1

Developing your self-awareness as a teacher

Introduction

Teachers need to know themselves. The benefits of understanding and reflecting on the impact that they have on their students are well documented (e.g., Brookfield 1995). The following sections explore evidence and give advice that can help you to develop your pedagogical self-awareness. All of these strategies are underpinned by the assertion that knowing your students’ views of you, and understanding how they react to your teaching styles
and strategies can provide you with invaluable information and ideas for enhancing your teaching, particularly when analysed with the assistance of trusted peers and mentors.

1.1 Tapping into your natural ability to communicate

- Simple features of communication are useful guidelines for teaching.
- Good communication involves: attracting attention, ensuring clarity and comprehension and building in opportunities for feedback.
- Creating a climate for ‘constructive interruption’ can enhance classroom communication and clarity.

As a teacher, your ability to communicate is essential to your capacity to help people learn. It is not just your command of your subject (which is of course very important) but it is your ability to make connections with others and to transmit ideas that will really bring your subject alive. One of the interesting paradoxes in educational contexts is that the more experienced you become, the harder it can sometimes be to communicate effectively with new students (e.g., Moore and Kuol 2005). This is at least partly because the more familiar you become with your topic and your subjects, the harder it is to see that material through the eyes of novice learners (Abbas and McClean 2003).

In order to become (and more importantly to stay) good at teaching, you need constantly to remind yourself of the simple principles associated with effective communication. This is a good way of keeping your teaching approach fresh and focused, and of reminding yourself of the essential ways in which you’re trying to help your students to learn.

As you plan to teach, think of yourself as the source of an important series of messages. Plan to encode those messages using language, images, ideas and metaphors that your students will understand. Deliver your message in a way that will help capture their attention, maximize their chances of understanding, believing in and remembering what you are teaching. As you do this, check regularly if your students are still engaged, if they still ‘get it’, if they are still with you, absorbing and learning the material that you are bringing to them.

In developing your confidence as a teacher, remember that you probably communicate with great effect in many other challenging contexts. Teaching contains important similarities with any situation in which people need to communicate with one another and to achieve particular goals associated with that communication.

Many of the features of good conversation are also the features of good teaching. All participants in the conversation need to feel engaged and empowered (even if one person talks more than everyone else, as is often the case in large
group settings). Everyone needs to have at least some command over the language that is being used, and where they don’t, efforts need to be made to help develop that language.

To have a satisfactory conversation, you need to avoid making the assumption that everyone shares the same amount of knowledge or understands the same principles and concepts. This may seem like common sense to you. However, there is a common phenomenon among teachers, and that is the unwitting use of language or words that students simply do not understand – and because it’s unwitting, it’s often difficult to guard against.

You can make sure that your students understand the words and concepts that you are teaching by creating a norm within your class – inviting students to signal to you any time when you have used a word, phrase or explanation that they do not understand. Simple teaching tactics can formalize this norm by providing active and endorsed permission to students to call a halt to your teaching when they are finding things incomprehensible. You could try installing techniques and tricks within your own classroom settings that don’t just allow interruptions, but positively encourage them under defined circumstances. Students really do like it when they are given a formal way to signal any lack of understanding. With your encouragement (perhaps by handing out red stop signs, or by writing a list of groundrules that define ‘constructive interruption’) and when they get over an initial reluctance to draw attention to themselves, constructive interruption can gradually become a much-appreciated way for them to initiate and enhance classroom discussion (see also Chapter 2, section 2.6).

Clear communication norms encourage students to communicate with you as well as providing useful signs when it’s time for you to try to communicate more effectively with them. In addition, it creates a situation in which they become more active learners – scanning the material that you are teaching and being on their guard to keep making sure they understand.

Think carefully about ways in which you can adapt your capacity to communicate in all the classroom situations you face in order to enhance your teaching and to enrich your students’ learning.

1.2 Knowing what your students think of you

- Aim to adopt simple, time-efficient techniques for regularly gathering students’ views about your teaching and their learning.
- Treat student responses as a powerful personal resource.
- Consider student views openly and non-defensively in ways that support your effectiveness as a teacher.
Most people can recall or identify teachers who are somehow resented by their students without seeming either to know or to care. The extent to which teachers can be oblivious or impervious to the views of their students does vary. Some are hypersensitive to student views, while others are perhaps completely unconcerned about them. We argue that as a teacher of college or university students, it is useful to have a good idea of what your students think of you. The more accurate this idea is, the better for everyone. Faculty often speak of their amazement the first time they read a student evaluation report, having had no idea how positively (or negatively) they or some aspects of what they do were viewed by students. Information about what your students think of you can be a powerful personal resource.

We are not always encouraged to seek this kind of information, and even if we are, it is not necessarily used to support our professional development. Understanding the kinds of perceptions and reactions that you produce in your students is something that can empower and equip you with ideas about improving your teaching, interacting more effectively with your students and generally being in control of what you do. You do, however, sometimes need to brace yourself when looking for honest feedback. It can be a humbling experience. And you need to develop an undefensiveness about how students express these perceptions in order to make the most of them in how you react and respond to them.

There are many ways in which you can attempt to get an honest idea of your students’ experiences of your teaching. Some of these are things that you will initiate yourself, others may be available through services provided by your own institution. And when using the services of a central resource like a centre for teaching and learning, you need to make your own decisions about the quality and trustworthiness of the processes in place.

