What is peer observation?

Peer observation is when a teacher observes another teacher in order to develop their classroom practice. A peer can be any colleague willing to support you. They may be from a different department or year team, have recently joined teaching, or be a member of the senior leadership team. Peer observation is a two-way process that can benefit both the observer and the teacher being observed, with the goal of improving learning and teaching.

"...the defining characteristic of this model is the importance of the one-to-one relationship, generally between two teachers, which is designed to support Continued Professional Development (CPD)." Kennedy, 2005

Effective schools appreciate that non-judgmental observations can form part of high-quality professional development. These schools see peer observation as important because it can improve the quality of teaching and learning for an individual and a whole school. The diagram, adapted from ‘Classroom Observation’ by Matt O’Leary (2014), is a typical model of how peer observation works.

What are the benefits of peer observation?

Benefits for the teacher being observed

Peer observation works alongside other forms of professional development.

Peer observation gives you an opportunity to apply what you have learned from other forms of professional development, such as conferences, training courses or reading. For example, after attending a training event where a new learning strategy was introduced, you could use peer observation to get constructive feedback on how this strategy would work in your situation.
Peer observation encourages honest conversation.
It is essential that the observation is used to gather evidence to encourage a constructive and supportive feedback conversation. At no point should you be judged. Without fear of being judged you may want to focus on how particular groups of students responded to stages of the lesson. Your observer could carry out a case-study observation of students you identified who are easily distracted or those students who need challenging further to extend their thinking. You may be able to begin to unpick the causes of distractions and plan how you can develop students’ thinking during the feedback as a result of being open with your observer.

Peer observation provides a new way of approaching a problem.
It can help you to develop a fresh approach to managing a challenging group of learners or developing strategies for supporting students with specific learning needs. This could be especially effective if the observer also has experience of teaching the same class or some of the same students and can share their experiences with you.

Peer observation boosts confidence.
It provides an opportunity to work with someone who understands the daily demands of the classroom, and this can help relax you. It is also a good reminder that all colleagues have parts of their teaching that can be developed, regardless of how long they have taught or what position they hold in the school.

Peer observation encourages reflection.
Being reflective is crucial to developing your teaching and learning. Being observed gives you the opportunity to reflect, both before and after the observation, giving you the space to stop and think about how you teach. You shouldn’t just reflect on what you need to develop but also on your strengths and what good practice you should be sharing with your colleagues.

Benefits for the observer

Peer observation develops communication skills.
Being an observer gives you the opportunity to discuss teaching and learning and practice giving constructive feedback, using evidence from the observation. A teacher taking part in peer observation in a secondary school reflected on her role as the observer: “It challenged us to sit on the ‘other side of the fence’ as the observer, giving us an opportunity to feedback using this format; challenging us to be honest with our colleagues as well as highlighting our own development points.”

Peer observation helps you to reflect on your own teaching.
When observing you can pick up useful strategies and solve issues that arise in your own teaching. Also, you may teach some of the same students that are in the observation lesson. It can be enlightening to see how students react differently in other subject areas, with different groups of learners and in different classroom layouts.

“...in observing another teacher, the observer draws on her professional vision, her adapted way of seeing the field of practice, to render the observed scene intelligible. In doing so, she engages in a ‘double-seeing’ of her own classroom in comparison to the classroom that she observes.” Tenenberg, 2016
Benefits for the school or institution

*Peer observation demonstrates a school’s commitment to professional development.*
It can contribute to the development of the whole school by creating a professional learning community dedicated to improvement. By opening up the classroom and sharing strengths with each other, good practice is seen and celebrated. Importantly, areas for development are highlighted and colleagues then work together to plan next steps.

“What you do not know, indeed what you cannot know, is often more important than what you do know.” Healy cited in Macbeath, 1999

*Peer observation can improve teaching and learning in a school.*
It gives colleagues the opportunity to learn from each other, with the aim of improving teaching practice and gaining new ideas. John Hattie (Hattie, Masters and Birch, 2015) notes that a shared approach to professional development has been proven to improve teacher effectiveness. If resources are available, the school could give all staff a written document containing excellent observed teaching strategies to make sure good practice is shared with everyone.

