

**Guidelines for Effective Observation of Case Instructors**  
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Observing colleagues in the classroom and providing feedback on teaching are critical components of faculty development at HBS. To enhance the effectiveness of faculty observations, the Christensen Center has developed guidelines which include observation principles and process, elements of effective class preparation, and in-class assessment of discussion-based teaching.

## **OBSERVATION PRINCIPLES**

While each observer's approach may vary, we have found that the most effective observations:

### **Include a substantive pre-class component.**

A pre-class discussion between the observer and the instructor regarding class-specific learning objectives, teaching opportunities and challenges, and class design can provide valuable *ex ante* guidance and feedback on class preparation and planning. Additionally, a more general discussion of the instructor's experience with the course and the section may reveal important insights regarding the instructor's perceptions, concerns, and teaching philosophy.

### **Begin with instructor's self-evaluation.**

Before presenting any feedback to the instructor after class, the observer should start the debrief session by asking the instructor for his/her own reflections on the class, including what went well and where there might be potential for improvement. Observers should be particularly sensitive to gaps between their own assessment of the class and the instructor's self-evaluation. For example, if the instructor appears to underestimate or not recognize certain weaknesses, the observer should provide more emphasis and detailed feedback with respect to these areas of concern. Conversely, for overly self-critical instructors, the observer should highlight the instructor's strengths in the classroom and provide perspective regarding perceived weaknesses.

### **Are focused, not exhaustive, in scope.**

The observer should not overwhelm instructors with excessive information, but instead distill the many potential pieces of feedback into a core set of strengths and opportunities—we recommend no more than three of each. Also, observers should be prepared to provide specific examples to illustrate each strength and opportunity. Although experienced instructors may wish to receive more detailed feedback on the class session, faculty early in their careers often find it challenging to process and respond effectively to a series of minute-by-minute reflections on what happened or could have happened differently throughout the class.

## Faculty Observation Process

We recommend a three-part process for conducting classroom observations and providing feedback for case instructors. Ideally, the observer attends class and provides feedback twice over the course of an instructor's teaching term.

### Before Class

1. **Plan the observation.** Request class materials including the case, supplemental readings, teaching note (if available), study questions, and seating chart. Arrange times for a pre-observation meeting and debrief. The debrief should occur while details are still fresh, preferably before the instructor's next class.
2. **Review class materials and relevant instructor background.** Read the class materials and review pertinent background information on the instructor, including notes from any previous observations.
3. **Meet with the instructor.** Discuss the class to be observed as well as any other issues relevant to the course or section. Ask the instructor if there are particular teaching concerns he or she wishes to address and incorporate these into the observation and debrief. You may consider shaping the conversation with the questions found in Attachment 1: Elements of Effective Class Preparation.

### During Class

1. **Observe both small details and the "big picture."** You may find it useful to draw on Attachment 2: In-Class Assessment of Discussion-Based Teaching in carrying out the observation.
2. **Take notes.** Observers' class notes vary widely, from detailed, minute-by-minute transcripts to brief remarks on various aspects of the class. Effective notes should aid recall of specific examples as well as broader impressions. Consider capturing elements related to the instructor's questions and statements, call patterns, student responses, transitions, and board plans.

### After Class

1. **Prepare to meet.** Review your notes and develop an account of the following: a) an overall assessment of the class, b) up to three core strengths and three opportunities for growth, and c) specific examples that support your observations. You may wish to review the attachments in order to strengthen and refine your assessment criteria.
2. **The debrief.** Faculty observations provide an opportunity for colleagues to participate in productive exchanges about teaching and course content. Debriefs need not be overly directive—ideally they should unfold as conversations. Regardless of format, it is important for the observer to remain constructive and forthcoming throughout the debrief. A debrief might follow this basic framework:
  - a. Ask an open-ended question about the instructor's assessment of the class. Use what you learn to create congruence between your feedback and the instructor's sense of the class.
  - b. Address the two questions: What are the instructor's principal strengths, and are there ways these strengths could be leveraged more extensively in the classroom? What opportunities for growth, if addressed, would yield the greatest improvement in teaching effectiveness?
  - c. Selectively review key moments or turning points in the class discussion.
  - d. Provide general yet actionable recommendations for future class sessions.
3. **Next steps**
  - a. Make yourself available to discuss questions or revisit points raised during the observation process. Consider inviting the instructor to make a reciprocal observation of one of your classes.
  - b. If you plan to observe the instructor again later in the term, discuss ideal classes, timing, and scheduling.

