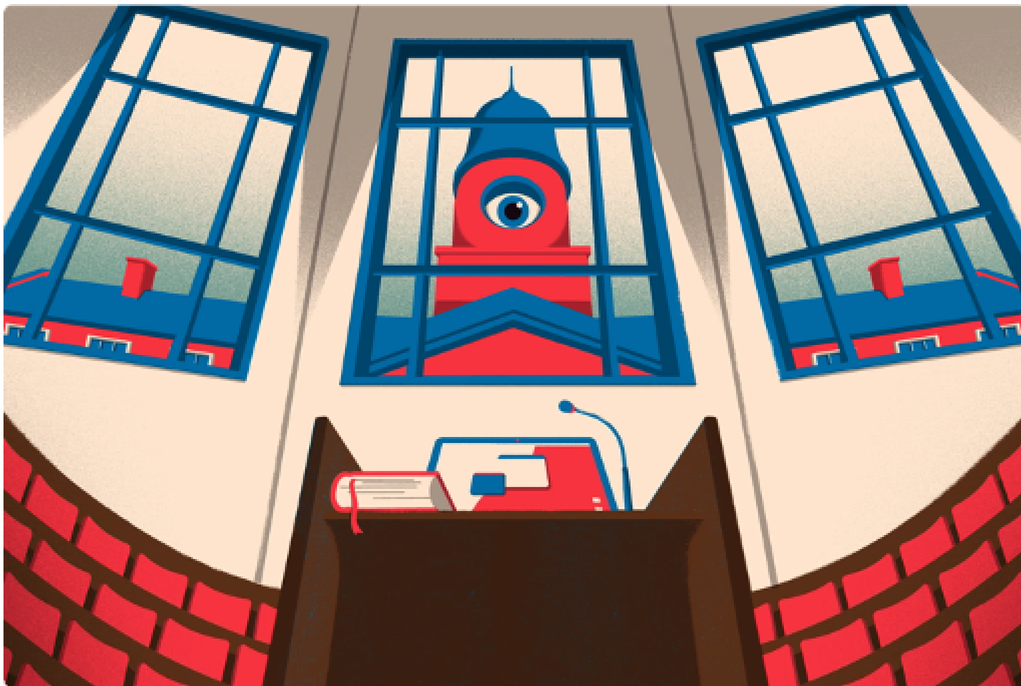
ADVICE

They’re Watching You Teach

How to put your best foot forward in a classroom observation.

By James M. Lang and Kristi Rudenga January 31, 2025



GOLDEN COSMOS FOR THE CHRONICLE

A visitor is coming to your classroom to watch you teach, and you’re worried.

Maybe your teaching is being evaluated for tenure or promotion. Or maybe you have been asked to teach a class as part of a job interview. In any case, you have an hour to demonstrate your skills (gulp).

The pressure to perform well in a single class period — under the watchful gaze of higher-ups, colleagues, or interviewers — can cause anxiety for even the most stoic academic. It's common to fret about the big stu! (your lecture or discussion topic) and the small (the foreboding congestion in your nose or the potential failure of your wireless slide advancer).

Such anxieties stem from the unpredictable nature of classroom teaching. Brains falter, technologies collapse, students get tired and don't want to talk. Over the course of a semester, you always have the next class period ahead of you to remedy these ills. But in a single-class observation, fears of the unpredictable are intensified. There's so much at stake, and the observer won't be back tomorrow.

Your worries may also run deeper: You harbor a secret fear that you are a terrible teacher, or you're barely a day ahead of your students in understanding the content of a new course, or you are just keenly aware that a major portion of the tenure criteria is based on this thing that you've never been trained to do. The fear of being observed magnifies such self-doubts.

Having spent much of our careers watching people teach, we know that even a little preparation can help you manage such fears. As part of our work in a university teaching center, we have observed hundreds of college instructors in the classroom, mostly to provide developmental feedback for their own self- improvement. We have also observed the teaching demos of job candidates, and one of us (in an earlier life) chaired a P&T committee that evaluated teaching in a high-stakes context.

Drawing from those experiences, we have identified four sets of teaching behaviors that you can control in an observed class. Note: We're not focusing here on course content. Because while some of the people assessing your teaching will be from your discipline, others — like the administrators evaluating you for tenure — will be folks who don't know your subject matter as well as you do. For the latter, what matters will be the pedagogical choices you make.

Here are four ways to broadcast your teaching excellence with a well-structured class:

No. 1: Create clear entry and exit points. You want your observer to walk out of the classroom feeling as if they have undergone a completed experience. Too many class

meetings (observed or not) fizzle into existence with nervous small talk and fade out with hastily improvised concluding words.

Script the critical opening minutes of class as much as possible. You can find plenty of ideas on how to do that here, but for an observed class, keep it simple. Students and observers will always welcome a quick review of the course or the field's GPS coordinates. Situate the class material, and the activities of the day,

within a larger narrative of knowledge learned or skills developed. That can be done with a few slides, a graphic or timeline, or even just a few words on the board.

Then demonstrate your organization by providing an agenda or outline of the day, with the major parts of the class period laid out. We can promise: Most observers will note any plan or agenda you share at the start of class. When they write up their observations, your clear agenda will remind them that you are a teacher with a plan.