We recommend the following kinds of simple techniques for getting a better view of your students’ attitudes towards your teaching:

1. **End of lecture paragraphs**: Ask your students to write for 5 minutes about their views on the best and worst aspects of your lecture. Have them hand in their reflective written pieces and review the comments. This simple activity can very quickly give you a picture of what your students have taken away from the lecture, as well as ideas about how you might be able to enhance their experience in the future.

2. **Classroom-based focus groups**: These are slightly more elaborate ways of getting structured feedback from students about their views on your teaching. Have someone facilitate a short (15 minute) discussion at the end of your lecture or at a key time during the semester and collect the main views, focusing in particular on areas in which you feel you know least about students’ reactions and experiences.

3. **Specific issue surveys**: Distribute specific-issue survey questionnaires if you want to find out more about students’ experiences of particular aspects of
the course, library resources, the main course textbook, in-class exercises, assignments or exams.

4 Informal conversations: Join your students after a lecture occasionally in order to debrief and get their opinions and reactions; or find other informal ways of having honest one-to-one interactions with students.

The closer you are to knowing their opinions and experiences, the better equipped you will be to respond appropriately to the issues that arise. It might sound like a lot of extra work, and indeed seeking out this kind of information does take time, energy and at least a certain degree of humility. But the effort that it takes to gather this kind of information can save a lot of time and trouble in the longer term, particularly if there are problems with your students’ capacity and orientation towards learning the subjects you are trying to teach.

Be reflective and don’t panic. Students do sometimes say dramatic things if you give them the space to do so. If you ask them honestly for their views, you do risk hearing things like: ‘I hate this topic’; ‘I’m completely lost’; ‘This is so boring’ and other discouraging sentiments. You’ll also hear some great endorsements too. Try to disentangle their views of you from their ideas about the subject you teach and the challenges that you have created for them. Don’t shy away from listening to and responding appropriately to their views.

1.3 Getting ready to respond to student views and feelings about your teaching

- Recognize the potentially emotional impact that student feedback can have on you.
- Work to interpret student feedback in reasonable, positive and action-orientated ways.
- Utilize student feedback where it clearly provides guidelines for enhancing teaching and learning.

Even when university teachers are active in gathering student views, they don’t always have firm habits associated with receiving and following through on them. We tend not to be prepared to react positively or appropriately to this kind of data. Many of us have difficulty even knowing how to start to interpret the data which student surveys produce.

While teachers do tend to get feedback increasingly regularly either through their own student surveys or through the ‘quick tick’ types of questionnaires
distributed and analysed centrally, it seems now that feedback fatigue is starting to become prevalent among students who are increasingly frequently being asked for their opinions of and reactions to teaching. One of the main reasons for feedback fatigue is based on the perception that systems for gathering student feedback are often used as shallow instruments, designed to satisfy relatively unsubstantial bureaucratic requirements associated with an increasing preoccupation with institutional control and measurement rather than a source of positive dialogue between teachers and learners (Johnson 2000). If this is the case in your teaching context, then it won’t take very long before your students learn this too (that is if they haven’t already) – and start to respond superficially, infrequently or not at all to requests for feedback on your teaching.

One of the ways to continue to receive constructive and valid views from your students, whether through structured questionnaires, informal conversations or semi-structured focus groups, is to commit to responding to these views in some meaningful way – to promise students that you will register what they have said, and to undertake to respond in positive ways to the information that they provide. However, it is not always easy to respond meaningfully to student feedback. It can, for example, be very difficult to encounter and respond to student feedback that is either negative or surprising (or both). Indeed when you combine the characteristics of negativity and surprise, you get a sometimes toxic cocktail of information that instead of motivating you to enhance and develop your approach, can lead to dismay, dejection, disappointment, defensiveness and denial (see Ilgen and Davis 2000).

Studies have concluded that the emotional impact on faculty who receive student evaluation reports should not be underestimated (see, for example, Moore and Kuol 2005). Indeed it is the emotional dimension of this experience that usually requires most attention. Individual faculty and their mentors could help to understand defensive or stress-related reactions better if they explored their own predictions of feedback in advance of the receipt of feedback from students. A system whereby faculty rate their own teaching in advance of students’ efforts to do the same might help to equip them with greater insights into how different kinds of feedback might affect them and in what ways.

While student evaluations of teaching (SETs) have been in operation for many years in many different contexts, much less effort has been applied to the development of an approach to feedback reaction that enhances the likelihood that SETs will be used appropriately, constructively and in the interests of learning. This can only serve to confirm Johnson’s (2000) and our own fears that these systems tend to serve the shallow needs of educational bureaucracy and not the deeper needs of learning and teaching in higher educational contexts.

Carson (2001) argues that teachers may need to be shielded from unhelpful or damaging feedback, and that feedback that is perceived to be non-specific, unactionable, irrelevant or in some other way outside the teacher’s control,
can damage a sense of professional empowerment as well as subsequent efforts to teach effectively. However, you may also need help in working out how to be responsive to reasonable feedback from your students, especially if you feel under fire and criticized, even when the feedback does direct you to possible areas for improvement.

