



# **Enhancing Learning and Teaching Quality through a Cycle of Collaborative Observation (CoCO)**

## **Training Guide**

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**Authors: Victoria Wright, Vanessa Cui, Julie Hughes, Jenni Jones and Matt O’Leary**

## Training guide

### About this guide

This guide is to support colleagues who are interested in facilitating the implementation of a Cycle of Collaborative Observation (CoCO).

You might be:

- Planning to use CoCO with staff and students for the first time;
- An experienced academic/education developer who would like some useful ideas or reminders of key principles of the approach;
- Interested to learn more about CoCO (perhaps with a view to using CoCO in the future);
- Interested in adapting some of the transferable principles and practices for use in other types of staff-student collaboration in quality enhancement;
- Managing or supporting staff and students who are using CoCO.

This guide includes pedagogical guidance and practical information about the Cycle of Collaborative Observation (CoCO) model, training activities and tools.

Authors: Victoria Wright, Vanessa Cui, Julie Hughes, Jenni Jones and Matt O’Leary

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For further information about CoCO, please contact: [vanessa.cui@bcu.ac.uk](mailto:vanessa.cui@bcu.ac.uk); [matthew.oleary@bcu.ac.uk](mailto:matthew.oleary@bcu.ac.uk).

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Find out more about Collaborative Enhancement Projects on the [QAA website](#).

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## Introduction to the project

The Enhancing Learning and Teaching Quality through Collaborative Observation project (ELTQCO; <http://tinyurl.com/QAACoCO>) is led by Professor Matt O’Leary at Birmingham City University with Dr Vanessa Cui. It involves three universities: Birmingham City University (BCU), Loughborough University (LU) (Lead: Dr Victoria Wright) and University of Wolverhampton (UoW) (Leads: Dr Jenni Jones and Julie Hughes). The project timeline is January 2023 to July 2024.

ELTQCO is underpinned by the premise that improving the student learning experience starts by improving the teacher learning experience. Shaped and informed by cutting-edge observation research and practice (Cui and O’Leary 2023<sup>1</sup>; O’Leary 2020<sup>2</sup>), we aimed to implement and evaluate an innovative and collaborative model of observation (CoCO), involving groups of students and teaching staff from varied disciplines, co-observing and co-reflecting on the quality of their learning and teaching. ELTQCO is driven by shared values around developing and promoting authentic and meaningful engagement amongst staff and students, with benefits for enhancing the learning and teaching awareness, relationships and experience of both parties, along with providing evidence for informing quality enhancement at course/module level. Across the three universities, case study groups of postgraduate and undergraduate students from across a range of subject areas (business studies, computer science, education, healthcare education, higher education, marketing, psychology and sport and exercise sciences) have contributed to the project as observers alongside their teaching staff. This involved students observing teaching sessions that they normally attend. Participating staff work in a range of subject specialisms and include academic and professional services.

### Our project objectives

- To increase student engagement in shaping their learning experiences by empowering them to become directly involved in informing and improving the quality of learning and teaching on their course/module
- To implement two cycles of collaborative observation (CoCO) with students and staff across three universities and to evaluate its impact at course/module level
- To provide students and staff with conceptual, practical tools to promote authentic collaboration and inquiry into the quality of their learning and teaching
- To work collaboratively with staff and students at three universities to share a reconceptualised approach to the use of observation as a tool for enhancing the quality of teaching and learning, with a view to sharing the findings/recommendations across these institutions and the QAA membership.

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<sup>1</sup> Cui, V. and O’Leary, M. 2023. ‘Collaborative observation between students and staff as a catalyst for meaningful improvement’ in O’Leary, M. and Cui, V. 2023. *Developing Excellence in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education through Observation*. Oxon: Routledge

<sup>2</sup> O’Leary, M. (2020) *Classroom Observation: A Guide to the Effective Observation of Teaching and Learning – Second Edition*. London: Routledge.

