Online Class Observation Process and Procedures  
School of Professional Studies

I. INTRODUCTION

The online class observation process is designed to support SPS faculty in their teaching. The process provides an opportunity for faculty to reflect on their teaching and, in collaboration with the observer, assess both teaching skills and learning outcomes. Created to be both supportive and helpful, the process also serves as an effective evaluation tool so that faculty can enhance the quality of the education they are providing to our students. Observers observing in online contexts will have already taught online. Evaluation of teaching effectiveness focuses on mastery of course content, ability to apply appropriate instructional methods for the students we serve, maximizing student engagement in the learning process, and creating learning experiences that link stated learning outcomes to actual student achievement. Because observations will occur at meaningful intervals, faculty will be able to improve their teaching and demonstrate that improvement over time.

II. ONLINE COURSE FORMAT DESCRIPTIONS

There are currently four online formats at SPS:

1. Asynchronous: faculty-led, wholly online courses. These use LMS (Learning Management Systems) for posting course materials and communicating/interacting with students. There are no regularly scheduled in-person meetings.
2. Blended: A mix of in-person and asynchronous sessions; these may hold some synchronous sessions via web-based meeting tools.
3. Hybrid: A mix of asynchronous and synchronous sessions via web-based meeting tools.
4. Synchronous: wholly online courses with regularly scheduled real-time sessions via web-based meeting tools. These are most similar to in-person classes and they may use LMS for posting content and communicating with students.

Depending on the format, the procedures may differ slightly. In a blended or hybrid class, the observer will need to attend to all the varied components of the students’ experiences in the course. In any class with an online component, the observer should understand that a meaningful observation will require viewing the way the instructor has created his or her learning environment online. Observers will be obliged to follow FERPA guidelines.

III. OBSERVATION PROCEDURES

There are five components to each observation including a pre-observation conversation, the actual online observation, completion of the Online Class Observation Report, a post-observation conversation, and submission of the final Online Class Observation Report.

The Pre-Observation Conversation

The purpose of the pre-observation conversation is to establish the context for the online class observation. To establish this context the observer should:

- Request copies of the syllabus and other materials to be used during the class.
- Request access to the LMS for the observation week.
- **For courses with synchronous sessions, request the link to observe web-based class.**
- Provide the instructor with the SPS Teaching Effectiveness Criteria document that focuses on seven components of teaching effectiveness including class management, relevance and mastery of course content, instructor communications skills, quality of student engagement, effective use of instructional materials, effective use of the learning management system and other educational technology tools as appropriate. Share the relevant tip sheet with the faculty member.
● Schedule a conversation with the faculty member being observed. This conversation may take place in person, over the phone, via Skype, or using any other strategy that permits a substantive conversation.
● Explain the observation process to the faculty member being observed and review the SPS Teaching Effectiveness Criteria document as a tool that begins the conversation about effective teaching. Explain that the result will be a narrative account of what is observed rather than a numerical rating.
● Inquire if the faculty member wants the observer to focus on anything specific to that class or related to his or her teaching style.
● Ask the instructor to inform the class that a visitor will be observing in the LMS course site and that the session and online learning activities will proceed normally.
● If the course has a synchronous component, ask the instructor to inform the class that a visitor will be in attendance in the web-based meeting and that class will proceed normally. Regardless of the type of observation ask the instructor to inform students that an observation will take place.

Online Observation

Many standard teaching observation forms use Likert scales because they are easy and commonly accepted tools for assessment. The disadvantages of Likert scales are that they only provide a general assessment, use limited criteria, and lack reliability unless ratings are very well defined and observers are like minded. Therefore, the SPS online classroom observation process does not include any Likert scales and instead, encourages a more open-ended approach.