Depending on whether the feedback is largely positive or negative, and whether it is broadly surprising or unsurprising, feedback reactions and responses may tend to be characterized in different ways, reflecting different levels of commitment to enhancing and changing teaching activity and orientation. When we studied the responses of teachers to different types of feedback, this is what we found:

1. **Where feedback is positive and expected**: Reactors seem to identify mild to moderate satisfaction indicating a positive but not urgent orientation to enhancing or sustaining the quality of their teaching.
2. **Where feedback is negative and expected**: We found strong tendencies to externalize responsibility for the feedback in a qualitative analysis of reactions in this category. Attributing problems to the challenges of the subject being taught is a common response, which may or may not be reflected in reality. Readiness to respond and repair teaching approaches that students are critical of was found in some but not all responders in this category.
3. **Where feedback is positive and unexpected**: Strongly emotional reactions were found in this category. Responders reacted extremely positively when feedback caused them to identify areas of teaching excellence or student appreciation of which they were not aware. Some potential evidence of stress (relating to the challenges of maintaining the positive views they had received) and some evidence of complacency seem to be evident among this category of responders.
4. **Where feedback is negative and unexpected**: Strong evidence of defensive cognitive dissonance was found in the responses to this type of student feedback. Denying, confronting and questioning the results were all evidenced in the articulated responses analysed. Fears and concerns about professional reputation emerged and self-affirmation activity was also in evidence. One respondent referred to their research-related strengths, possibly as a way of defusing their articulated sense of dismay with negative student feedback.

If you plan to get structured feedback from your students then it’s also worthwhile to think about your own possible reactions and orientations yourself. Evidence suggests that it pays to prepare for the receipt of student feedback and orientate yourself more actively towards the possibility that some of this feedback may be surprising, negative or both (Moore and Kuol 2005).

We propose that based on the reactions that we have observed in some of our own teaching contexts, the guidelines presented in the next section might be useful in the development of healthy, functional, learning-orientated responses to student feedback.
1.4 Developing your repertoire of responses to feedback on your teaching

- Remember that both positive and negative feedback can emerge for reasons that do not always relate to the quality of your teaching.
- You don’t have to respond to every specific aspect of student feedback.
- It’s particularly useful to interrogate feedback that is in some way puzzling or surprising.
- Talking to students about the feedback they have given you can be a positive way of building rapport.

From our observations of different kinds of feedback reaction, we present six guidelines for faculty and their mentors when confronting student feedback:

1. Control your defence mechanisms. Ask yourself; what kinds of reactions am I having to this feedback and how is it likely to make me respond to my teaching challenges in the future? Whether your reactions are making you feel angry, euphoric, dismayed or pleased, analyse how these feelings might interfere with (or enhance) your capacity to develop an effective teaching strategy.

2. Particularly for puzzling feedback, try to get more information about the nature of your students’ perceptions. As we have suggested, conducting follow-up focus groups, having informal discussions with student representatives or small student groups and distributing more specific questionnaires or feedback from peer observers are all strategies that you could use to find out more about an identified problem articulated in student feedback data (see also section 1.2).

3. Guard against overreaction to student feedback. We have found that it is very common for teaching faculty to fixate on one or two critical comments in feedback data that was overall extremely positive. This hypersensitivity may lead to reactions that only focus on minority or unrepresentative views. This risks reversing or undermining teaching strategies that are satisfactory for the majority of learners in a particular context.

4. Guard against under-reacting to student feedback. Student feedback that is extremely positive may yield complacent reactions and can be interpreted to mean that an individual’s teaching strategy requires no further attention. Teaching effectiveness can vary from day to day, and from year to year. Different types of students experience the same kind of teaching in quite different ways. Assuming that one positive student feedback report means that you have ‘got it right’ for all time, is probably a mistake. Analyse positive feedback in ways that help you deliberately to exploit the strategies that
gave rise to it. But similarly, don’t withdraw from negative feedback which can contain the potential for sometimes dramatic improvement. Negative feedback can cause faculty almost to recoil from their teaching responsibilities, and can lead them to focus instead on other aspects of their professional lives that affirm and endorse their sense of competence. But if you are to make negative feedback useful, it is worth paying attention to it and responding in appropriate and positive ways whenever this feels possible.

5 Use the feedback as a way of enhancing communication between you and your students, not bypassing it. Often, SETs are administered and collected via a central service. Many faculty do not discuss, or even mention, the survey either before or after its distribution. An effective SET system should be an aid to, not a replacement of, student–teacher communication. If you have some dialogue with your students about the nature of the SET survey, and the kinds of feedback you would find most useful and constructive, then you are more likely to receive constructive responses. Additionally, if you ensure that at some point after analysing the feedback you summarize the main issues that students raised (both positive and negative), you can engage in a more reasonable approach to the management of their expectations. Post-feedback dialogue with students might start by focusing on a particular issue raised by a large number of students. For example: ‘I know you think the textbook is very hard work, but these are the reasons that I have prescribed it . . . And these are the things I’ll try to do to help you navigate it’. Or the dialogue might be more generic, registering with students the overall tone of their feedback. For example: ‘most of you feel quite comfortable with how the topics are unfolding so far but you seem to have some concerns about . . . and . . .’ or: ‘many of you are finding this course tough going – It’s great that you told me this, because here are some of the things we can do together to address the challenges that you’re facing’. Whatever strategy you adopt, it pays to talk directly to your students about their evaluations of your teaching. It helps to show them that you value their input and are likely to respond in some affirmative way to at least some of the issues that they raise. Sometimes, simply registering that you understand the students’ struggles and signalling that you are prepared to help can turn negative student feedback around in ways that are positive both for you and for them.