## Methodology – about CoCO

Our innovative methodology adopts a formative, process-driven, enhancement focused approach to understanding and improving quality, in contrast to the dominant, product-focused, summative approaches commonly relied upon to capture students' experiences of teaching. The Cycle of Collaborative Observation (CoCO, see **Image 1**) (O'Leary and Cui 2020<sup>3</sup>) is used as a conceptual framework and operational tool to engage students and staff in collaborative discussions, observations and reflections on the quality of learning and teaching. For the previous research and theoretical underpinning work about CoCO, please see O'Leary and Cui's book (2023) '*Developing Excellence in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education through Observation*'.

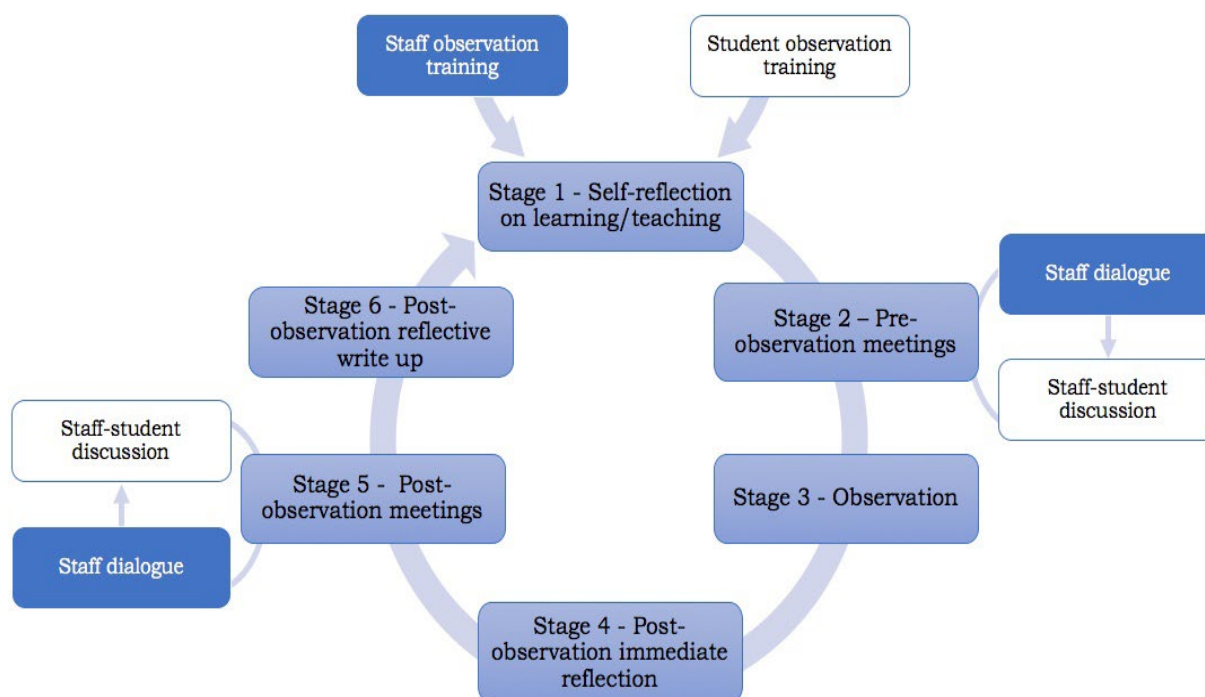


Figure 1 Cycle of Collaborative Observation (CoCO)

We conceptualise improving higher education learning and teaching quality through a sustainable approach at classroom/course level, involving the active, meaningful participation of students and staff. Without assuming students and/or staff were experts of learning and teaching, we decided that the best way to embark on meaningful and sustainable improvement was to build a shared understanding of learning and teaching between them in the context of their respective courses. Thus, we conceptualise students as members of their higher education learning and teaching community. Our approach also reconceptualises and reconfigures the way in which students and staff engage with

<sup>3</sup> O'Leary, M. and Cui, V. 2020. 'Reconceptualising teaching and learning in higher education: challenging neoliberal narratives of teaching excellence through collaborative observation', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 25 (2), Pp141-156

observation as a method for inquiring into and enhancing learning and teaching. In this way, students become genuine partners in co-inquiring and co-constructing their learning experiences with staff, impacting positively on levels of student engagement. The improvements to learning and teaching are driven by situated, meaningful insights from the co-inquiries of both students and staff, drawing on the perspectives of both groups.

