

## Class visits & tutors' professional learning

Many tutors will have had people from their department 'drop in' to their online classes this year - and will have noticed some changes.

For the last 2 years, we have been working at radically changing our approach to visiting classes and supporting tutors' professional learning.

This issue explores why we have taken this new approach and how it works...

### Our journey

For many years, as required by Ofsted, departments have observed tutors and graded the quality of the class. They have had to make a judgement about it - and effectively the teaching. Of course departments tried to make this process as supportive as possible. However, this system had problems:

- Tutors were often very nervous about being observed.
- Grading has been proved to be very inaccurate across the sector – one observer's grade 1 could be another's grade 2 or even 3!
- Judgements were made based on an hour's visit and could overlook what came before or after in the lesson, or individual student's histories and learning needs.
- The grading regime meant the opportunity

### Why is judging not helpful?



#### Yes, judging can help with...

- providing feedback
- Identifying what we are doing well, or less well
- enabling us to change and develop
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#### But... feeling judged can also ...

- decrease willingness to change (or do anything)
- sow mistrust
- make us feel scrutinised
- diminish confidence and morale
- create worry or anxiety which takes up time and energy
- quickly identify what we might be 'doing wrong', but make us more reliant on others to see and think for us
- prevent us from owning our own development

*Thanks to Ian Tucknott*

for reflection and discussion between colleagues was harder to make genuine.

In the last two years, we have been working at

changing our approach. We aspire to create a place where tutors can drive their own professional learning, be creative and innovative, in an environment which is non-threatening and non-judgemental. We want class visits to be a source of development through professional discussion and reflection.

In our visits, we now focus on whether students are learning, not how they are being taught (there are many ways of achieving the same result). In a 2018 survey many of you said you would welcome the opportunity to discuss your classes with peers and other experienced colleagues. Our new approach tries to help this happen.

### **Why do we need class visits and why do you assume I need developing?**

We have highly professional teaching staff at City Lit. Many tutors are very experienced. However teaching is an art - and a challenging one - not a fixed set of skills. Every situation, every group of students and every change to our course content results in new challenges. We need to reflect on and develop our teaching throughout our careers. In fact if we stop, rather like if a musician stops practising, we tend to go downhill. Class visits offer an opportunity to reflect on and discuss our classes with colleagues. We can use the visit, and subsequent peer discussions, to evaluate our strengths and consider any adjustments that would improve our practice.

#### **Tutors say...**

“Drop ins and follow on conversations / collaborative projects have been a great opportunity to take the time to reflect on why and how I organise my classes. They gave me scope and encouragement to try out new ways of doing things rather than be complacent. I realised that by keeping myself engaged I had greater engagement from my learners. Better job satisfaction too as a result. “

Magali Robert-Chung, Languages.

### **What are we doing in 2021?**

This year we are doing as many class drop ins as we can so we can see how students are experiencing learning online. As these are done across many classes over a short period of time, class visitors can notice only the key flavour and themes that characterise students' learning experience. Class drop ins are followed by tutor conversation meetings. These give tutors the opportunity to discuss teaching with each other and for the visitor to contribute their perspective.

We are also continuing to do some longer full class visits so we can offer more in-depth support. Both of these are described below.

### **Class drop ins**

You may well have experienced one of these this year. Below are some common questions and answers:



#### **Why do you only drop in for 10 – 15 minutes?**

Class drop ins are about getting a rapid overview of students' experience of learning online across a department. They are not about individual teachers. They are short as their purpose is to gain a picture of provision.

#### **Why do I not get individual feedback?**

Class drop ins are not designed to lead to feedback to individuals. They are too short apart from anything else. They can only help with raising

questions for reflection and discussions among tutors. Visitors are only 'noticing' what students are doing/learning and looking for any common themes across a large range of classes.

### How can you not make judgements about my teaching?

It is no longer the case that class visitors see their job as judging or 'fixing' teaching. There are lots of ways of supporting and enabling learning. The key is whether students are learning, achieving and enjoying their learning.

### How can you notice learning ?

Visitors are being careful to note what they actually see students doing, and not make inferences. They can see if students are participating, and if their contributions demonstrate their understanding. If students are producing work in class, they can see this too. They can look at body language – are students attentive on Zoom? Are they more distracted? They can also 'wonder' and have questions for later discussion.

### Tutors say...

"Having known the old system as well as the new one, I can say that the new drop-in system feels much better to me than the old marking system did. It is much less stressful and as a tutor it feels more like support than judgement .

I don't think the stress will ever be entirely avoidable. It is natural, because it's your work (or the outcome of your work if you look at the learning rather than the teaching) that is under scrutiny. But when you understand that it's for a positive outcome then it's easier to embrace it.

I like the peer review and the sharing best practice projects that have been organised, because it's a collective effort and it's not too time consuming. I like that the observations made after the drop-ins were general. If you know what you do you will recognise the remarks that concern you but at least you can keep it to yourself.

