Innovation Center

Evidence-Based Classroom Observation Technique: An Interdisciplinary, Structured Approach to Classroom Observation

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Abstract

Classroom observation is commonplace in higher education, but the process itself varies from school to school. A literature search revealed a lack of structured tools and universal interdisciplinary processes for postsecondary classroom observation. Thus, the Evidence-Based Classroom Observation Technique was developed to include both the tool and the interdisciplinary process.

KEY WORDS Classroom Observation – Faculty Evaluation – Growth Mindset – Interdisciplinary Mentorship – Pedagogical Evaluation – Nursing Education

Nurses hired to teach in nursing programs are often expert clinicians but not expert educators, as in other academic disciplines. Classroom observation typically serves as a formative method of teaching assessment to fulfill university requirements for annual evaluation, tenure, or promotion. Its value can increase with structure. Instead of the classroom observation simply serving as a "checks and balances" procedure resulting in a letter testifying to the day's happenings, structured observation can serve as a process that broadens the evaluative perspective while providing interdisciplinary mentorship. The Evidence-Based Classroom Observation Technique (EBCOT) was designed for three purposes: 1) to fill the gap of not having an evidence-based guide to orchestrate classroom observation, 2) to discourage silos in academia, and 3) to promote pedagogical growth and mentorship beyond the department level.

EBCOT DEVELOPMENT

EbscoHost, ProQuest, and Google were used to locate articles on teaching-learning best practices for postsecondary education. Search words included "classroom inclusion," "classroom engagement," "teaching practices," "quality teaching," "active learning," "belongingness," "connectedness," "course design," "course alignment and course objectives," "course alignment and learning objectives,"

"teaching strategies and course alignment," and "course alignment with university." Postsecondary best practices were extracted from relevant articles and organized into five dimensions (course alignment, course design, course community, course management, and course reflection) that summarized the findings. These dimensions, found on the left margin of the guide, provide the structure for the guide. (The EBCOT is available as Figure 1 in Supplementary Content, available at http://links.lww.com/NEP/A411.) Within each dimension, check boxes represent best practices found in the literature.

To facilitate dimension review inclusion, three steps were developed to organize the EBCOT guide as a classroom observation technique. When creating the guide and steps, growth mindset and interdisciplinary evaluation were also of research interest. Growth mindset means "the belief that intelligence is not fixed and can be developed" (Claro et al., 2016, p. 8664).

THE EBCOT GUIDE

The EBCOT guide is separated into three steps to facilitate course introduction, classroom observation and evaluation, and peer discussion. Using the EBCOT requires a two-person interdisciplinary team that works together to review a college-level face-to-face, hybrid, or synchronous online course: the observing faculty member and the observed faculty member. The teams can be formed by the faculty teaching the course as part of a self-evaluation process or by the university administration as a mentoring practice. Step 1 (course alignment) allows the observing faculty to see how the course aligns with the "big picture" of student growth and development. Step 1 requires the observed faculty to choose a cognitive domain, an alignment exercise influenced by Bloom's Taxonomy (n.d.). This serves as a reflective practice for the observed faculty and course familiarity for the observing faculty.

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Step 2 includes three dimensions (course design, course community, and course management) and serves as the actual observation piece of the process. The first dimension, course design, serves to elevate the classroom observation to a more holistic approach by observing the course from a student perspective. This dimension was influenced by Quality Matters (QM). QM is a "consortium of individuals, institutions, and organizations that have a common understanding of and desire for online course quality. QM serves as a leader in quality assurance" (Crews & Wilkinson, 2015, p. 49). Course design is also evaluated through a review of the syllabus and learning management site, looking for specific items such as office hours and a diversity policy that promotes classroom organization and inclusion (Kachini et al., 2020).

The second dimension, course community, focuses on the concept of belongingness and inclusion in the classroom, which has been linked to student success (Gilken & Johnson, 2019; Kachani et al., 2020). Strategies that promote community building are student-student interaction/collaboration (Crews & Wilkinson, 2015; Gilken & Johnson, 2019; Kachani et al., 2020; Wieman & Gilbert, 2017), encouragement to participate in class (Gilken & Johnson, 2019; Kachani et al., 2020; Wieman & Gilbert, 2017), and using student names (Kachani et al., 2020). Inclusion strategies include using personal pronouns, modeling expected behaviors, and using content examples from diverse backgrounds (Kachani et al., 2020). Positive faculty attributes that contribute to classroom inclusion include enthusiasm (Baier et al., 2018; Piryano et al., 2019), approachability (Jenkins, 2016), knowledge level (Baier et al., 2018), comfort in teaching (Jenkins, 2016), and professionalism (Jenkins, 2016).

The third dimension in Step 2, course management, is evaluated by looking for engagement and active learning strategies, for example, using a variety of course tools, academic engagement, relational engagement, and beginning and ending the class on time (QM, 2020). These best practices are listed in the EBCOT guide to provide structure to the observation while remaining focused on teaching-learning skills.

Finally, Step 3 of the guide (course reflection) promotes interdisciplinary conversation focused on teaching-learning practices from a growth mindset. The term *not yet* found throughout the EBCOT guide reinforces that teaching skills can be developed through practice, reflection, and peer support. Reflection is an emotional intelligence skill promoted by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (2021). Furthermore, Kachani et al. (2020) recommended reflection as a method to enhance inclusive classrooms.

This interdisciplinary process of course evaluation is implemented by following the steps outlined in the EBCOT guide. For example, a nursing faculty member can partner with an English faculty member to review a required course housed in the English department. During the EBCOT process, the nursing faculty becomes familiar with the learning management site and syllabi and observes one class within that English course. When the faculty team meets to complete Step 3, they can openly share observations about the course, all while learning from each other. This can also be an opportunity for nursing faculty to gain a better understanding of courses for student advisement while building a new relationship with a peer.

PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

During the 2020 to 2021 academic year, following institutional review board approval, 30 faculty agreed to pilot the process and provide feedback to refine and improve the EBCOT guide. Faculty volunteers included members of each school within one private university: 10 from the School of Arts and Sciences, six from the School of Education, seven from the School of Health Professions, four from the School of Communications, two from the School of Business, and one faculty member-at-large. Participant faculty ranks included lecturer, clinical assistant professor, assistant professor, associate professor, full professor, visiting assistant professor, and adjunct instructor. Synchronous online and face-to-face undergraduate and graduate courses were evaluated.

The participants were placed into interdisciplinary teams by the researcher and completed the EBCOT process. After Step 3 was completed, all participants completed a 12-question Qualtrics survey that aimed to gather data on the process and areas needing clarification throughout the guide. This feedback resulted in clearer step descriptions, the addition of a one-page introduction, the addition of a term companion key at the beginning of the guide, the removal of accreditation language, and making evidence notes a required component. A similar process may be used to reevaluate the EBCOT at designated intervals, along with a new literature search to determine if the best practices listed remain relevant. Further research could also be conducted using the EBCOT for reliability between reviewers.

CONCLUSION

With the use of the EBCOT, faculty members from all disciplines can benefit from pedagogical evaluation from a growth mindset and gain access to teaching-learning practices from an interdisciplinary lens. Having a checklist-style process provides structure and focus for classroom observation and an outlet for exposure to other faculty members in higher education, potentially leading to course improvement and interdisciplinary mentorship.

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