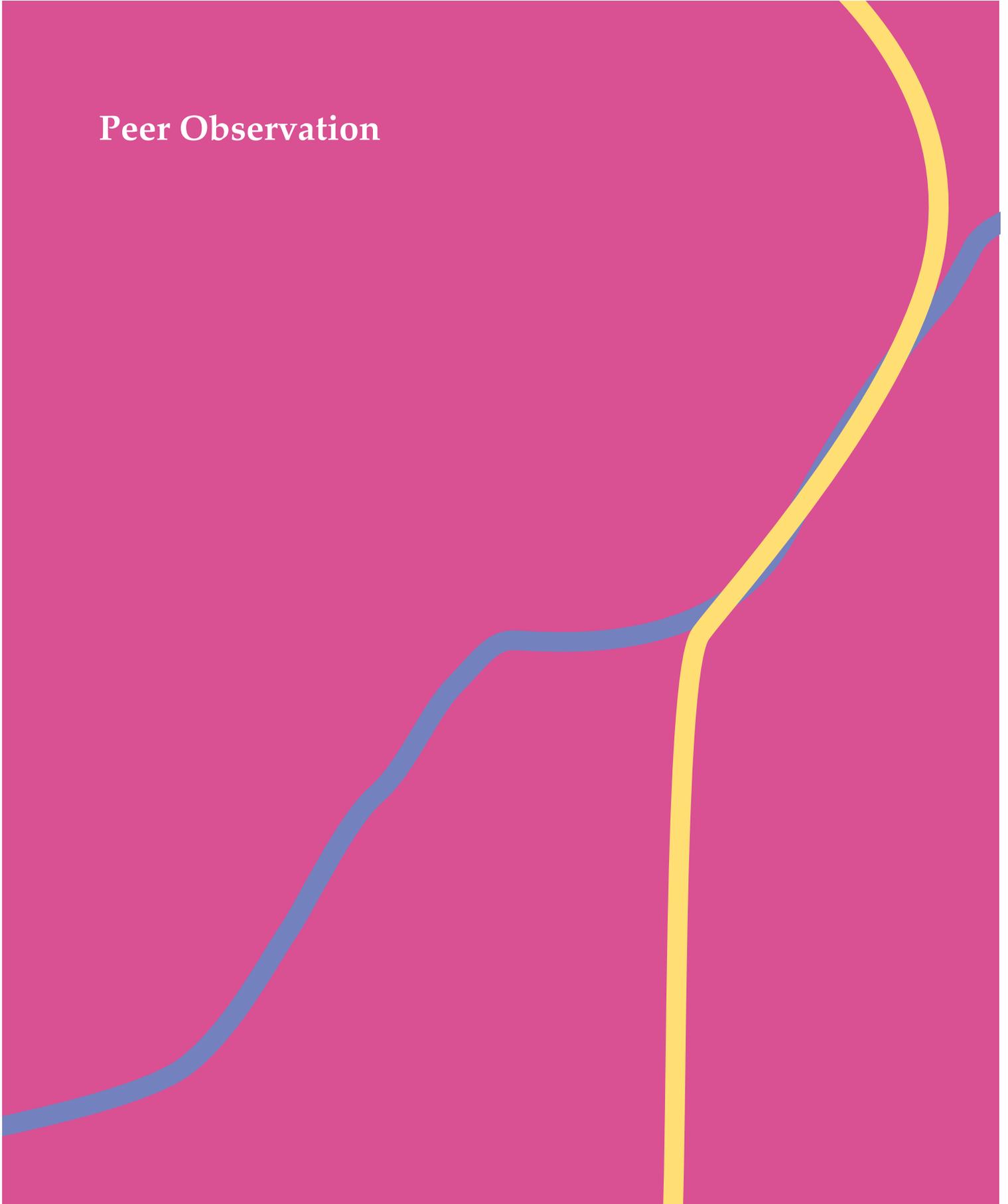


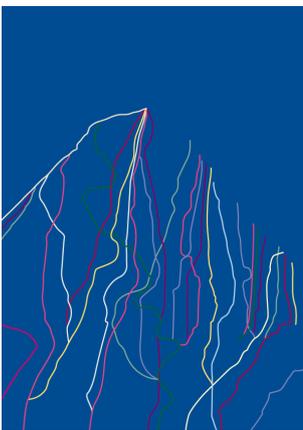


University of
Zurich ^{UZH}

Center for University Teaching and Learning

Peer Observation





A network of over thirty different routes stretches across the north face of the Eiger. Since the first successful ascent of the Eiger in 1858 what counts is no longer simply reaching the summit, but also the choice of route. These differ in terms of the length of climb, access points and destination, therefore also in terms of degree of difficulty and the challenges confronting climbers.