I honestly think the staff is doing a great job at all this. And I personally feel very supported"

Julie Ricci, Languages



A linoit showing some 'noticing' and 'wonderings' by tutors at a collaborative tutor meeting.



### How will I know what class visitors have noticed in drop ins?

If you have had a class drop in, you should be invited either to a 'tutor conversation meeting' or to participate in a longer collaborative development project. These bring tutors together to reflect on teaching and learning, to share ideas on what works well or less well in online learning, and share their highs and lows. Class visitors participate in these discussions as teachers and colleagues. They can also raise any themes they noticed on their visits and any questions they might have. Eg '*We noticed that some students had their videos turned off in classes. We wondered whether this might have an impact on their learning, and how it might impact on other students. What is your experience?*' We hope this will lead to professional reflection and discussion. Is it a problem or not? Is there anything to be done about it?

From these meetings, tutors should leave with ideas of what they are happy with and anything (often small things) they can do to develop their teaching.

### Full class visits

We are still doing traditional 'observations' – they are now called 'full class visits' and last around 45 minutes. The most usual reason for a full class visit is when a tutor is new to City Lit. Full class visits are also more common in departments where teaching is more complex and tutors need more detailed support. Ideally we would like tutors to

start to *ask* for visits - for a chance to use the visitor as another 'lens' on their class and to reflect with them afterwards.

The visitor will take the same non judgmental approach and be working on the same principles as class drop ins.

### What is the process for full class visits?

The visitor will visit your class for 45 minutes or so.

#### Tutors say...

The class visit process felt more supportive than judgemental. ...The focus on learning rather than teaching was very welcome.....

The follow-up conversation with other tutors was very useful. It was an opportunity for tutors to learn from each other about what works in a writing class. The summary notes sent out to us afterwards will serve as aid-memoires in the future.

Finally, as a veteran of school Ofsted inspections, I should like to say this was less arduous and nerve-racking than those!

Terry Freedman, Creative Writing

"My experience of the full class visit: I was naturally apprehensive beforehand and felt, whatever the intention, that I would be judged, but at the same time, I wanted feedback on this new method of online teaching.

The visit was very competent and non-disruptive. The feedback meeting afterwards was constructive and I felt I benefitted from Maria's detailed observations. It's hard when you're in the middle of it, to observe what is going well or not so well, and to have any point of comparison, especially over Zoom. It was reassuring to have one's own feelings validated. I don't think tutors need to feel anxious or that they are being judged. It is a good way of checking that what you think you are achieving in your teaching is happening".

Gerry Byrne, Creative Writing

You will be sent a pre-visit questionnaire which asks if there is anything you would like the visitor to help with, and add to this after the visit with your own reflections.

Visitors will try and learn as much as they can about student learning in your class. They will notice factually what students are doing in the classroom. If they can, they will talk to your students about their learning. You can both look at IRLs, your group profile and recent evaluations from students.

### Will I get individual feedback?

You will have a meeting of up to an hour after a full class visit. These meetings are designed to be a professional discussion between colleagues and not feedback in the old sense. The visitor will ask you about your students and their progress. They will share anything they noticed factually about the class and the students and their learning. They will not be telling you what to do, but using a coaching approach to help you reflect on your strengths and on any new approaches you may want to try.

### Will I get a report?

You will get a report which summarises your discussion in the form of 'key messages'. The key messages will include strengths of students' learning and any agreed areas you might want to develop. They will lead to an action plan. You will have an opportunity to reflect again on the report once it has been written.

#### Class visitors say...

"Doing class visits feels completely different to before—much better. It becomes less about feedback and more a two way conversation. We have moved away from judgemental to developmental. And you can see the impact straight away. It opens up different kinds of conversations - more positive conversations. We are looking at good bits and how we can make them better rather than judging the bad bits. I'm 100% behind it".

Adam Piper, Visual Arts

" This approach has helped me focus more on learning from the point of view of the learners.

For example I may have favoured a way of correcting but have seen that students can find a different way very valuable. It is a challenge to me as a teacher and what I consider effective. It made me realise the importance of getting evidence from lots of places rather than what I see in one class and making easy assumptions and conclusions.

It is great to talk about learning with teachers and have a genuine discussion. It has reinforced the feeling that we are all learning together."

Estelle Hérouin, Languages

### Where can I find more information?

There are more details about **class visits** on the Staff Access pages of the City Lit website. The link is [www.citylit.ac.uk/teaching-and-learning-class-visits](http://www.citylit.ac.uk/teaching-and-learning-class-visits)

There are lots of **tips and advice on online learning** on the Teaching and Working Remotely site ([www.citylit.ac.uk/staff access](http://www.citylit.ac.uk/staff access))

### Give us your feedback

We would love to get more individual feedback about how class visits have felt for tutors and how effectively they supported their development? Let us know by emailing us at [tutor.development@citylit.ac.uk](mailto:tutor.development@citylit.ac.uk) ?

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