

# Peer Observations of Teaching at Yale-NUS: Principles and Guidelines

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## Overview

A large number of institutions have recognized the necessity of peer observation of teaching, as a mechanism to facilitate collaboration between faculty, for exchanging ideas and enhancing teaching, and to provide a useful additional source of data on teaching beyond student evaluations. Lomas and Kinchin (2006) describe some of the historical context for peer observations of teaching, ways to implement strong peer observation systems, along with an enumeration of factors that can limit the effectiveness and support for such systems. Hubball and Clarke (2011) describe some of the larger issues facing universities in designing peer review of teaching, and gives several examples of how to structure feedback reports and criteria for teaching effectiveness. Ultimately the goal of peer observation of teaching is to create an open teaching culture in which the faculty can create what Shulman called a “community property” in excellent teaching and to prevent “pedagogical solitude” in which faculty and students are not well-served (Shulman, 1993).

After extensive discussions with a wide range of faculty in academic years 2014-2015 and 2015-16 and in consultation the Dean of Faculty, the TLA committee developed a detailed description of a portfolio for evaluating teaching at Yale-NUS College. This document was built in consultation with colleagues from the NUS CDTL, the Yale-NUS TLA Committee, and has been discussed with the full faculty in a meeting in March 2016. The document describes a process which provides multi-faceted and nuanced evidence to evaluate teaching for candidates being reviewed for tenure and promotion. The portfolio would include a set of components that are summarized below.

## Components of the Teaching Portfolio for Tenure and Promotion

Generated by the candidate:

- A **teaching reflection** in which the candidate frames their teaching in context to the portfolio as a whole, and provides a narrative of their approach to teaching and its evolution. In this document, the candidate will illustrate their strengths as a teacher, and will also describe how they have developed and improved to overcome any difficulties in teaching. The candidate may wish to address questions such as: *What are my goals as a teacher? How do I incorporate my research into my teaching? What discipline-specific or broader educational research has influenced my teaching? What are the distinctive features of my teaching approach, and how do these features contribute to those aims? In what ways have I improved as a teacher? Which outcomes do I consider the most significant for my particular discipline and approaches?*
- A **list of teaching assignments**, such as courses and independent studies taught, students

mentored, capstone projects supervised, curriculum development undertaken, and Week 7 and LAB projects supervised<sup>1</sup>. For candidates seeking full professor these efforts should also demonstrate leadership in the College as well as impact and leadership in larger national and/or international disciplinary communities.

- **A list of formative teaching development activities**, such as classes observed by other faculty members for formative purposes, attendance at lectures and symposia on teaching, and presentations or inputs from conferences.
- **Sample classroom materials**, such as syllabi, links to course blogs, essay assignments, exams, and outstanding examples of student essays or projects. The purpose of such materials is to provide concrete examples of pedagogical techniques and innovation.
- **Sample of other pedagogical materials**, such as materials related to curriculum development, supervising student research, planning courses, advising students<sup>2</sup>, and assessing student learning.
- **Letters from peer observations of teaching**, which should include reports from classroom observations of teaching, letters from coordinators of common curriculum courses, or letters from peers familiar with the candidate's teaching or contributions to curriculum development. Candidates will solicit letters from peers, and these will be sent to the Division Director, to be included in the portfolio. These letters will be kept confidential.

Generated by others:

- **Summative student evaluations** for each course
- **A large sample of student recommendation letters** – perhaps about 20 – from former students of the candidate from Yale-NUS College<sup>3</sup>. Such letters should come from both students in the major, non-major students, those in introductory courses and in advanced courses, and some advisees of the professor. The candidate can recommend up to 15 students to receive requests for recommendation letters; the divisional director will select the remaining students. These letters will be sent to the Division Director, and will be kept confidential.

In this current document we provide a prescription for a protocol for providing peer observations of teaching. For the process to be successful and promote and disseminate excellent teaching at Yale-NUS College, both instructors and peer observers need to gain experience and training in this process, and should follow some procedures which are outlined below, based on a study of

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<sup>1</sup> Lists help to clarify evaluations and are acceptable but the faculty candidate should include descriptions or narratives for each point/item listed.

<sup>2</sup> This could be a narrative about the faculty candidate's experience with advising students.

<sup>3</sup> Swarthmore does 25, Dartmouth suggests no more than 20 (<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~dof/pdfs/dartmouthfacguidelines.pdf>).

best practices of universities across the world. It is also important to note that the peer observations in the classroom would be one component of peer input, which can also include contributed letters from peers familiar with the candidate's work in curriculum development and team-teaching settings.