The process for an online observation requires that the observer takes copious notes that can be used later to complete a thorough assessment. The observer should keep a detailed account of what transpires in the LMS course site as well as the web-based classroom and highlight teaching strategies that were particularly effective or could be improved upon. To help the observer in writing his or her account, he or she can refer to the relevant tip sheet for guiding questions as to what makes a well-designed, engaging course. A week should be allotted for the observation of the LMS. If possible, the entire web-based class should be observed. The observer may refer to the SPS Teaching Effectiveness Criteria document as a reminder of teaching effectiveness variables but should not feel limited by this list. Both observer and observee should understand that the goal of the observation is formative -- the aim is to produce better teaching, not to render summative judgments.

Post-Observation Meeting

Within a few days of the online observation, the observer should schedule the post observation meeting. This meeting should be a thoughtful and mutual conversation. The observer should come prepared with careful notes. Thoughtful and detailed comments are essential to this process and the observer should reflect on a variety of teaching effectiveness variables and provide actual examples whenever possible. The conversation should include positive and specific feedback about the instructor’s strengths, and specifically identify areas for improvement. The observer should be able to explain why he or she feels the way he or she does and provide suggestions for improvement.

No later than one week after the post observation meeting the observer should complete the written Online Class Observation Report, change it to a PDF, and email it to the instructor. The instructor being observed may add comments and then send the document back to the person observed.

More on The Post-Observation Conversation

The post-observation conversation should be handled in a collegial manner. It should be interactive and the observer should ask the instructor to openly convey their perceptions and opinions about the report and the class that was observed.
It is very important to remember that recognizing positive teaching strategies is just as important as identifying areas for improvement. Therefore, the post-observation conversation should begin with a discussion about the most effective teaching strategies observed. Additionally, if superior teaching strategies were observed, both parties should collaborate on ways the instructor could share those strategies with other SPS colleagues.

When discussing areas for improvement, the observer should provide the reasons why a particular strategy seemed less effective and suggest one or more alternatives that can be utilized instead. The observer should ask the instructor if he or she has any ideas for changes that would enhance his or her own teaching effectiveness. It is useful to sit in front of a computer with the person observed so that the comments made can be linked to specific aspects of the course evident from what is on the screen.

Submission of the Final Online Class Observation Report

After receiving the report, the instructor may elect to add comments to the Online Class Observation Report. The instructor may wish only to sign the report. The instructor should send back the signed report to the observer within one week of the meeting. Once the observer has a signed copy of the report, he or she must submit it to the Academic Director for inclusion in the instructor’s personnel file.

IV. OBSERVER CREDENTIALS

Whenever possible, observations should be completed by SPS administrators or full-time faculty who have taught successfully online for a minimum of five years. Administrators who have never taught may not serve as observers. Administrators, adjunct faculty, or full-time faculty who have taught but do not meet the five year benchmark may serve as observers if they attend the observers’ training program provided by the Center for Academic Excellence and Support (CAES).

SCHEDULE OF OBSERVATIONS FOR NEW FACULTY

All new SPS adjunct and full-time faculty must be observed in the first and second semesters that they teach. If possible, observations should take place in different courses. After the two initial observations, the following schedule will apply:

- Adjunct faculty must be observed once every four semesters that they teach, including summer sessions, until a minimum of five observations have been completed.
- Full-time faculty must be observed every two years until a minimum of four observations have been completed.

It is important to note that this schedule reflects the minimum expectations and could change based on a variety of circumstances such as, but not limited to, the following:

- Observers observing in the online context must have already taught online
- Additional observations may need to be completed if an improvement plan has been executed.
- Additional observations may need to be completed if an adjunct or full-time faculty member plans to apply for promotion. A requirement of promotion is the submission of two class observations completed over the past three years.
- Once a full-time faculty member has been formally observed at least four times, he or she is required to ask another SPS or NYU faculty member who has been teaching at least three years to attend a class for a peer observation. This request must be made at least once every three years. The observation is less formal, serves as a refresher for the instructor, and is meant to promote interactive discourse about teaching effectiveness.