

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 – its 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.