### **Principles for Peer Observations of Teaching at Yale-NUS College**

A study of educational literature provides a set of principles that can inform our procedures for peer observation. The peer observer is essentially conducting a form of educational research for the instructor and for Yale-NUS College, and as such should be following procedures which themselves are based on broad principles that underlie sound educational research. Felton (2013) suggests that such educational research should be:

- Focused on Student Learning
- Grounded in the context of the instructor's course and student knowledge
- Methodologically Sound
- Appropriately Public

Within a peer observation, the observer should be focused on the elements within a classroom that define "good practice in undergraduate education." Instructors who are exhibiting such "good practice" (adapted from Chickering and Gamson, 1987) would satisfy these elements:

- Encourages contact between students and faculty
- Develops reciprocity and cooperation among students.
- Encourages active learning.
- Gives prompt feedback.
- Emphasizes time on task.
- Communicates high expectations.
- Respects diverse talents and ways of learning.

Our peer observations should also foster a "scholarly approach" to assessment of teaching (as outlined by Glassick et al, 1997) in which the observer is able to discern in the instructor a set of key criteria which are built into an observation rubric. These criteria include:

- Should have clear goals for the class
- Should have adequate preparation
- Should be using appropriate teaching methods
- Should be developing significant results in learning
- Should provide an effective and interactive experience in the classroom
- Should base their teaching on a reflective process that incorporates feedback from students and ideas from peers.

### **Protocol for Peer Observations of Teaching at Yale-NUS College**

To provide a fair and transparent procedure for peer observations of teaching in the classroom, we describe a protocol for peer observations of teaching that includes a pre-class visit between the instructor and observer, multiple observations in the classroom, and a rubric for evaluating

teaching which is based on principles widely agreed upon in the educational literature as defining good teaching. This protocol builds upon the earlier discussions of Peer Observation of teaching developed by the Yale-NUS College TLA Committee in 2014-15, and from studies of “best practices” of peer observation in world universities.

Yale-NUS College Peer Observers in the classroom will follow the protocol below:

1. Peer Observers will attend a training session to discuss a rubric and guidelines for classroom observation and will be able to clearly identify what elements of teaching practice constitute good teaching.
2. Peer Observers will be required to meet with the instructor before the class to discuss the class goals and context, and any other elements that the observer should look out for.
3. Peer Observers will have a clear set of criteria and principles for their assessment, which will be shared with faculty and observers, and form the basis of questions to be answered by the observer.
4. Peer Observers will be required to attend more than one class session of the instructor being reviewed to get a more accurate picture of the teaching.

The Peer Observer will report the results of their observations to the instructor in a way that provides constructive and detailed feedback. In the case of a formative observation, these comments will be conveyed directly to the instructor and a post-class conversation will enable a thorough debriefing. For summative observations, the instructor should be given a sense of the conclusions from the Peer Observer, and be given a chance to have additional observations for the summative report if the instructor feels that the initial observation did not give an accurate sense of the instructor’s teaching. In this case, the Peer Observer should provide constructive feedback to enable the instructor to prepare for a subsequent observation. Each of the elements in the Peer Observation is described in more detail below.

### **Training for Peer Observers**

Peer Observers should be aware of the principles described above that define good practice in undergraduate education. These principles are only broad guidelines, and we need to encourage a wide diversity in approaches to teaching and learning at Yale-NUS College to preserve the originality and creativity of our professor’s teaching practice. The Training for Peer Observers will be a chance to provide discussion of the broad principles of good teaching, as defined both by educational literature and in practice, based upon the experience among the group of peer observers. The training session will include a review of key teaching guides, an overview of the process for peer observation, including a detailed discussion of the process for the pre-class meeting, and a review of the in-class observing procedure. Any questions about the process and the reporting of the outcome will be discussed in advance, to avoid confusion and misunderstanding between the instructor and the Peer Observer.

### **Pre-Class Meeting with the Instructor**

Before the class is observed, the Peer Observer will meet with the instructor to discuss the goals for the class session and its context within the course. The pre-visit meeting will allow a discussion about the expectations, context and protocol for the classroom visit. The instructor

should provide the Observer with a copy of the class syllabus, any lesson plans for the class session, and any relevant handouts or readings for the class session. The instructor and observer in their pre-class meeting will discuss a wide range of topics (based on the framework in Hubball and Clarke, 2011) that includes:

- The nature of the course
- The Instructor's general impressions of the course so far
- The Instructor's approach to teaching the class
- Course objectives
- Where they are in the course
- Specific teaching challenges in the course
- The Observer's background / previous experience with the course
- The topic for the class being visited (Look at the course outline)
- Specific objectives for that particular class meeting
- Determining a time for a debrief meeting

The specific protocol for the class visit will also be discussed and the details of the observation will be agreed upon in advance of the observation session. The instructor and observer should discuss whether the observer will be introduced during class, whether the observer will interact with the students in class, and what kinds of other inputs might be helpful to the instructor or the observer to facilitate the observation.