Some routes are used frequently, others very seldom. Time and again pioneers successfully attempt new routes and extend the bounds of mountain climbing still further.

Whilst cartographic paths show the well-trodden paths to success, it is always possible to discover new pioneering routes. The same can be said of individual teaching plans and activities. Thanks, for example, to the topographical signs and markers in the dossiers of the UZH Center for University Teaching and Learning.

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What is peer observation?

Do you sometimes feel like you have been left to fend for yourself when it comes to planning and giving lectures, or taking seminars and tutorials? Would you be glad of some feedback on the different elements you use: on different forms of teaching and learning, on didactic concepts, on how to formulate and evaluate students' learning outcomes or on what form assessments can take? Are you looking for alternative ways to extend your didactic repertoire? Would you like to find out how colleagues master the challenges that university teaching brings? Is teaching quality important to you? Do you want to continue to develop your own teaching skills?

If you answered 'yes' to one or more of these questions, then peer observation is certainly something worth serious consideration. Feedback from colleagues generally leads to realistic suggestions that you can put into practice in your teaching. This procedure is not a form of control or evaluation: it is based on mutual exchange and self-reflection.

Peer observation means having a colleague from your own or another discipline sit in on your teaching, and afterwards give you feedback on his or her observations. It provides an opportunity to share experience and know-how, and helps promote the development of analytical and reflective skills. The emphasis in peer observation is on personal and professional development. It is not designed to lead to evaluations in terms of 'right' or 'wrong', or to generalized judgements of teaching as 'good' or 'bad'. Attending courses is certainly one way to support professional development; however, classroom visits offer more, a point emphasized by Boud (1999): 'It is in sites of academic practice (i.e. the classroom) that academic identity is formed and is most powerfully influenced'. The value of this approach was confirmed by one of the graduates of the Teaching Skills program set up by the University of Zurich in 2001: '*Peer observation is the perfect complement to what we have learned in the course.*'

It may well be that the idea of being observed is not immediately attractive. No-one wants to look like a fool in their own discipline. Nonetheless, lecturers who dared to invite colleagues to observe them and initially spoke of the '*dreadful idea of being observed during their teaching*', were ultimately convinced that the experience had been both valuable and worthwhile:

- Colleagues are in the same boat and can easily identify with the situation.
- The observer is on the same hierarchical level and also engaged in teaching.
- Peer observation can show the value of existing teaching methods and/or reveal any 'blind' spots.
- As a guest you get the opportunity to learn from others and reflect on your own teaching.

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Peer observation offers learning opportunities for all involved, for both the lecturer and his or her guest. As Diez et al. (2002) stated, 'the concept of peer observation is based on a constructivist approach: learning as an individual, active and self-determined process of knowledge construction.' Consequently, peer observation offers the chance to apply and reflect on current didactic thinking in the appropriate context, and to develop new ideas and competencies through collegial exchange. Teachers learn to talk about their teaching, practice giving and receiving constructive criticism, and are actively invited to disclose, explain and reflect on their own teaching practice. The process of peer observation promotes the acquisition of competencies by individual lecturers, raises quality awareness and, as a rule, results in improved quality.

Forms of peer observation

Peer observation is usually undertaken in small teams of 2 or 3 people, so that the roles of guest and lecturer can be exchanged after an observation. Mutual observation is an intensive process that has the advantage of offering

participants the chance to get to know each other much better, and develop a valuable relationship based on trust and knowledge exchange. However, this tandem form is not entirely risk free, for instance if the guest is not sufficiently candid in his feedback because he or she

knows that they will be the next to be observed. In this regard a team of 3, or 'triad', has advantages, as the exchange of roles means that there doesn't have to be mutual observation. The disadvantage is that the triad form is more difficult to organize.

The framework for peer observation

6 The framework for 'peer observation' is built on a number of theoretical learning concepts (Bell 2005):

1. **Experiential learning:** learning that occurs in a real life situation. If it is to be successful, learning must include reflection and the continued development of new ideas.
2. **Cooperative learning:** a joint approach to problems that it would be difficult to solve alone.
3. **Critical reflection:** the learning process is enhanced when teachers articulate their personal approach to teaching and learning in words, and subsequently reflect critically on it. Critical reflection requires open-mindedness, responsibility, seriousness, flexibility, attentiveness and curiosity; all attributes that are of great advantage when it comes to sharing with colleagues.
4. **Reflective practice:** a process that develops individual abilities through the capacity to reflect on action. The cycle 'plan – act – describe – reflect' provides a complement to critical reflection by focusing on one specific moment of individual teaching practice. Reflective practice is regarded as a central element in the professional development of teachers.

