

Observation Protocol

The purpose of this form is to reflect the teaching priorities of the math department in both

1. the feedback that is given to new instructors in their first semester teaching here, and
2. the teaching files of members of the department.¹

The aim is to reflect that good teaching can happen in a variety of different modes (lecture, group work, flipped classes, student presentations, etc.). Regardless of the mode, we think there are some things that everyone needs to be attentive to:

- **Clear communication** with students about both the goals and intentions behind class activities, and the mathematical content.
- **Organization** both in terms of the overall structure of the lesson and what's written on the board.
- **Educational climate** should be positive and conducive to learning, everyone (students, TAs, the instructor) should feel respected.
- **Student engagement** with what's going on in the class.
- **Mathematical content** should be aligned with the course goals and presented at an appropriate level.

Pre-observation preparation

Being observed can be nerve-wracking. People always want to be observed at their best (or at least, not at their worst) and a pre-observation meeting can do a lot to help the person being observed feel more comfortable throughout the process. Here are some questions you might ask at such a meeting. Depending on how well the observer and the instructor being observed know each other, some of the questions might be irrelevant.

About the instructor

- How long have you been teaching? How many times have you taught this course? Have you changed anything about the course since the first time you taught it?
- What do you think are your teaching strengths?
- What would you like to change or improve about your teaching?
- Is there something you would like me to focus on for this observation?

About the course/class

- What do you hope students will take away from your course as a whole? from the class session I will be observing?
- What do you expect students to do in preparation for class? Do students usually come to class prepared?
- What are the assignments like? Are there any recent ones that may come up in discussion on the day I will be observing?

About the students

¹ For the purposes of this document, I will assume that these are the teaching files for graduate student and postdoc instructors who we expect will need teaching letters when they apply for jobs. However, we may want to expand the scope to include continuing track faculty who need to document their teaching for the purposes of reappointment.

- What can you tell me about the students in your class? What do you know about their backgrounds, majors, and reasons for taking the class?
- What does student participation look like in your class? What do you want it to look like?
- Is there anything from the course that you think the students find particularly challenging or interesting?
- What type of relationship or rapport do you try to establish with the students? How satisfied are you with how this is going?
- What do you think the students would say about the course structure or goals? What would they say about the assignments?

During the observation

- Show up on time. Try to be an unobtrusive presence in the classroom throughout the session.
- Observe the instructor's teaching methods, strategies and interactions. Observe the students' engagement, participation, and reactions.
- When making notes, be attentive to the distinctions between observations, interpretations, and evaluations.
 - Observations: concrete phenomena, patterns of behavior
 - Interpretations: what might the thing you observed mean? What might people be thinking or trying to do?
 - Evaluations: How do you value what you have interpreted?
- It might be good to focus on observation and interpretation in the moment, and hold off on evaluative judgements until writing your report later.

Post-observation discussion

Schedule this meeting in the days immediately following the classroom observation. Don't wait too long – a week is already pushing it – or things won't be fresh in your minds. Here are some tips to guide the discussion.

- Use open ended questions to encourage self-reflection in discussing the lesson.
- Make sure to highlight positive things. In fact, it can be good to start here to put the person who was observed more at ease.
- Give constructive criticism. Framing things as areas for growth reflects that we all should have a growth mindset about our teaching.
- If possible, give specific suggestions or tips for how to implement changes to support that growth.
- Tell the instructor whose class was observed what will be documented and how. Tell them what will go in the report to the department. You may even provide them with a copy of the feedback form you filled out (though you may not need to do this, they can always ask to see it...).
- Make an action plan:
 - Are you going to do another observation? when?

- Are there other teaching resources on campus you recommend the instructor look into?
- When are you going to check-in with each other again about how things are going in the areas for growth that were discussed?