6 Do not inevitably assume that positive student feedback necessarily indicates excellent teaching or that negative student feedback necessarily indicates poor teaching. Even though responding to students’ ratings of your teaching can help to improve their perceptions of their learning environment, it is not always the appropriate thing to do. Some challenging experiences that students resist, may indeed be a necessary part of their learning journey, and may explain why some disciplines tend to receive more negative SETs than others. It always pays to put student feedback in context. As the literature has shown, class size, student maturity, type of
subject and timing of the feedback may all moderate or enhance your ratings (Cohen 1981; Feldman 1984; Kierstead et al. 1988; Cashin 1990a, 1990b).

1.5 Helping your institution to use student evaluations responsibly

- SET systems are more useful if they are well resourced and supported by follow-up coaching and assistance, particularly where negative feedback has been received.
- It is important to interpret student evaluation data firmly within the context it was gathered. Class size, time of year, student group and discipline need to be considered as part of that interpretation.

The literature in the field of student evaluations suggests strongly that systems for gathering student feedback should be accompanied by an institutional health warning. From an institutional perspective, systems that gather student evaluations must be underpinned by a sound orientation towards the information that it yields and the responses to which it gives rise (Olivares 2003). Assess your institution’s treatment of student evaluation systems against the following institutional guidelines:

- SET systems need to be appropriately resourced as part of an integrated strategy that values and is prepared to respond positively to the voices of students, while also recognizing the potential for feedback from students that is not related to teacher performance.
- A SET system that is isolated and decontextualized may be neither a valid nor a reliable indicator of teacher performance. This can lead to the generation of performance-related data that is inherently threatening, unhelpful and stressful.
- Where SET data is valid and can help to point to problems with teaching, it still may not have a positive impact without the existence of the necessary supports to help overcome identified deficiencies in teaching performance.
- Given the emotional impact that SETs can have even when the system is voluntary and confidential, we believe that it is essential for institutions to provide support to help faculty interpret and respond healthily to the feedback that they get from students.
- A well resourced SET system that gives rise to learning supportive outcomes needs also to be accompanied by a culture of respectful feedback in student and faculty evaluations of one another. A well supported and managed SET
system may actually be able to introduce or reinforce a culture of reciprocal respect in higher education environments.

- Our experience suggests that it is extremely divisive, unhelpful and invalid to use SETs as league tables that pit different subjects, disciplines and teachers against one another. Data should be robust enough to help teachers compare their performance not against all other rated teachers, but rather all other rated teachers within similar categories (subject, class size and timing should all be taken into account). Otherwise, comparisons are not meaningful and can lead to unrealistically positive or negative self-evaluations.

- It is essential to take timing of SET surveys into account. Whether SET surveys are conducted early or late in the semester, before or after grades have been received, or at crucial stages in the unfolding of a taught programme can all have fundamental effects on the ways in which students respond. Surveys typically only tell a skeletal, snapshot story. Carrying out the same survey at several stages in the development of a particular module may help to interpret student experiences more comprehensively, but may also lead to the unwanted outcomes associated with feedback fatigue among students.

- In supporting and utilizing the potential benefits of a SET system, it may also be worthwhile to introduce a facility for getting faculty to predict their students’ ratings in advance of collecting feedback. This information could equip coaches and educational developers with a ‘diagnostic’ of likely responses and enable constructive conversations with faculty, orientating them towards an appropriate teaching enhancement strategy.

### 1.6 Looking at yourself on video

- Video/DVD records of your teaching can be a useful professional development resource.
- Analyse footage of your teaching in structured and prompted ways by asking key questions.
- Performative dimensions of your teaching are important to be aware of, but are supported by a range of other skills that video footage may not reveal.

‘Watching a videotape of yourself is an extremely valuable experience. Videotaping allows you to view and listen to the class as your students do; you can also scrutinize your students’ reactions and responses to your teaching. By analyzing a videotape of the dynamics in your classroom, you can check the accuracy of your perceptions of how well you teach . . . identify those techniques that work and those that need revamping.’

(Gross-Davis 1993: 34)
Undertaking to look at yourself through other people’s eyes is a revealing and sometimes disturbing exercise. But this information can also be extremely useful in your efforts to enhance and develop your teaching. In the short-term, seeing yourself on video can make you extremely self-conscious and uncertain, but in the medium- and longer-term, it can equip you with perspectives that genuinely help you to build on your strengths, address weaknesses and to understand how your messages, ideas and instructions are conveyed to learners.

And if at first you can only look at yourself through your fingers, cringing at every hesitation or error, you will find gradually and with regular viewings that your external self becomes more tolerable, and that you can cast a more objective and favourable eye over your performance and delivery within the classroom. Looking at yourself on video is a true and brave commitment to enhancing your self-awareness.