All these concepts play a role in peer observation. They emphasize that peer observation is more than just a classroom visit; it is part of an ongoing cycle that encompasses a number of different elements (figure 1).

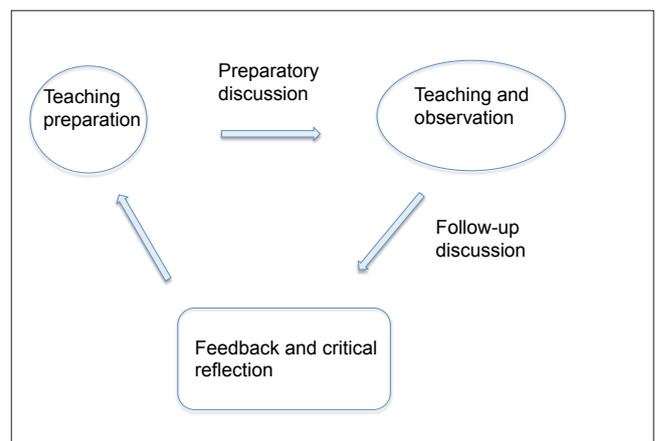


Figure 1: The basic elements of peer observation

The procedure for peer observation

Choosing a colleague and the preparatory discussion

The peer observation process begins with the choice of a colleague ('guest' who takes on the role of observer) and with the choice of a lesson suitable for the observation. Both decisions are made on the initiative of the lecturer. When choosing the guest the following characteristics may be taken into account:

He/she:

- can put themselves in the place of the lecturer.
- understand that the main aim of the observation process is development.
- is an experienced teacher.
- is a good listener.
- is able to give specific, concrete feedback.
- accepts that there is no such thing as the 'right' way to teach.

It would of course be ideal if the guest could draw on many years of experience and an in-depth knowledge of didactics. However, the main thing is that the guest is someone whose opinion you respect and with whom you can discuss matters openly and honestly, and who will treat the peer observation process with the requisite discretion.

One of the questions most frequently asked with regard to peer observation concerns the guest's own specialist discipline. Should the guest come from the same discipline area or is it more beneficial to invite someone from a completely different area. It isn't possible to give a conclusive answer to this question: both options have advantages and disadvantages. A guest from the same discipline area can identify more quickly and realistically with the problems and particularities of teaching in that specific discipline. Consequently, feedback is more subject-related and often more specific, and contents and methodology are usually observed in terms of their mutual interdependence. As a rule, familiarity with the contents means that the choice of didactic method is more easily understood. In addition, having the chance to observe teaching methods and forms specific to his or her own discipline can provide the guest with valuable

input to extend his or her own didactic repertoire. The principal danger is that a guest from the same discipline will focus too heavily on content.

In contrast, a guest from a completely different discipline can approach the process with an open mind, often sees a whole new dimension and observes things from a different perspective. He or she focuses on the teaching methods and is not bound by 'institutionalised norms' that could hinder the discussion about alternatives. On top of this, teams with members from different disciplines give both participants the opportunity to reflect on their fundamental understanding of teaching and learning in a way that extends beyond subject-related ideas. That both options are win-win situations for both participants is confirmed by a graduate of the Teaching Skills program:

'I have visited colleagues from my own discipline and a completely different discipline and also had them as guests. Both experiences were valuable. Although, naturally, it was possible to consider subject-related issues in more depth with the colleague from the same discipline, a look beyond the garden fence helps to expand horizons.'

Prior to the observation, a preparatory meeting is held to present and discuss important information about the subject matter and didactic planning: :

- Type of lesson and its positioning in terms of the curriculum as a whole (B.A.,M.A. program; module; semester; compulsory core course, compulsory elective or elective)
- Objectives of the lesson, i.e. the module as a whole (general goals)
- Objective of the lesson observed (specific goals)
- Theme of the lesson
- Structure of the lesson: lecturer-activities, student-activities
- Analysis of students: term numbers, major / minor subject; number of students
- A copy of material provided for students in the lesson to be observed –room details incl. set up (helps in choosing a place for the guest)

- Length of the observation (one lesson, double lesson?)
- Specific aspects the lecturer would like the observation to focus on
- Elements of individual lecturer's teaching philosophy / own teaching concept.

The goal of the discussion is to provide the guest with sufficient information to ensure the observation is based on and in harmony with the intentions of the lecturer.