## Training for Observers and Observees

The Cycle of Collaborative Observation (CoCO) has seven stages through which staff and students are supported as collaborative partners.

Each project institution lead has led observation training at their university in which case study staff and students were brought together as partners.

The training is designed to:

- introduce the context of the project
- introduce and clarify the collaborative observation model
- initiate the stages
- position the staff and students as collaborators engaging in an authentic inquiry to inform and improve the quality of learning and teaching on their course/module (i.e. the roles students and staff play as observers and observees)
- to discuss the practicalities of the work (e.g. time commitment, schedules, etc.)

Observation scenarios in the project included staff pairings where staff taught the same or different students, affinity/related subject area pairings (with different students) and different subject disciplines with different students<sup>4</sup>.

Within the project, staff observers observed for an hour (typically) and the student participants split the time (the hour) between them i.e. 20 minutes or 30 minutes dependent on the focus of the learning and teaching interactions. Trainers will need to collaborate with staff and students to negotiate the time allocated to each and reflect on the length of the session. The important aspect to focus on here is the balance between students' input as a collaborating observer and their involvement as a learner in the session. Students typically observed for less time because they were also students in that session (their learning time). Where staff teach large cohorts, knowledge of each individual student is more limited. Some student participants, though studying the same module, did not always know each other i.e. they were on different programme pathways. New relationships and new understandings emerge in the context of the joint training session and continue to develop and evolve through the timeline of their case study participation.

### *Ethical considerations:*

As well as following ethical research procedures and practices (e.g. BERA 2018; each project partner institution's research ethics guidelines), our project paid special attention to the ethics of student-staff working relationships, the potential impact on participating staff and students, as well as the impact between participants and their peers on the course. Trust

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<sup>4</sup> Across the ELTQCO case studies, four involved staff members from different subject areas pairing up to observe each other's practices. This resulted in each staff member working as an observer with a pair of students from the staff observee's module/programme. Evaluation data from these case studies was positive. All staff appreciated having a supportive critical friend bringing a different perspective to their observation discussions, learning from students from other subject areas; students felt hearing from a staff member from a different subject area helped them to understand more widely about learning and teaching in higher education.

between the participants was vital. In our project, the project team acted as a mediator at the beginning to facilitate dialogue and allow the participants to have time and space to develop trust. It was important for the students to recognise this was not an exercise in gathering feedback and evaluating staff performance. Instead, the conversations, observations and reflections were focused on making sense of the connections and intersections between learning and teaching on their programmes/modules. Part of the training sessions focused on the use of non-judgemental statements and questions in conversations for developmental learning. It was important to ensure that the participants had ownership of the work and were able to select the focus in their respective case studies. This included the power to decide which aspect(s) of learning and teaching they wished to focus on. We were keen to avoid any prescriptive and/or one-size-fits-all approach, as these contradicted the underpinning principles of CoCO and could potentially jeopardise the opportunities for learning between staff and students.

The relationship between participating staff and students and the rest of the students on the course was a factor that required careful thought and sensitive handling. Staff were required to communicate the project, key findings and any action as a result of the project to their colleagues and their students to ensure transparency. Students were also responsible for ensuring that their work did not compromise any member of staff or peer on their course. So, for example, when reporting their observation notes, staff and students were required to keep the identities of their students/peers anonymous and focus on the aspects of teaching and learning that they observed rather than the individuals. Participants from each case study were briefed that in their observation notes, discussions and reflections, the identities of other students and staff should remain anonymous.

### **Steps for training:**

*(Appendix 1 Observation Training Resource for Trainers)*

1. Introductions
2. Contextualising and applying the model
3. Posing a question to generate reflections on learning and teaching i.e. What makes an effective (high quality) learning and teaching experience for you? (as student or as staff).