### **Rubrics and Guidelines for Peer Observations of Teaching**

Within the class observed, the Peer Observer should be seeking to answer the questions below:

- Are the goals for the class clear to the students? Is it clear to students why the class activities are structured as they are?
- In the case of lectures or instructions for activities, is the presentation of the material clear? Does the observer understand what the instructor is trying to convey? What evidence is there to suggest that the students understand the material?
- Do students appear to be aware of connections between the material for that day and other material for the course? Do students appear to be aware of connections between the material for that day and the students' experience outside the classroom? Are connections made to students' prior knowledge or experience?
- To better understand the student experience, the observer might choose to adopt a student persona by asking him or herself, if I were a student in this class, what would I experience? At what points in the class might I be confused? Challenged? Motivated? Angry? Enthused? Intimidated? Intrigued? Distracted? Bored?
- Who appears to own the learning? That is, who is actually doing the work, solving the problem, going to the board, reading the passage?
- What do you observe about the relationship between the instructor and the students? Do all students appear to feel free to ask questions or interject comments? Are students' comments constructive? How does the instructor respond to student questions or comments?
- What do you observe about the interactions among students? During discussions, do they direct comments, questions, and requests for clarification to one another or to the

instructor? Do students appear to value the contributions of their classmates? What evidence do you have to suggest that?

(adapted from Holmgren, 2002):

These guiding questions will form the basis of a post-class observation report, to be delivered to the instructor after the observation. In addition a simple rubric form will be completed during the observation to provide feedback on key components of the class session. The rubric will include both a quantitative Likert Scale and a free-response area for qualitative feedback in four components which include:

- **Goals and Learning Objectives for the Class** – Were they clearly developed and communicated to the students? Were the learning objectives appropriate for the time available and for the student's preparation?
- **Preparation for the Class** – Was the instructor well-prepared for the class? Did the instructor have command of the materials being discussed and presented?
- **Teaching Methodologies** – Did the instructor use appropriate and effective pedagogy? Were these methods sound and well implemented?
- **Student Experience in the Class** – Were the students engaged? Did they participate and demonstrate learning within the class? Did they interact effectively with each other?

These four components will provide both quantitative and qualitative information for evaluating the class session by the Peer Observer, and will be supplemented with additional information provided from the Observers experience and from answers to the guiding questions above.

### **Reporting of the Observation and Multiple Observations of Teaching**

After the observation, the Peer Observer should provide the completed observation form to the instructor, and discuss the observations in person with the instructor in the case of a formative observation. The goal of the Peer Observation is to provide a friendly and constructive report on the effectiveness of teaching, with specific suggestions for improvement. In the case of a summative or evaluative observation, the instructor should be given a chance to comment to the Peer Observer on how they felt about the class being observed, and whether they agreed that the class session was a good representation of their teaching. The instructor should be given the option for a repeat observation, and to also allow for one or more of the observations to be converted into formative observations, in which case the observation report will be provided to the instructor to provide constructive feedback for improvement.

If the instructor agrees that the observed class was a representative class, the Peer Observer will provide their report to the relevant tenure review committee, and this observation report will become part of the candidate's teaching portfolio. Observations for tenure review should include multiple class sessions, and the instructor can nominate additional observer(s) to include two or more class observation reports to their portfolio. It is recommended that a new faculty member request multiple observations of their teaching each year to help them improve and share ideas with their colleagues, and that experienced and tenured faculty members participate fully in the peer observation process, with everyone's teaching being observed at least once annually.

## **Conclusion**

Our guidelines for peer observation, the procedure for pre-class discussion and in-class observation and the reporting guidelines are all developed to enable an open teaching culture at Yale-NUS College. The use of peer observation will improve teaching and learning at Yale-NUS College substantially, by enabling instructors to learn from each other about their pedagogies, and to share their impressions of how the students are learning in various class contexts and within different types of pedagogy. Bringing these observations into the teaching portfolio will be of great benefit to instructors as well, since it provides an additional source of evidence of the quality of the instructor's teaching beyond the sometimes unreliable student evaluations. The process of Peer Observation will provide a mechanism for fostering excellent teaching at Yale-NUS College, and also for articulating how excellent teaching has been developed and experienced by students and instructors. Through this process, the excellent teaching at Yale-NUS will become more visible, and we will create a process that can capture "its richness and complexity" and a valued community property (Schulman, 1993). By bringing frequent peer observations and discussions about teaching into our culture, we will also build a stronger sense of community in sharing our advances in teaching and learning at Yale-NUS College.

## **References**

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