Having a structured framework or checklist for analysing yourself is also useful. Categorize your observations of yourself under different headings. Look at your body language. How is your eye contact? What kind of presence do you feel you have? Are you at a physical distance from your students? How do you connect with them non-verbally? How do you use your hands? What kinds of gestures do you repeat? Do you have any repetitive verbal or non-verbal habits that you were previously unaware of and that might be distracting or confusing for your students? How does your voice sound? What does your overall tone communicate? What effect do these things seem to be having on your students?

These subtle aspects of your teaching may not be something you are aware of unless you see yourself from your students’ perspective. You can also become more objective about other aspects of your teaching by viewing video footage. Focus on issues of pacing, clarity, transition from one topic to another, ways of engaging students and techniques you use to get them to interact. You can analyse student reactions too, if the video recording captures them as well as you in action (Acheson 1981).

Video analysis of your teaching is inevitably restricted to the performative aspects of your teaching. Nevertheless, watching yourself teach may give useful insights and strategies for enhancing essential aspects of your approach and your style.

### 1.7 Talking to others about your teaching

- You can address a lot of nagging fears or doubts about your teaching by talking to others about your strategies and style.
- It is helpful to treat teaching as a public rather than a private activity, which can benefit from the inputs and ideas of other teachers.
Strathern (1997) talks about teachers in current educational environments experiencing ‘a vague, persistent and crippling sense of failure’ (p. 318). He attributes this mainly to the squeeze that is increasingly being applied to the time that teachers have to formulate, reformulate, make sense of and respond to their own reflections on their teaching and its impact.

It is easy to experience some perception of failure as a teacher. Your impact is not always easy to gauge and it is often difficult to get accurate insights into your performance and your effectiveness. Teachers often say that they feel isolated and unsupported in some of their most important professional activities. Even though teaching is a very public act, particularly if you have large numbers of students, you may feel forced to treat it in paradoxically private ways. The public act of teaching risks becoming subverted into a private, lone act that is neither nourished nor criticized by other voices.

Expert teachers, experienced tutors, researchers and investigators who operate both within and outside your own discipline can have a powerful impact on your approach to teaching. But they are unlikely to do this unless you talk to them about your approaches, your mistakes, what you are planning and what you have already achieved. Have a look at some of the structured advice on mentoring in sections 1.9 and 1.11. It really does help to talk to others about your teaching plans, approaches, strategies and challenges. It is useful to set up your work schedule in a way that facilitates these kinds of conversations.

### 1.8 Watching other people teach

- At any stage in your teaching career it can be professionally refreshing to watch someone else teach.
- Climates in which teachers regularly attend each others’ lectures/classes tend to be characterized by more active, effective teaching and learning dynamics.

Many of us have not attended lectures since we were students ourselves. We don’t get the opportunity to sharpen our own approach because we don’t get to see how much better or how much worse we might be. Your professional development as a teacher is likely to be dramatically enhanced if you can understand your approach, your delivery and your material in the context of the approaches and deliveries of other academics.

A useful and professionally developing habit you can adopt as a teacher is regular attendance at teaching sessions led by other people. In fact in environments where this is the norm, you’re probably more likely to find cooperative,
open and satisfying learning and teaching environments from the perspectives of both students and teachers. Local teaching climates may facilitate or prohibit this practice – but even where it is not the norm, you can create your own micro-climate and develop a system where a ‘community of practice’ can emerge among small clusters of committed teachers.

Asking permission to go to a lecture may take you or the person you are asking outside of the normal comfort zone. But the reciprocal professional benefits are already clear (Wiske et al. 2002). And enhancing academic teaching climates may involve creating norms that allow you into other teaching spaces and inviting others to do the same.

1.9 Getting peers to observe your teaching

- Peer observation is another potentially useful tool for teaching development.
- Assiduous and focused peer observation preparation can guide observations and ensure that they are as effective as possible.
- Peer observation is best conducted in a voluntary, supportive and collegiate environment.

Peer observation is quite a common and widespread approach to professional development in teaching in higher education (see for example Cosh 1998 and Allen 2002). Some of the problems and difficulties that we have highlighted relating to student feedback can be moderated by a good, trusted, thoughtful colleague who simply watches you teach and tells you what they think.

There are useful frameworks and provisos to consider whenever you decide or are required to invite someone into your classroom with the aim of helping you to improve or develop your teaching. Peer observation can be used as part of a system for accounting for and demonstrating a commitment to quality, thus satisfying the managerial requirements that increasingly exist in higher educational environments. But probably more importantly, from the point of view of individual teachers, and if negotiated well, peer observation can provide a fresh orientation on teaching, on student reaction and engagement, on subject delivery and on all sorts of subtle dimensions of teaching that teachers might otherwise be unaware of (see, for example, Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond 2004).

When planning to have your teaching observed, consider the more fine grained aims and objectives that are relevant to your own context, experience and focus as a teacher. Here are some suggestions about the aims of peer observations provided by Martin and Double (1998):
Aims associated with peer observation of teaching

- To help teachers to be more explicitly aware of their own personal approaches to the delivery of their subject in the context of a defined curriculum.
- To help teachers to consider enhancing and/or extending teaching techniques and styles, simply by considering and exploring new options with someone who has observed their teaching.
- To consider the interpersonal skills of the teacher through the ways in which teaching is delivered within a real setting.
- To help teachers become more practised in evaluating and appraising themselves.
- To use classroom observation reflections as the starting point for a discussion on curriculum planning and to develop curriculum planning skills.
- To pinpoint areas of teaching and expertise that are particularly strong or in particular need of enhancement or development.

