Advice from Expert Educators: UCSF Academy members share their best practices and the common challenges from their own experience in serving as Teaching Observation Program mentors.

Best Practices

Preparation and observation

- Meet with the mentee in advance to discuss what s/he would like help with and focus on those items in observation and feedback.
- Create a supportive and safe relationship; break the ice and dispel anxiety by sharing your own teaching challenges and recounting your own TOP experiences.
- Schedule the feedback discussion as soon as possible – by phone later that day is better than in person one week later.
- Watch the learners and use their perspective to inform the feedback.

The mentor/mentee relationship and creating a safe environment for feedback conversations

- Be informal, emphasize both the peer relationship and confidentiality. Also emphasize that you will both learn from the discussion.
- Minimize use of the word "feedback" and emphasize the word "discussion" - to minimize any sense of judgment and maximize the sense of collaboration.
- Make it clear that your feedback is your opinion, not some ultimate truth, and different people may have different opinions.

Presentation and content of feedback

- Think about what you want to say ahead of time and identify 2-3 major points. Make them practical and link points for improvements to existing strengths. Be specific and detailed, but don’t overwhelm the mentee with too much information.
- Make it a conversation about teaching and be respectful of the teacher’s expertise; State that these are your observations; involve the mentee in thinking about what happened and how to improve.
- Begin by eliciting the mentee’s thoughts about how things went; they often are already tuned into their own challenges.
- Provide the feedback in person verbally and written, and offer the option of a follow-up conversation.
- Check in with the mentee to confirm your comments make sense.
Emphasize the positive in terms of skills and capacities, then build constructive criticism as suggestions that address what the mentee perceives as sticking points.

Avoid critical feedback on things that may need improvement but for which you can offer no feasible solutions.

Use examples you directly observed and don’t assume that this is how the mentee generally teaches – just give feedback on what you saw this time.

Share examples of effective approaches (e.g., samples of slides for lectures). Use the subjunctive: “You might find this a way to address the problem…”

Discern differences in style from functionally important deviations from ‘best practice’. If one’s approach would be markedly different from the instructor’s, consider the benefits of each.

Ask the mentee how the feedback conversation worked for them, and for any suggestions they may have for you about future mentoring.

Conclude by asking if there is ONE thing they may change based on this discussion.

Common Challenges

Creating a safe environment for feedback; minimizing the response of feeling criticized and defensive, while avoiding the use of an overly apologetic tone.

Feedback ideally should be solicited, not imposed.

Coming up with formative feedback when teaching skills are already quite well established.

The temptation to give only positive feedback – avoiding the harder stuff.

Logistics of finding time to talk before and after the session - but this is critical.

Obtaining specific details from the mentee on what issues s/he would like the observer to critique.

Keeping the focus on the process and not the content of the teaching session.

Narrowing down the feedback to a couple key points - it is critical to figure out what is the highest yield feedback and likely to make the greatest impact in terms of the faculty’s teaching.

It can be hard for the observer to understand the context of the one session in the overall curriculum or who the learners exactly are – it’s useful to find this out in advance, either with the teacher, the course director, or a knowledgeable colleague.

Making sure the feedback is specific and do-able; working with someone’s personality and style, rather than trying to force one’s own style upon him/her.

It’s hard to hear critique of a lecture or session the faculty has put so much time and effort into.

Faculty already receive direction from course directors and may feel constrained about changing their lectures without course director approval.

Follow-through on feedback may be difficult if the teaching session occurs only once a year.

It’s challenging to formulate feedback on “soft skills”, e.g. if the teacher has a mannerism or personal characteristic that is off-putting; sometimes the only thing you can do is to ask them if they’re aware of it.