- 8** Details about the positioning of the lesson in relation to the curriculum help the observer to think in terms of what is important to students.

The preparatory discussion is not intended as a forum in which to merely exchange basic information for the ob-

servation; it also offers a platform for participants to get to know each other and formulate their own teaching philosophy. The act of articulating his or her own philosophy prior to the observation brings clarity for the lecturer and allows the guest to give feedback about the degree of consistency between theory and practice. Answers to the questions such as, 'How do you define learning?', 'How do you see your own role in the lesson?', 'What aspects of good university teaching do you try to incorporate into your own teaching?', form the basis for the formulation of a teaching philosophy and an individual teaching concept.

The lesson and the observation

As guest it is advantageous to arrive in the room in good time in order to choose a suitable seat. Good seats for guests are those that are not in the students' main field of vision (i.e. not in the front row), but rather towards the back so that students can also be observed. Although it is primarily the lecturer who is being observed, feedback should also include how students react to the lesson (interested, bored, challenged, restless, focused etc.).

Students should be informed of the observation. Even in large groups the presence of a guest is unlikely to go unnoticed and it is important to guard against unnecessary speculation! The information given to students at the beginning of the lesson fulfils two goals: firstly they learn that the lecturer has invited a guest on his or her own initiative in order to get concrete feedback on how to optimize student learning. Secondly, they can be told (where applicable) that the guest would like to meet with students during the break or after the lesson to hear their opinions about the lesson. Experience shows that listening to students' opinions provides a valuable addition to the overall picture. As a rule students have fewer inhibitions in expressing their views to a neutral (the guest), meaning the lecturer can receive student feedback in a different way to the normal teaching evaluation. Examples of questions that could be asked of students during the break are:

- Is this a typical lesson?
- What makes this lecturer particularly good? What do you appreciate in particular?
- Is your background knowledge sufficient for this lesson?
- Where do you see opportunities for improvements?
- What (other) feedback would you like to give to the lecturer?

It is important to take notes during the observation to ensure that feedback is to the point and comprehensive; however, guests will often find it necessary to compromise between observing and taking notes. Although the observation as a whole is based on the main points agreed with the lecturer, a range of other instruments may still be helpful:

- Checklists: these can be useful, but have the smack of 'evaluation' rather than 'development'. They focus on the presentation by the lecturer and do not take account of what the students are doing. A point such as 'spoke clearly and audibly' can be marked as 'fulfilled' on the checklist, but is of little value if the students were restless and distracted at the time. Nonetheless, a checklist can be a good aid for the first observation, especially if it leaves space for comments.
- Log: the log procedure integrates the time factor into the observation of lesson activities. A simple table

with 'time', 'purpose/goal of this phase', 'Lecturer activity', 'Student activity' as column titles enables a sequential protocol of the lesson. The log procedure is particularly useful in showing what happens in various phases of the lesson and how long they last. It helps the guest to order or summarize his or her observations according to the different phases. It is helpful for the feedback stage to note specific examples and to also take down specific statements verbatim, e.g. references to previous lessons such as 'if you re-

member...'; the opinions expressed by the lecturer such as 'my impression of the literature...'; references to research such as 'research proved at an early stage that...'.
- Attention curve: before the lesson two or three students can be asked to fill out an 'interest curve' throughout the course of the lesson by ticking 'high', 'medium' or 'low' on the y axis, 'interest', every ten minutes. A comparison of this curve with the log can be very informative for the feedback.

The follow-up discussion: feedback and reflection

The follow-up discussion provides an opportunity to give feedback on the main points of the observation and to reflect on them. The objectives of the lecturer should have been made clear in advance, and the feedback ser-

ves primarily to show how successfully these have been put into practice, and to what extent the learning goals have been achieved.

Good Preparation	The follow-up discussion requires careful preparation: the observation notes can be used to summarize the most important points that the guest wants to communicate to the lecturer. These should relate primarily to the priorities set by the lecturer, and these must be discussed in the follow-up discussion. Consequently, it is advisable not to hold the discussion immediately after the observed lesson, but within the following week so that there is time for preparation and the observation is still fresh in the mind.
Consider 'self-perception' Provide help for more precise reflection	The follow-up discussion begins with the question of 'self-perception': How did the lesson go for you? What went well, and what less well? What did you find easy, and what proved difficult? The guest remains primarily in the role of listener, but can ask questions to help the lecturer reflect more precisely on his or her teaching: 'Why do you think that?'; 'Do you have a different explanation for that?'. Next comes the feedback or 'external view': emphasise strengths, confirm the points where there is agreement between the observer's view and the lecturer's 'self-perception', discuss incongruities in perceptions. Individual points should be backed up with concrete examples. Statements such as 'I particularly liked the first phase' is not of great help on its own, particularly if it does not refer to specific elements that can be put to use in future lessons. It is better to say: 'The outline you developed in the first phase on the overhead projector with the help of students ideas clearly showed how the significant elements of concept XY cohere. The students were very attentive in this phase and were very involved in the thinking behind it.' The results of the discussions with students during the breaks can also be brought up here.
Provide the 'external view'; be as specific and concrete as possible	Feedback can also include additional questions that bring in new ideas or stimulate the lecturer to reflect about his or her own behaviour and reactions. For example: 'How did you feel after you asked about the characteristics of group III elements and nobody answered? What could you change in future to help get an answer?', or 'I see that you used method X. Why exactly did you chose this method?'
Questions help future development	