Give participants time to reflect individually first and then to come together to discuss. This enables a shared understanding and works to foster a supportive and collaborative relationship between staff and students from the outset. As a trainer, be mindful of teasing out or enabling discussion of any educational or specialist vocabulary. For example, in one project case study training session, the word 'engaged' became a useful point of discussion, establishing that the staff and students already shared a number of common interpretations.

4. Initiating discussion of the stages.
- Preparing to observe:

Ask participants to reflect i.e.



- What does it mean to observe in the context of a classroom/lecture theatre for example?
- What do you think you will need to be mindful of as an observer?
- Can you make a list of what you *can* and *can't* observe in an educational environment?
- How will you make notes?
- What will you make notes on?
- Why might you make notes on those areas? i.e. why might that feel important to you as part of your observation of the teaching and learning experience?

Share observation templates blank and completed (*see Appendix 2 Observation Recording Templates for some examples*) and invite participants to consider:

- What has been recorded?
- Why do you think that aspect might have been recorded?
- What do you think about the way of recording (Is it helpful? Is it clear? Would this be a way of recording that you would like to use?)

In the project, participants were free to write their notes in their own way. Their notes were not shared with the project lead or with the observed staff member directly but were a resource for them to talk from (in the post observation feedback and later project reflections).

For ethical purposes: remind participants not to name individual students. Staff should explain that some students and another member of staff are observing the taught session and for what purpose.

- Preparing for the pre-observation:

Contextualise the meeting as a confidential, collaborative dialogue between the participants (staff observer, staff observee and student observers) and typically lasts an hour. Ask

- What might it be helpful to discuss?
- What might you want to find out about?

Based on our project, case study participants' experiences and previous project's evaluation findings, the first pre-observation meeting is often led by staff members to invite students to think about their role as collaborative observers and provide them with opportunities to ask questions about the observation (e.g. what to note down, which part of the session to observe, where to sit, etc.). Be mindful this is likely to be the first time students undertake the observer role in their own classrooms, so give them the opportunity to clarify as many details as possible. They need to feel they are supported and no question is unnecessary. If it's possible, give students the opportunity to discuss things between themselves and raise questions/suggestions jointly.

Some initial concerns might be about the potential of misunderstanding each other and/or about receiving overt personalised criticism. Your role as trainer is to support positive, productive conversations and relationship building.

Enable discussion of timings if needed (i.e. length of time students will observe during their taught session) and invite any questions.

In the project, we applied the collaborative observation model to inform and explore particular themes *i.e.* at Loughborough, the theme was assessment and feedback; at BCU, the theme was student engagement; at Wolverhampton, the theme was engagement and inclusivity. You might have an institutionally assigned or staff and student identified theme to explore at this point.

- Preparing for the post-observation:

Again, this is a collaborative and confidential dialogue. Staff and students will be drawing on their observation notes. Questions you might pose for shared reflection:

- What is the purpose of the post observation feedback meeting?
- What kinds of things will you (in your different roles of staff observer, staff observee and student observers) be doing?
- And how can you work to ensure that the observation feedback feels meaningful, authentic, and collaborative?

Other questions you might ask participants to reflect on include: Who will start the conversation? How will you manage turn taking? How will you work together to identify and/ or inform actions to take forward? Feedback from our project participants suggests that if it's possible, invite the institution facilitator to help with notetaking or record the discussion so all participants can focus on talking about the observation findings and their reflections.

## 5. Introducing reflective tools for capturing notes and reflections

Within the project itself, simple reflective models and or templates were shared with participants to support them as they moved towards Stage Six. In your local contexts, you might wish to introduce our Record of Notes and Reflections Template as an exemplar (*Appendix 3*). This will encourage thoughtful reflections as well as providing an aide memoire to support full participation at each point (pre observation, observation, post observation).

