Observation form

Introduction & Instructions

As part of the TA training, you will be **observed by an experienced assistant** while you are running your class, be it either an **exercise session, lab session or excursion**.

You will be given the choice of who you will ask to observe you, bu it is best to do this in consultation with the coordinating assistant of your department. It is therefore possible that you will be asked to observe another assistant in the future. The observing assistant **must be one of the following**:

- A PhD student in their third year or later
- A post-doc or professor
- A professional Teaching Assistant

The observer uses the **observation form** to complete their observation of your class. The observed assistant then uses that form to complete a part of their portfolio

The observation happens within a context of '**critical friendship**'. Both parties involve share a personal confidence relationship, and will need to maintain that relationship, even while one of the parties has to critically evaluate the other. Important is that you show confidence in each other's **professional competences**, and confidence in each other's **good intentions.**

Observing an assistant can be an instructive experience for both parties. But how should you observe someone? Which factors should be considered?

1. Preparation

Before the observation occurs it is important to make good agreements with the each other (and, if necessary, with the other members of the didactical ream). It is also useful to discuss beforehand the **context** of the session, e.g. the objectives, and any special **points of attention** for the observer. For example, this session might be exceptionally challenging because the subject is difficult, or the student group might be especially rowdy or silent.

2. Observation

During the observation it is important that the observer describes the **actual behaviour** of the students and assistants as **objective as possible**. This should be done **without interpreting or evaluating**. The questions on the completion form will help you do this, but be mindful of this..

3. Feedback and self-assessment after the observation

After the observation it is time to **provide feedback** so the observed assistant can assess the quality of its own session (**self-assesment)**. This is the most instructive part of this exercise. The completed observation form can assist in doing the self-assessment and hence, improving the didactical skills.

Tips on how to give good feedback

- **pDistinguish between facts and interpretations**.

Example: You can say: 'At a certain moment you seemed bored'. This is not a fact but an interpretation. Something like this can put the observed teacher in a defensive position. It is better to say: 'You frowned your eyebrows and looked at your watch. I thought you might be bored by the students, did you feel that way?'. Doing so leave room for the teacher to tell their side of the story.

- **Find a balance between positive and negative feedback**.

It is easy to give a lot of negative feedback because the weak points are the most noticeable. However, it is better to give positive feedback as well, even if it is only trivial.

- **Focus on the impact of a certain behavior on the learning of students**.

Explain why certain actions provoke certain reactions from students.

- **Be very selective with negative comments.**

Negative comments can reduce the teacher's motivation and self-confidence. However, it is still recommended not to keep negative remarks to yourself. Teachers can only improve themselves if they are aware of their weaknesses. There are different strategies for formulating negative comments in a way that supports and encourages improvement. The most crucial strategy is to select which comments are important to mention. Small weaknesses are better ignored or quickly mentioned in between without going into more detail. Sometimes there are also weaknesses that cannot be improved. It could best to keep quiet about this because it can lead to a decrease in self-confidence in the teacher.

- **Be careful when giving suggestions for improvement**.

This places the observer in an expert position, which can quickly disrupt the balance of power. Moreover, the suggestions for improvement may not be implemented in the way it was originally intended. Does the teacher have the necessary skills (such as timing, contact skills,...) to carry out the suggestion? If not, suggestions can do more harm than good. It is better to guide the teacher in the search for and implementation of solutions. In this way creative solutions can be found that 'fit' with the personal style of the teacher.

- **think about and weigh your words.**

When describing weaknesses, it is best to report as neutrally as possible in a descriptive, non-aggressive way. Problems should be presented in such a way that an acceptable solution is available.

Completion form

Observer:
Observed assistant:
Date:
OPO Code and name:
Exercise session, lab session or excursion?
Student group (Ba/Ma, programme,…):

1. Which structure was observed during the practice session?

a) Describe the different parts of the practice session b) Describe the student behaviour (attentive, noisy, calm, …) in each part and indicate the interaction between assistant and students. *Remark: The description of the observation should be concrete and objective. The aim is to describe the actions not to evaluate them.*
session part 1: session part 2: session part 3: session part 4: session part 5 session part …

2. What did you appreciate in this session and why? What was, according to you, less good and why?

3. Which alternatives (structure, content, didactical method, interaction assistant/student) would you consider for this session?

4. Box to be completed by the observed assistant (not by the observer): Which information and tips on this form and after discussion with your observer will you consider in your future didactical activities?