(Adapted from Martin and Double 1998)

When planning to have your teaching observed by a peer, look at the above list of objectives and decide which of them is most relevant to you. Which objectives are closest to your own teaching enhancement goals? Which of them could help you to clarify creeping concerns you might have about your skills and orientations?

As a first step, standard practice in peer observation processes tend to involve a pre-observation meeting in which you and your peer discuss your aims, concerns and the kind of advice or observation you think might be most useful for you. It is a good idea if the observation itself is guided by broad structures which can help your peer observer to capture and provide useful and appropriate observations about your teaching and your students’ learning. Common advice about post-observation meetings suggests that it is a good idea to meet as soon as possible after the observation has taken place (Martin and Double 1998), that peers should be prepared to deliver criticism as honestly and as constructively as possible (Morss and Murray 2005) and that written summaries of the feedback be clear, actionable and accurate, helping to identify the observers’ perceptions of strengths as well as areas for development (Hansen and Liu 2005).

In our own experience, teachers generally find peer observation useful, professionally endorsing and worthwhile. However, there are caveats. Your peer may overpraise you when in fact you could do with a bit of well reasoned criticism. Your peer observer might be highly critical and undermining of something that is in fact having a positive effect on students’ learning.
There may be other reasons why peer observation of feedback might not work. We suppose that this is a hazard in any situation where interaction and professional feedback from one colleague to another takes place. Nevertheless, many teachers have made excellent strides forward in their teaching styles and impact through peer observation (Blackwell and McClean 1996).

You can maximize the benefits and avoid the pitfalls of peer observation of teaching by: choosing your peer carefully, preparing your peer for the session and giving them as much useful information about the students and the subjects as possible and by encouraging them to be open, honest, positive, but also constructively critical about their observations. Insights arising from peer observation are likely to be quite different from the kind of feedback you get from your students (Orsmond 1993). Comparing both sources of feedback can help you to build a comprehensive and multi-level picture of your teaching and suggest useful ideas for your teaching in the future.

1.10 Keeping a teaching diary

- Teaching diaries capture real time reflections that benefit longer-term teaching habits and orientations.
- Teaching diaries can be used to monitor, compare and analyse teaching experiences in ways that support a scholarly, reflective approach to teaching.
- Teaching diaries can ultimately save time and energy by capturing key recurring dynamics and patterns in particular classroom settings.

Keeping a teaching diary is a very valuable activity whether you will be teaching the same programme for some years to come, or you are required to hand over to someone else and mentor their teaching in the future. A teaching diary that records questions, problems, ideas, challenges and struggles that you and your students have encountered can represent an enormously useful professional development tool, and can provide raw material for refreshing, enhancing or even redesigning aspects of your programme with a view to continuous improvement and ongoing development of your teaching (Richards 1990; Brock et al. 1991).

You can record any kind of information or observation in the process of your teaching – pragmatic (e.g., ‘not enough copies of a particular reading in the library’, ‘only a small number of students regularly accessed on-line discussion boards’); cognitive (e.g., ‘students really struggled to understand X Y and Z, but very quickly grasped A, B and C, as evidenced by in-class assessments or quizzes’); emotional (e.g., ‘there was a difficult conversation around socio-economic backgrounds when students were asked to read and discuss case
study F’); collaborative (e.g., ‘students really started to accelerate and improve their work after week 5 which was when a collaborative small group task was set’).

These kinds of experiences and observations tend to be quite readily noticed by teachers if they are asked to watch and listen carefully for evidence of student engagement and learning. However, it is easier to notice such dynamics within your learner groups, but relatively difficult to recall the exact nature of these interesting and useful phenomena a year later – which is when such information could be extremely useful.

Short-term adaptations of your teaching and responses to student experiences are one thing, but longer-term improvements can really benefit from the keeping of a teaching diary. It is a practical tool that can help you to track and monitor and enhance your own performance and make the most of your teaching insights. Of course you will find that each student group is likely to be different, but it is generally true to say that teaching diaries equip teachers with information that might otherwise evaporate and have them feeling that they’re somehow re-inventing their own wheel.

1.11 Having an academic mentor

- Trusted academic mentors are likely to have a positive impact on your career development.
- Selecting and securing an objective, supportive mentor is an important professional choice.
- You may need different mentors at key stages in your career or for different dimensions of academic activity.

While we have presented the specific teaching performance related guidance that can be derived from peer observation (in section 1.9), this section focuses on a more contextualized kind of guidance that can be achieved by harnessing the energies of an academic mentor. There are many shortcuts, tips, ideas, insights, strategies, problems and solutions in academic life that other people have encountered before you. You don’t have to be on a lone and solitary journey, and you don’t have to face or discover all of these things completely on your own. Well delivered advice at crucial points in your academic career can be invaluable. At the very least it can save you time. Sometimes it can have transformative effects.

While we have recognized that academia is often individualistic and competitive, we also know that those people who have found trusted mentors somewhere within their system experience benefits and achieve breakthroughs
that would otherwise have been a lot more difficult. Indeed there is much
evidence, across many organizational settings that mentors are good for your
professional well-being (e.g., de Janasz et al. 2003).

