

COPUS Wedging

How COPUS Can Help Initiate Consulting, Coaching or Simple Conversations About Teaching

Source: Brett Gilley, CWSEI

PDF and editable Word version: <https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/seihandbook/chapter/supplemental-documents/>

The Classroom Observation Protocol for Undergraduate STEM (COPUS) is an observation tool allowing reliable characterization of how faculty and students are spending their time in a classroom. Here are some suggestions on how to leverage COPUS observations for faculty self-reflection, based on extensive use of the tool. This low-stress, low-cost observation tool can start fruitful conversations about evidence-based teaching practices. One overarching aspect to remember is that becoming evidence-oriented and student-centric about teaching is an expert collection of skills. It takes time, knowledge, practice, and feedback. COPUS can facilitate some of the steps towards being an expert instructor.

Why? What's your point? What are the opportunities?

- To gain access to instructors you haven't yet worked with. In other words, COPUS can serve as your first contact with previously uninvolved faculty. This can be a chance to observe or discover authentic problems in action and commiserate with instructors about their challenges.
- To establish a teaching baseline, perhaps prior to planned changes in teaching.
- You were asked to by someone in the department, project or institution. This could give you an opportunity to be more broadly involved.
- Assessing your teaching is one of the things we should reasonably expect of professionals. COPUS is an easy yet useful instrument that instructors can use to observe each other.
- An observation can involve instructors in teaching improvement programs with almost no commitment on their part; i.e., it's a low bar for participation, requiring almost none of their time.
- COPUS can be objective and non-judgmental (a key statement for some people), as opposed to the more daunting notion of an evaluation.
- COPUS can provide an opportunity to see and learn from what goes on in any class, which can be especially useful from a DBES perspective.
- It can be a chance to show off all the good things faculty do (from their perspectives) and disseminate the good practices observed.
- It can also provide an opportunity to give very specific feedback to a professor you are working with.
- COPUS helps provide open-ended advice for an instructor. The observer could pick specific changes to suggest (when instructors know and trust you).
- For newer instructors it can be helpful to suggest specific questions about instructing (e.g. computer use, engagement, reaction to a specific part of class).
- Observations are very useful to target help for instructors who are trying something new.
- COPUS will enable you to come up with suggestions for activities on topics covered in class.
- An instructor could add observation results to a teaching portfolio, tenure or other award package, etc. as a demonstration of teaching effectiveness from a third party.
- Using COPUS represents a third-party observation that uses a standardized process.

- Having an observer allows instructors to focus on teaching and not worry about trying to make judgments about their own effectiveness at the same time as actually teaching.

Tips for getting started, do's and don'ts (depending upon context and trust level)

- “Could you help me with this?” e.g. see how a strategy is run.
- “I’ve heard good things and would like to see how x works in your classroom.”
- Do not sneak into a class. Ask permission. Observations may be odd or novel for many people.
- Email an offer to the whole department. This could include suggestions about how data could be used (e.g. if comparisons will be used—could be an opportunity).
- Set up appointments with individuals by email.
- Run into someone; in passing, suggest an observation during casual conversation. Emphasize this is a standard, non-judgmental instrument.
- Offer to do an observation if an instructor is trying something new.
- Some departments or projects are starting to use COPUS in regular observations or as part of transformations, and even a few for tenure assessments (although this last is rare so far).
- Words to NOT use: assessment/evaluation/review/peer-judgment/I would. Remain focused on the instructor’s needs and perspectives, and de-emphasize ‘measuring’.
- Words you COULD use: can you help me?/I won’t send this elsewhere/anonymous/standard/objective/non-judgmental/etc. Feedback for you/feedback about time spent in class (students and instructors). “Students did…” (i.e., explain what they did, NOT what you interpreted, and not what you thought they SHOULD have done). “I think.”
- Use COPUS to distinguish between instructor and student actions as the lesson unfolded.

Following up immediately after observation

- Flag one or two items only from the class to discuss very briefly.
- Plan for no more than 2 minutes (even if more actually happens), and use part of that time to set up a meeting for discussion. Let the instructor choose the time and duration.
- Pick positive items first! And be constructive!
- Ask the instructor to reflect before you say anything. This encourages self-reflection.

Following up in a later meeting

- Show the check marks in the COPUS columns first and explain how the form works rather than showing the processed graphs. They can take time to explain and be an initial distraction.
- Limit feedback. Pick the two most important to emphasize.
- Include one or two things that are very easy to change. For example, “Count to 10 after asking a question” or similarly, “there’s no need to be afraid of silence,”
- Commiserate with problems you’ve had to deal with yourself—offer ideas for solutions.
- Compare to previous observations if possible (when you’ve done them before). This could be a window of opportunity: “Look at how the students react both times” (or in both sections, etc.). Two observations are more than twice as good as one.
- Focus on the student categories first. You could make general statements about how you like to see more than just lecture. Most instructors ask questions in class, so it should be fine to say this as a way of getting to less common strategies.
- Focus on things the instructor asked about. Let them guide the follow up if they bring up ideas.
- Regardless of what is scheduled, leave 1.5 hours of your time free in case they want to talk further. It is not that unusual; professors don’t get to analyze and discuss their teaching very often.

- Explain at this meeting how we encourage teaching using research-based practices based on motivation, time for telling, feedback based on thinking-made-visible, etc.
- De-emphasize the instructor's personal style unless they ask explicitly. Focus on what transpires during the lesson as a timeline.
- The meeting is like any one-on-one tutoring.

Other thoughts

- Sit towards the back. You need to see many students and get a perspective of the class from the back of the room, far from the instructor.
- If asked, tell students that you are simply doing this as a normal process of supporting improvement among colleagues.
- Your observations will always reveal some good ideas and insights about what works and under what circumstances. Use these to enhance your ability to provide support to all instructors.