



## The effects of peer observation on the quality of a tutorial: A case study

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This article uses a case study to illustrate the structured approach to (peer) observation. First, it shows how peer lead observation can support specialist teaching. Subsequently, the general effects of peer observation and possible observation aspects are presented. This form of quality assurance in tutorial teaching enables an exchange at eye level in the form of collegial observation at peer level. This allows "blind spots" in one's own teaching activities to be addressed transparently in the feedback discussion. The possible discrepancy between self-perception and external perception (of teaching activities) is also broken through the change of perspective. Specific observations and assistance are presented in the case study. With the help of observation and a subsequent feedback discussion, these didactic adjustments can be uncovered and one's own teaching style can be changed for the better by applying the adjustments. At the same time, didactically well-executed teaching at peer level has a motivating effect that encourages students to attend courses in person again.

Dieser Artikel veranschaulicht mit einem Fallbeispiel das konkrete und strukturierte Vorgehen bei einer (Peer-) Hospitation. Zunächst wird dargestellt, wie Peer-Angebote die fachliche Lehre unterstützen können. Anschließend werden generelle Effekte einer Hospitation und mögliche Beobachtungsaspekte vorgestellt. Diese Form der Qualitätssicherung der tutoriellen Lehre ermöglicht in Form kollegialer Hospitation auf Peer-Ebene einen Austausch auf Augenhöhe. Hierdurch können „Blinde Flecke“ der eigenen Lehrtätigkeit transparent im Feedbackgespräch thematisiert werden. Auch die mögliche Diskrepanz zwischen Selbst- und Fremdwahrnehmung (der Lehrtätigkeit) wird durch den Perspektivwechsel durchbrochen. Es werden im Fallbeispiel konkrete Beobachtungen und Hilfestellungen dargestellt.

Mit Hilfe einer Hospitation und einem anschließenden Feedbackgespräch lassen sich diese didaktischen Stellschrauben aufdecken und der eigene Lehrstil kann durch Anwendung der Stellschrauben zum Positiven verändert werden. Zeitgleich wirkt eine didaktisch gut durchgeführte Lehre auf Peer-Ebene motivierend, um wieder in Präsenz an Veranstaltungen teilzunehmen.

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## 1. Finding your way out of "presence fatigue" with peer offers

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in lower participation rates in university courses and a prevailing "online fatigue" [1], which is currently turning into "presence fatigue" and a lack of commitment to participation. What is needed is commitment and motivation, which is conveyed via peer offerings, among other things. Well-trained peers who act as teachers in tutorials (tutors) "build a bridge here" [2].

## 2. Understanding a tutorial

In this context, a tutorial is understood as a teaching unit or a learning group that is led by a student tutor. In a tutorial, students come together at a learning location to practise subject-specific content in depth, discuss certain topics, clarify questions or receive additional support as equals in a peer-to-peer setting. In this abstract, tutorials also refer to exercises that are led by a tutor. In principle, tutorials are offered in university teaching to supplement or accompany lectures or seminars.

## 3. Understanding observation

Observation in a tutorial refers to a setting in which one observes and participates in such a tutorial [3]. During an observation, the observing person has the task of recording previously defined observation focal points:

- the structure and sequence of the content – clarity in goals of practice (e.g. are the individual phases logically linked and are they oriented towards learning objectives or competencies?)
- the methodological and didactic design of the tutorial (e.g. the choice of work and social forms, as well as the appropriate integration of selected media and materials such as worksheets, presentations, other learning objects for illustration)
- the social interaction between the participants and the tutor as well as the collection of feedback (e.g. the way of

communication and the learning atmosphere in the group)

- the ability of students to engage in self-directed learning (e.g. understandable and comprehensible explanations of existing problems or exercises and encouragement to develop independent solution strategies)
- the presentation style of the tutor (e.g. the use of facial expressions, gestures, language and expression)
- the tutor's leadership function (e.g. first appearance in front of the students and role awareness)
- participants' feedback to lesson