Good mentors can enhance your career, can accelerate your journey to pro-
ficiency and can make you feel psychologically safer and more guided in the
thorny terrain that university and college teaching sometimes presents. But
finding a mentor is not always easy. There are good and bad mentors in any
context. You need to be aware at least in some vague way about what you need
at your stage of development, for different aspects of your working life. Some
people who take on mentoring roles don’t automatically have a positive
impact on the lives and work of their mentorees. And in some cases the impact
can even be damaging or destructive. However, a good mentor is a potentially
powerful ally and you can reap the benefits of the relationship right through-
out your life. We recommend that you spend some time looking for and
securing positive healthy mentor relationships as you embark on and continue
your teaching career.

Your choice of mentor will inevitably depend on your own preferences,
likes, dislikes and priorities. There will be an element of serendipity and luck
about finding a great mentor at crucial times in your career, but it helps to
know what you’re looking for. The literature on effective mentoring suggests
that your mentoring relationship should be trust-based and power-free (Rymer
2002); multi-source and multi-level (Ensher et al. 2002); and monitored,
nourished and adapted over time (Vincent and Seymour 1994).

Also, while one mentor is useful and professionally helpful, several well
chosen mentors can be an even stronger asset. By having more than one men-
tor, you get to explore your ideas and plans through a range of different lenses
and you have the advantage of seeing problems from a variety of perspectives.
This is a useful way to become a reflective practitioner and a great route to a
more considered, more comprehensive orientation towards your work as a
teacher. Of course, it is likely that the kind of mentoring you need in the earlier
stages of your life as a teacher is different from the kind of mentoring you may
need when you’re further on in your career, and key developments will help
you to identify what kind of coaching will work best for you, when.

If mentors understand the range of different challenges that you will
encounter they can help you to strike the right balance between teaching and
other areas of your job, know when you’re ready to move on to another phase
or type of work and help you to ask and work on these kinds of tough ques-
tions, then you will find that they provide an invaluable service to you. Good
mentors represent the epitome of what can be so empowering and positive
about academic environments – they provide the collegiality, the critical sup-
port, the insight and the advice that people thrive on when they become
academics and teachers in further and higher education.
1.12 Building your sense of entitlement as a teacher and scholar

- You are in the process of becoming an expert in your area.
- Your views and opinions about your topic are likely to be very useful for students whose perspectives are still probably very new compared to yours.
- You have a right to teach without having to know everything about your subject or knowing all possible answers that your students might ask.

Teachers often struggle with their sense of entitlement (Berhanu 2006). They worry about whether they have a right to teach others in an area they are still struggling to understand and master. They can feel somewhat embarrassed and self-conscious standing up in front of a class or having others assume that they are an expert in their field. These kinds of feelings tend to be particularly common among new teachers and it can interfere with the conviction and commitment that they bring to their job.

Teachers who feel entitled to teach also feel confident and poised within a teaching environment. Teachers who don’t, can become consumed with self-doubt – even fear – and gradually lose their nerve, something that students can also absorb, making for a sort of nervous, tentative, disengaged teaching and learning experience. They feel ambivalent about being the expert in the room and they worry about whether they have a right to be at the top of the class, directing, facilitating, designing and determining the direction, the content and the nature of their students’ learning. Try to recognize that even if you are very new to teaching, you have something important and valuable to bring to your students. Your own struggles with the subject you teach will help students just as much as those areas in which you feel competent and in control.

1.13 Avoiding professional jealousy

- Excessive competition and comparison can erode the enjoyable aspects of academic life.
- Focusing on the pleasures of academia is a nourishing exercise, particularly after a career setback.
- Be assertive about your career progression rights, but don’t let setbacks destroy your own internal motivation and enthusiasm for your work.
It can seem that at college or university, your professional impact is constantly being compared to that of other people. Promotions systems seem to try to differentiate between people based on narrower and narrower distinctions, and the role of teaching is often lamented as either missing or inadequately accounted for in the assessment of whether or not someone deserves tenure, promotion or other types of accolades and rewards.

Comparing yourself to your colleagues can become an obsessive and dis-satisfying game that can take you away from the purpose and pleasure that academic life might otherwise nurture. The true joy in life as Shaw (1950) once observed lies in ‘being used for a purpose you consider a mighty one, the being a force of nature, rather than a feverish, selfish clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy’.

Being competitive and wanting to achieve in ways that differentiate you from others is not outlawed, nor do we suggest it should be. It’s just that competition can quickly become dysfunctional. The gymnastics of competitive comparison can become a sort of soul-less pursuit in its own right. It can take you away from the reasons you may have wanted to become an academic in the first place. It can cause you to spend more time than you should poring over your various achievements, lamenting your lack of career progression, tinkering idly with your CV and having rather fractious discussions with the people who you think may have some influence over your next career move.

All of these types of activities may form part of your life as a teacher in college or university, but when they become the driving pursuit or the main direction for your energy they are likely to have damaging and personally undermining effects. If you find yourself spending a lot of time wondering what someone else did to deserve the promotion or the accolade that you failed to get, then maybe it’s time to re-orientate yourself or to find a way of refreshing your commitment to your subject, your interest, your enthusiasm, your own unique, irreplaceable, unmeasureable (albeit inconsistently rewarded) talent.