Put yourself in the place of the students	One possibility for giving feedback is for the guest to put him or herself in the position of the students: 'Personally I would have liked to see a concrete example showing how the process is used in practice. This would have made it more plausible and made clear why we, as students, need to understand it'.
Make suggestions	Specific suggestions that arise from the guest's own experience or other sources are, of course, also an important aspect of feedback: 'When I tell the students there will be a little quiz at the end of the lesson, they are more attentive to the input. Have you considered trying something similar?'
Avoid making judgements	Making judgements about how and what should be taught is not part of collegial feedback, neither are tips or advice about the 'right' teaching style. 'I' messages tend to be much less judgmental than 'you' messages. It is better to say: 'I saw how some students simply chatted while you explained the importance of promoting intrinsic motivation in large companies', rather than 'You let the students chat while you explained the importance of promoting intrinsic motivation in large companies'.
Positive conclusion; plans for the future; reflection	Together with the guest, the lecturer draws up a list of strengths, and identifies the areas that will be concentrated on in the near future. The lecturer is invited to develop appropriate measures that can be used in future teaching. This brings the cycle of peer observation to a close.
Report if requested	Peer observation can also be regarded as part of a complete quality assurance concept. This takes place on the initiative of the lecturer and focuses on his or her development. Depending on the level, the results of the observation can provide a valuable record of teaching quality that can, for example, be integrated into a teaching portfolio. If requested the guest can provide a corresponding report.

After the observation it is important to observe certain rules when giving feedback. From what has been said above it should be clear that guests must be careful to choose the right words to ensure that they get their message across in a way that is appreciative and supportive. Likewise, the lecturer also has an important task, namely to listen carefully and where necessary to make

notes and not interrupt the feedback with excuses or justifications. Individual points can then be discussed in detail afterwards, although the emphasis should remain on the importance of the lecturer's own reflective process: 'Normally I don't do; I'm trying to understand why I did it differently this time.'

Experiences of peer observation at the University of Zurich

As previously mentioned above, at the University of Zurich peer observation is part of the Teaching Skills program, which is available to all lecturers. All those who want to complete the program must act as an observer for a colleague twice, and must be observed twice themselves. For every observation the guest drafts a report for the 'teaching portfolio', after this the lecturer observed describes his or her reflections in the portfolio, lists any measures resulting from the feedback and documents them. A brief survey of the program graduates gave a unanimously positive echo with regard to their experiences with peer observation. This can be seen in a selection of the responses:

'To visit someone's lessons is completely different to simply talking about teaching. It brings new didactic insights and inspiration.'

'Similarly to co-teaching, reciprocal visits also suddenly make individual teaching no longer seem like such a lonely affair: I find myself introducing someone else, or being introduced, to the 'cosmos' of one of my lessons.'

'One of the very clear benefits I gained from the process is that I had to really put my didactic ideas into words for the peer observation, and could discuss a lesson with someone in very specific terms. Previously, I had tended to reflect with colleagues in a more general way. I didn't see any disadvantages.'

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Conclusions

Teaching is an extremely complex process in which many elements come together to form a whole. Peer observation offers a platform to help deal with this complexity and in doing so also helps facilitate student learning. Well-meant, specific feedback from colleagues can help achieve change in four areas:

- Technical changes: improvements in the use of, for example, new learning technologies.
- Didactic changes: e.g. the introduction and implementation of active learning strategies.
- Establishing or changing individual teaching concepts: how do I do what and – above all - why? (pedagogic decisions based on didactic reasoning).
- Learning critical reflection as a key factor for future development as a lecturer.

Peer observation is a non-judgemental process that offers plenty of room for manoeuvre in terms of contents and timing, and it offers learning opportunities that, alongside continuing education courses and specialist literature, are of great value for the professional development of teaching staff.

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