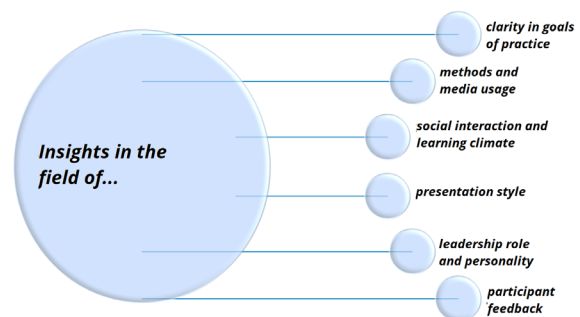


Fig. 1: Observation dimensions of the hospitation [created by M. Ludwig]

## 4. Effects of observation

This provides insights into the tutor's teaching activities and offers the opportunity to identify proven teaching strategies, reflect on pedagogical approaches and suggest possible improvements or adjustments.

Furthermore, peer observation promotes a change of perspective on the part of the tutor, as the tutor's own perspective and that of others are perceived. This procedure therefore makes it possible to discover the "blind spot" [4] in one's own teaching activities. In addition, the defined observation focus provides new insights and impulses and can therefore make a professional contribution to university teaching.

The observation can also serve to promote the exchange of best practices, strengthen the pedagogical skills of the tutor and improve the overall effectiveness of the learning process within the tutorial.

## 5. The prototypical course of an observation program at the Technical University of Dresden

At the beginning, the tutor voluntarily contacts the TUTORING hybrid team and expresses the wish to take advantage of a peer observation.

After an appointment has been made, the so-called preliminary interview and a short survey on the observation focus follow. The following points are discussed in this interview:

- Content of the tutorial
- Aim of the tutorial
- Number of participants
- Format (in presence or online)
- Suitable internship date
- Experience of the tutor (previous experience, prior knowledge, professional expertise)
- Feedback requests from the tutor
- Problems and challenges encountered in past tutorials
- Clarification of the procedure on the day of the peer observation (transparency about the observation etc.)
- Agreement on confidentiality and the protected framework at peer level
- Arrangement of a feedback appointment

The criteria-based observation then takes place. Right at the beginning, the tutor explains the new context and the observation situation to the group and then starts with the content of the lesson. The observer chooses a place in the room that allows all participants to be seen from behind. In addition, the entire room and the prepared materials should be visible. Meanwhile, the observer makes notes on the desired feedback aspects in a previously created observation protocol and notes down interesting facets of the teaching activity and skills in a resource-oriented manner. During the ongoing tutorial, no intervention is made and no comments are made. Only the observation process takes place.

In the feedback discussion that follows immediately or takes place later, the tutor is first asked about their own assessment, the so-

called self-perspective. This is a form of self-reflection. Which aspects did the person themselves notice, which were they not aware of? Where were obstacles encountered and what went really well? What didactic questions or adjustments arose after the tutorial? Wisniewski and Zierer (2018) describe professionalism in relation to the teaching profession as "reflexivity in relation to one's own professional actions" [5]. In order to "act professionally as a teacher, one's own routines must be constantly questioned. Among other things, self-reflection can serve this purpose. However, this should be supplemented by "external data." [6].

Depending on the agreed observation focus, the questions for self-reflection can vary, for example, more specific feedback on one's own leadership function and group dynamics can be focused on.

Here too, the observer makes notes and then responds to the questions or perceptions. In addition, all thematic blocks of the observation protocol are discussed and feedback is formulated in a constructive and appreciative manner. This relates primarily to the desired aspects (e.g. presentation style, methodological and didactic process, etc.). If there are no more open questions, the feedback session ends and the tutor is then sent the observation protocol by email to secure their own results.

Templates already exist for all of the steps mentioned, which are currently being revised and standardized in order to achieve a consistently high quality of observation and feedback.

It should be noted here that the confrontation of the observed person with the "blind spot" can lead to an emotional situation with unpleasant feelings. It is therefore important to emphasize that no subjective evaluation process takes place, but rather an objective observation according to previously defined criteria, in order to transparently illustrate any defensive or unconscious aspects of the teaching function and to derive various offers of support for the tutor from this.