1.14 Recognizing the power that comes with teaching

- Examine power relationships between students and teachers – where possible relating this to the subject matter that you teach.
- Create democratic classroom climates to enhance student engagement and to teach in more ethically aware ways.
Even if you are a passionate, enthusiastic and committed teacher, your influence on learners may not always be positive and empowering. Teachers have a lot of power in university settings. Their views, their voices and what they value has a currency that many students are prepared to accept without question (Beach 1997). When students sign up to the unequal power relationship that prevails between them and their teachers, several things happen.

First, they may be more likely to accept (or at least not to challenge) behaviour from teachers that they would not accept in other contexts. Second, they may unwittingly reinforce teaching behaviours, habits and patterns that don’t support their learning. And third, they may not draw learning related problems to the attention of their teachers. Compliant, accepting, respectful students may contribute to a situation in which your teaching styles and actions are not subjected to enough criticism or evaluation. And while you may feel comfortable and get used to not being challenged or questioned, this may not be in the best interests of your development as a teacher or indeed the learning of your students.

Supplement the feedback you get from students with peer evaluations (see section 1.9). Work to create more democratic classroom environments by involving students in decisions related to the teaching of your subject. You will still have to call a lot of the shots, and some of the shots are already decided on by the design of the curriculum, but there is often more leeway than our habits and tendencies suggest.

We know that undeclared power in the classroom has very strong effects on behaviour and learning (hooks 1994) and we also know that the more democratic the classroom environment, the more of an active and empowered part students are likely to play in their learning (Brookfield and Preskill 1999). There is value in recognizing that by virtue of our position and knowledge, we do possess power that impacts on learner experiences. Explore the power and have your students do the same. Be aware of and critique it. Discover and discuss the principles upon which it is based (e.g., is your power based on your authority to grade and assess student performance; is it based on your expertise or your reputation?) If one of the fundamental aims of university education is to help to create critical thinkers, then a critical treatment of the power dynamics within the classroom is arguably an interesting interrogation to engage in.

Talking about power is a potentially fruitful conversation to have in any disciplinary setting. And in recognizing and discussing these power relations, both you and your students might be in a better position to distribute that power more evenly, helping learners to become vocal, critical, engaged and challenging about the subjects that you teach. It might all feel like a lot of hard work, but actually many people report that this takes some of the pressure and focus off them as teachers and creates all sorts of new levels of engagement among learner groups. This is an orientation that can transform a didactic and authoritarian approach to teaching, and set the scene for more interesting and satisfying experiences from everyone’s point of view.
1.15 Revelling in the clandestine

- Don’t underestimate the value of collegiate, trust-based learning climates.
- Differentiate between the student as ‘customer’ and the student as ‘citizen’. Decide which model you prefer.
- Remember that some of the most powerful and effective moments of student learning cannot always be predicted, designed or measured.

The official university places its trust in abstract and general systems that may have no purchase on truth or reality but that obey a transparent, if tyrannical, logic. . . . The clandestine university, by contrast, places its trust in human beings working together, engaged in argument and dialogue.

(Docherty 2005: 223)

This quote comes from an insightful critique of some of the ailments associated with higher education policy and practice. One of Docherty’s most powerful arguments lies in his assertion that quality control systems within college and university environments tend to sustain the freedom of the consumer (which he defines as slavery) rather than the freedom of the citizen (which he defines as emancipation).

Furthermore, he argues that it is often the unstructured, unscheduled, unplanned and unmeasurable dynamics of teaching and learning that yield the most memorable and transformative results. It’s easy to measure student attendance, grades, retention rates, performance averages and other quality-related gauges – but at best these can only be vague proxies of what’s really happening in an educational environment. Revelling in the clandestine requires having a healthy scepticism for the measures that are applied to quality at college and university.

If we become too obsessed with the inevitably inadequate measures that are applied to the control and management of our universities, we might risk forgetting the principles of engagement, excitement and delight that committed educators bring to active learning environments.

1.16 Knowing your mystery ingredient

- Become aware of your strengths and your unique characteristics as a teacher.
- Remember that you don’t have to be perfect in every aspect of teaching to be an outstanding teacher, nor should you always feel your teaching has to fit a standardized template.
Even after analysing thousands and thousands of student perspectives on excellent teaching, there still seems to be support for the idea that really excellent teachers possess a ‘mystery ingredient’ that could be most closely described as ‘presence’. Brady and Bedient (2003) define presence as ‘an ability to listen, to adapt, and to make effective choices in language and in emotions to help motivate students toward success’. But different teachers clearly exercise this ability in different ways. Our own analysis of teaching effectiveness data shows that many ratings of overall effectiveness are significantly higher than the more specific and common indicators of effective teaching such as organization, preparation, communication skills, knowledge, enthusiasm, ability to explain difficult material and so on. In other words, some teachers can score quite badly on things like preparation and even communication, and still in overall terms be defined by their students as outstanding teachers.

Your mystery ingredient is unique and may be what differentiates your particular kind of teaching impact among your students. It might be difficult to identify, measure or pin down. In your eagerness to engage in professional development as a teacher in higher education, take care not to ‘overhomogenize’ yourself in response to standardized recommendations of delivery, and take care not to rob yourself of your original and distinctive voice and style.