The plan should include attention to the final few minutes of the session, too. With remarkable consistency across disciplines, we've watched instructors pick up speed as they approach the end of class. Their eyes dart back and forth between their notes and the clock, the wheels in their heads turning almost visibly as they estimate how much more content they can fit into the remaining minutes.

Force yourself to slow down in those final few minutes. At a minimum, o!er a brief conclusion and reiterate key points. Better yet, instead of a closing lecture, consider staking out three to five minutes for an ending activity. Use the time, for example, to ask students to jot notes of the three key points they are taking away from the day. Ask for a few volunteers to share what they wrote, and then o!er any updates or additions that seem necessary.

No. 2: Don't leave your interactions with students to chance. For the main part of your observed class, our best advice is to design a deliberate mix of passive and active learning. A blend of pedagogical structures will give your observer a sense of how you introduce or review content as well as how you

engage students in their own learning.

If you normally lecture, limit it to 20 minutes or so and then interact with your students in some way. In spite of what many people think, researchers have not identified some magic number beyond which students lose their focus. Yet from our observations, we have noticed that 15 to 20 minutes seems to represent a tipping point when eyes (including, potentially, those of your observer) start glazing over or wandering to cellphones and other such distracting technologies. Force yourself to insert active-learning elements by including a discussion question or activity prompt in your slide deck.

Even for the most flipped of flipped classes, we still recommend having a mini- lecture or two incorporated into the plan. If you are an aficionado of class discussions or group work, by all means, stay true to your pedagogical convictions. But the more you open the class to discussion or interaction of any kind, the more you open the door to the unexpected — which can be fantastic for learning, but scary for an observation. Your observer may be a big fan of lecture and less impressed by a class period that features none of it. Again, the best approach is to mix it up.

Finally, observers always make note of whether you have included the entire group of students in the class. Did you ask an occasional question and call on the same two students who raised their hands every time? Are there patterns in terms of who volunteers or speaks? And do those patterns reflect the principles of inclusive teaching? If you want to ensure that the most students will participate in class, follow some of the recommendations in *The Chronicle*'s guides on inclusive teaching and class discussion.

No. 3: Organize your teaching materials. The visible, physical, or digital tools that you use to support students' learning are another element entirely under your control in an observed class.

Test your tech tools ahead of time. We have heard many flustered apologies from professors about tech malfunctions — an online poll gone awry or an embedded video with no sound. We've all had that sinking feeling. But really, most teaching observers will be less concerned about that than you might think. In fact, if the glitch doesn't appear to stem from a recurring issue of disorganization, then your ability to calmly roll with a backup plan could actually end up as a note in your favor.

Slides are the most consequential technology of many college courses. In spite of the volume of recommendations admonishing instructors not to overload slides with text or rush through them too quickly, we still see both problems frequently when we do teaching observations. Follow the standard advice: Limit the text on your slides, avoid irrelevant graphics, and ensure that students have time to process each slide.

Similarly, if you teach with handouts, be sure they are organized and coherent. Bring copies for your observer. Aim to print them well in advance of class on observation day — don't let an empty ink cartridge send you into a last-minute panic.

And if you are a chalkboard user, give some extra thought to how you organize information you write on it. A chalkboard can be a particular bugaboo if you're not well practiced in arranging content while managing your penmanship and speaking at the same time. Just as students do, an observer will likely record what you put on the board. Will it make sense to them when they are reviewing it afterward?

No. 4: Climate matters. Finally, most observers will notice, consciously or not, the climate of your classroom. Do the students seem to know one another, and feel comfortable talking in class?

The unscripted moments before and after class can be especially telling. When we do teaching observations, we often will note what happens before the class starts: Does the instructor greet students and call them by name? Does the instructor stare fixedly at the screen as students enter the room, and then launch immediately into their prepared talk? Or does the professor acknowledge that other humans are present?

Small talk before class can challenge introverted teachers (both of our hands are raised!). Here, too, a bit of planning helps. Come up with a few questions or topics in advance. Try asking about the weather, about how midterms are going, or about a recent headline from the student newspaper. Having those questions concretely in mind can lower the barriers to connecting with your students, even in the midst of your heightened anxiety about being watched.

Knowing your students and calling on them by name, as recommended by Michelle Miller and others, can also go a long way toward creating a welcoming classroom climate. Even in a very large class, using a few names in your interactions with students can convey that impression, to your observer as well as to students themselves.

A final issue to consider is the use of movement and space. Even in a very small classroom, we have seen instructors remain pinned behind a podium, as if they were delivering a long acceptance speech at an awards show. That may stem from anxiety, habit, or disability. But if you are capable of moving, you should.

When you are locked into position at the podium, you send a signal — however unintentional — that the classroom has two kinds of space: the one where the expert stands, and the one where the novices sit. When you cross that barrier, your physical presence helps you interact with students more directly as they respond to questions or engage in group work.

Of course, all of these practices are worth incorporating into your regular teaching — not just when you're being observed. They are supported by research as valuable for student learning. If you incorporate some of them in a fretful flurry to impress your observer, we encourage you to make them ongoing habits in your teaching.

There is, sadly, no magic formula to erase the anxiety borne of having your teaching under a microscope. But by taking steps toward improving the structure, visible environment, and climate of your class, you can ensure that you're putting your best foot forward in a stressful situation.

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