Each individual step described requires expertise, which is provided by trained or appropriately trained observers. If the

observation is implemented as "collegial observation" by peers, the commitment of the person being observed is also increased.

## 6. A case study

The following case provides insights into the teaching reality of a tutor in the engineering sciences department at the Technical University of Dresden and at the same time shows what important adjustments are needed in the didactic training of tutors.

In the summer semester 2023, an exercise was observed at the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering. In the preliminary discussion, the wish was expressed to get ideas for more interaction between the students and the tutor. Students would often not speak up, even if they actually had questions. It would therefore be interesting to shape the relationship in order to examine the openness, cooperation and barriers of the participants more closely.

Right at the beginning of the tutorial, the tutor pointed out the observation as agreed and the tutorial started. There were around 35 students present and it was the second and, according to the tutor's assessment, "louder" tutorial of the afternoon. After a review of the content and a classification of the topic, an outlook on the lesson was given. Meanwhile, the doors and windows of the large seminar room remained open - students came and went. The further back, the louder the side conversations were.

The tutor used a tablet as a work object to illustrate his content using a projector presentation. He always made it clear on the tablet what he was talking about with markings that remained for a short time and then disappeared again. This led to the effect that he primarily looked at the tablet and hardly made direct eye contact with the students. There were short question-and-answer dialogs that took place between him and students in the front row of seats. The dialogs could no longer be understood due to the restless working atmosphere at the back of the room. The tutor did not repeat any questions or answers and there was no demand from the students in this regard. There were also

numerous spelling mistakes in the presentation documents.

When asked, it turned out that the tutor had used documents from his predecessors and had not noticed the mistakes. No one in the audience drew his attention to this either.

After a half-hour introduction to the topic, the students were given an exercise unit in which they were to work independently on the steps just shown in the exercise booklet. There were no didactic instructions as to how this should be done or which working or social forms should be used (individual work, partner work or group work). The tutor walked between the rows and answered questions quietly.

Afterwards, the overall content of the training session was summarized once again and an outlook on the next content was given.

## 7. Evaluation

In the feedback discussion that immediately followed, the tutor himself recognized a few of the disruptive factors mentioned (for example, restlessness in the room and little interaction). In the end, it was possible to jointly identify important parameters for more peace and quiet in the room as a basis and quality aspect for "good teaching":

1. Clearly communicate the start and end of the tutorial and signal important content sequences via body-space presence: Clearly close the door and stand at the front, look at the participants and wish them a good day in a friendly and determined manner to start.
2. Establish clear rules: Please arrive on time and let me know if you have to leave early. Cancellations in the event of illness are also relevant in order to provide more planning security.
3. Show presence in the form of facial expressions and gestures throughout the room: Walking around while telling the story involves participants sitting at the back and tries to create an active interaction.
4. Repeat participants' questions if they were quiet. Students sitting at the back ask

whether the questions are understandable and include feedback from participants.

5. Actively involve participants through an appealing methodical design. For example, by including questions ("Do any of you already know the answer?") to build on previous knowledge.
6. Instruction of group work forms: encourage group work, give concrete small-step instructions, thus establishing active and passive shorter learning phases in the tutorial and supporting learning processes in peer format.

It was suggested that the tutor should set himself the goal of implementing exactly one new aspect for his next tutorial (e.g. signaling more presence in the room during the storytelling). In the next sessions, further aspects could then be taken up and implemented in the tutorial. For example, formulating questions in such a way that they remain open: "What thoughts do you have on this topic?" instead of "Do you have any questions?").

## 8. Conclusion

In retrospect, it is clear that peer observation enables an exchange at eye level. This allows "blind spots" in one's own teaching activities to be addressed transparently in the feedback discussion. The possible discrepancy between self-perception and external perception (of teaching activities) is also broken through the change of perspective. With this approach, didactic levers can be uncovered in the future and one's own teaching style can be changed for the better by applying the levers. At the same time, didactically well-executed teaching has a motivating effect at peer level to participate in courses in presence again.

## Literature

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