*Peer observation encourages an open and sharing school culture.*
It provides teachers with dedicated time to share good practice with colleagues so that they are not isolated. This helps to prevent teachers passively accepting new knowledge and only making changes to their teaching as a result of a senior leader coming in and telling them what to do. We wouldn’t want our students to approach their learning like this and the same applies to our staff!

*Peer observation gives teachers the power to make changes.*
When teachers feel supported to make changes to their practice they can help shape conversations about teaching and learning in a school. Effective schools make sure a teacher’s voice is heard, and encourage teachers to develop their own teaching. Teachers who talk about teaching and learning may help to influence policies set by the school.

Six common misconceptions about peer observation

‘Peer to peer’ is the only way to carry out an observation.
Peer observation can take place in pairs but could also involve three colleagues working together. This might involve two colleagues observing while another teaches the lesson. If you have two observers, perhaps they could focus their observation on two different students or groups of learners. Or, while one of you observes, the second one could speak to the students, but only if you agree this before the observation starts. See below for more information on alternative models of peer observation.

You should only give positive feedback.
This depends what we mean by ‘positive’. While observation must be non-judgmental, there is a risk that there could be no change in teaching if you only say ‘nice things’ about each other’s teaching without saying how you could develop. You can overcome this by carefully pairing up colleagues and making sure you trust and respect each other.
“Staff need to feel safe if they are to be honest about their teaching; and there needs to be a collegial spirit of mutual support among equals if tutors are to accept a collective responsibility for teaching within a department.” Coffield, 2012

**It takes too long to carry out a peer observation cycle.**
Time is always a challenge in any professional development activity, so it is essential to focus on what works. Peer observation involves working with others, and teachers may need time out of the classroom to carry out an observation. But it is flexible. If you are taking part in an observation you should consider the best times during a term to observe or be observed, which classes are best to be observed with and when there will be enough time to give feedback. By agreeing a focus for the observation beforehand, the time spent observing and giving feedback is targeted on learning, meaning you use your time more efficiently.

**Colleagues should be from the same department.**
Not necessarily, it depends on the purpose of the observation. If knowledge of the subject content is crucial for the focus of the observation, this may be the case. However, belonging to a different department or institution may be beneficial to learn more generally about teaching. This point is highlighted by an English teacher who had the opportunity to work with colleagues from the Languages faculty during their peer observation cycle: “This was useful in the sense that it gave us an insight into how other subject teachers approach their subjects, as well as what resources they use. Certainly, from the French lesson that I observed, I witnessed a pace and challenge that I would like to adopt within my English lessons, as well as resources to go with this.” In a study by Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond (2004), staff felt it benefited them to see how other disciplines approached teaching. It is also important that peer observation doesn’t become repetitive or stagnate. This is a risk if it is only ever colleagues from the same department who observe each other.

“More than one study has reported that colleagues who are too close may be unwilling to provide honest feedback about negative aspects of teaching by the observer.” Tenenberg, 2016

**Peers who observe each other must want to develop the same part of their teaching practice.**
You don’t have to both be developing the same part of your teaching. In fact, sometimes it is better for you to have different strengths. For instance, it may be that you pair up with a colleague whose strength is ‘effective use of plenaries’, which is an area you want to develop, and your strength lies in your behavior management, which is what your colleague wants to develop. However, it is worth thinking carefully about who can support you to develop. While you are not expected to copy the exact teaching approaches of your peer, it is worthwhile thinking carefully about whose approach to teaching you feel is closest to your own. This is a good idea, as you are more likely to feel you are able to apply what you have observed your peer do when back in your own classroom.

**I have to agree with the feedback from my peer.**
No you don’t, but you do need to be open to receiving feedback. The feedback after an observation gives both teachers the opportunity to talk through their reflections on the lesson. It is not essential for you both to have the exact same interpretation of the events of the observation lesson. Instead, you learn from talking and making sense of what was observed (O’Leary, 2014). It is the open discussion between you that is crucial.