## **Attachment 1**

### **Elements of Effective Class Preparation**

#### **Learning Objectives**

1. What are the two or three principal learning objectives for this class?
2. What role does this class play within the course module?
3. What impact do you expect the class to have on students' depth of knowledge, development of judgment and analytical skills, and leadership capabilities?

#### **Teaching Opportunities and Challenges**

1. What compelling topics, points of tension, or potentially surprising or counterintuitive insights stand out in the case? How will you leverage these to engage your students in high-quality discussion and debate?
2. What in the case might this audience find difficult or confusing? How will you manage the discussion of these issues?
3. At what points in the discussion is the class at greatest risk of going off-track? How will you manage such contingencies should they arise?
4. How might you draw upon relevant connections between this class session and your own research or business experience?

#### **Class Design**

##### *Structure*

1. What issues or pieces of analysis should be covered during the discussion?
2. How will you sequence the discussion pastures and how much time should be devoted to each? What is the logic underlying each transition from one pasture to another?
3. How will your board plan support the class design and facilitate student learning?

##### *Opening*

1. What comments, if any, will you make to introduce the discussion? Why?
2. What is the rationale behind your opening question?
3. Which student will you select as the opener? Why?
4. How do you expect the discussion to emerge following the opener's initial response?

##### *Discussion Leadership*

1. What follow-up questions within each pasture will motivate students to think beyond their initial contributions?
2. How will you phrase the transition between each pasture?
3. What question will you use to introduce each pasture following the opening discussion?
4. How will you incorporate student backgrounds into the discussion? Are there specific students who should/should not be encouraged to contribute during particular pastures?
5. How might you stimulate students to think beyond this class and develop insights through linkages across classes, modules, and courses?

##### *Closing*

1. How do you plan to close the class discussion? Why?
2. What are the risks of providing too much closure at the end of this class? Too little?

## **Attachment 2**

### **In-Class Assessment of Discussion-Based Teaching**

#### **Structure**

##### Opening

1. Are the students ready to begin on time? Does the class start on schedule?
2. Does the instructor make introductory comments? If so, do they provide an appropriate context for the class session?
3. How well does the opening question motivate and energize the first discussion pasture and the class as a whole?

##### Sequencing and Timing

1. Is there a clear, logical flow from one discussion pasture to the next? Is sufficient closure achieved within each pasture before moving on to the next?
2. Is appropriate time allocated to each discussion pasture?

##### Closing

1. Does the instructor provide appropriate closure to the class as a whole?
2. Does the class end on time?

##### Overall

- Does the class structure effectively support the learning objectives?

#### **Process**

##### Instructor

1. Does the instructor seem well-prepared? confident? excited about the class?
2. Does the instructor set high standards in the class discussion?
3. Does the instructor listen thoughtfully to student comments and treat students with empathy and respect?
4. How effectively does the instructor's discussion leadership result in students discovering, articulating, and developing the most critical analyses and insights during the class?
5. How effectively does the instructor manage the discussion flow, while responding flexibly to both individual comments and section dynamics?
6. How effectively does the instructor use the boards and classroom technology to support the learning process?
7. How effectively do the instructor's body language, eye contact, voice, and movement support the learning process?
8. Does the instructor encourage an appropriate balance of instructor-to-student and student-to-student interaction in the class discussion?
9. Does the instructor effectively leverage student background information in the discussion?
10. Are the instructor's call patterns fair and appropriate?

##### Students

1. How well prepared are the students?
2. Do students participate and listen actively throughout the discussion?
3. To what extent do students contribute ideas, analysis, and personal experiences instead of simply presenting case facts?
4. Do students build effectively on each other's comments?

##### Overall

- Which aspects of the class session are particularly inspiring? raise concerns?

#### **Outcomes**

1. Are the principal learning objectives achieved? Does in-class learning substantially exceed pre-class learning?
2. Are students stimulated to think beyond this class and develop insights through linkages across classes, modules, and courses?