## Key considerations for implementing CoCO

Wider application of the CoCo model (outside of the funded project) should:

- introduce and clarify the collaborative observation model
- initiate discussion of the stages
- position the staff and students as collaborators engaging in an authentic inquiry to inform and improve the quality of learning and teaching on their course/module

The CoCo model is unique in positioning students as collaborators alongside staff so some discussion of the value you (as trainer/facilitator) and your organisation place on student feedback will be helpful. Students are used to more formal mechanisms (such as National Student Survey/ Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey, mid-module evaluations and course feedback). This is a distinctly less formal vehicle through which to hold authentic, professional and meaningful dialogues about teaching and learning.

Depending on your application of the model in your local context, you might ask staff and students why they are choosing to participate. Doing so naturally provides valuable insights. Some of the reasons shared by project students have included: wanting to be trained as an observer, wanting to have their voice heard to potentially influence a change and wanting to contribute to a piece of research and/or find out more about the nature of qualitative research.

Building trust and enabling shared understanding of language use and observation processes and practices is what Stage 1 is all about. Give time and space to support open conversations i.e. a comfortable setting, introductions and an inclusive approach. You might also share some of the project findings with a view to clarifying how valuable each participant's contribution will be – for themselves and for each other.

## **Appendices**

### *Appendix 1*

#### *Observation Training Resource for Trainers*

## Appendix 2

### Observation Recording Templates

#### Observation Template: Bullet point list

Date and time of observation:

Brief overview of subject/ curriculum area and the specific focus you are observing:

Record your observations in bullet points. You might want to include timings (how long or short that discussion/ activity type was or when something in particular happened).

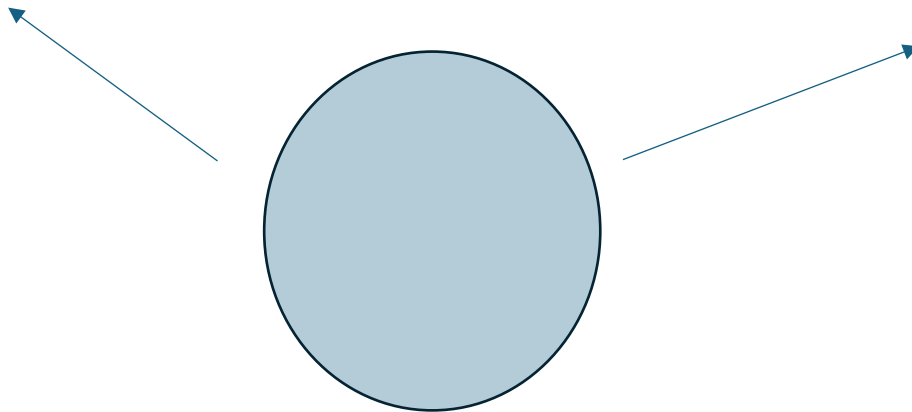
Observation	Timings (where appropriate)

Observation Template: Mind mapping

Date and time of observation:

Brief overview of subject/ curriculum area and the specific focus you are observing:

Draw a mind map to represent your impressions during the observations. This could be visual or visual and text (if it helps you to communicate your thoughts in the post observation feedback).



## Observation Template: Storying

Date and time of observation:

Brief overview of subject/ curriculum area and the specific focus you are observing:

Can you story this observation by describing your impressions in a creative way i.e.

How does the story start? Are there any twists and turns? How does it progress?

What is happening for the characters? How are the characters included in the story as it progresses?

How does the story end?

Observation Template: Grouping

Date and time of observation:

Brief overview of subject/ curriculum area and the specific focus you are observing:

You might want to group your observation reflections together by providing a label for your specific foci in the first row and making notes on that foci in the second row i.e.

<i>Foci: Clarity of communication</i>
<i>You have checked that students understand by.... You checked the mic was working at the start of the session and that you could be heard at the back You ask questions to check learning at regular points You invite students to ask you questions by....</i>
<i>(label for your foci)</i>
<i>(observations on the foci)</i>
<i>(add rows below)</i>



*Appendix 3*

*Cycle of Collaborative Observation – Record of Notes and Reflections Template*

Course/subject:

Focus of observation:

Mode of delivery (in person or online):

Date of observation:

Observation stage	Key areas discussed	Key reflections/considerations
Before the observation		
During the observation		
After the observation		