a later convenient time; again whether this is face to face or remote is up to the participants. There is no "correct" timing for this, though it is a good idea to schedule the "post" meeting beforehand, otherwise it may never actually happen. If there is a gap between the observed session and the post-meeting, it is a good idea for the observee to reflect on the session and note what seemed to work well, what not so well, and any areas of interest or concern.
- The observer should prepare a report summarising the key points from their observation to be able to give this to the tutor at the meeting. A possible way of organising this feedback is shown in the sample observation report at the end of this document.

### 3.1 Giving Feedback

- The observer should aim to give constructive feedback i.e. pointing out what worked well but **also** what they think worked less well and, where appropriate, suggest ways in which things *might* be improved.
- Giving critical feedback can be difficult but it is essential if the lecturer is to benefit from the process.
- Observing someone else's lecturing is a very subjective process but your thoughts on what you observe can be very illuminating for the lecturer. If during the meeting the observer and lecturer agree that there are any errors in the report these can be noted and the report amended.
- As soon after the meeting as possible the observer should send their report to the lecturer electronically for their own records.

### 3.2 Reflecting on the process

- Once the post-observation meeting has taken place and the report received, the lecturer should reflect on the process and, in particular, reflect on the comments that the observer has made in their report, both positive and negative.
- The observer should also reflect on the process of observing; in particular, consider what you feel you learned.



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## Example Template:

(There is no need to use this – this is just a suggestion; you may wish to consider just using some of it. This can be discussed with your observation partner at the pre-meeting.)

### Report on Peer Observation of Teaching

Teacher:

Observer:

Date of observation:

Class observed:

PRE-OBSERVATION

*What particular areas would you like me to look out for?*

DURING OBSERVATION

*General observations of lecture:*

*Teaching methods used:*

POST OBSERVATION

*How do you (the lecturer) think it went overall?*

*What was the best feature?*

*Is there anything you (the lecturer) might try to do differently next time?*

*Is there anything that the School can do to help improve your teaching experience?*

*Any general comments?*