

# Teaching and learning issues

## Classroom visits that support tutors and lead to great learning

Key findings from surveys of City Lit tutors and observers, Spring 2018

City Lit has been observing and assigning grades to lessons for over 20 years. Recently, however, City Lit has been reconsidering. Are graded observations the best way to support our tutors - and ensure the best quality learning for our students?

We decided to consult staff on their experience of observations. We carried out two surveys in the spring - one for tutors and one for the observation team.

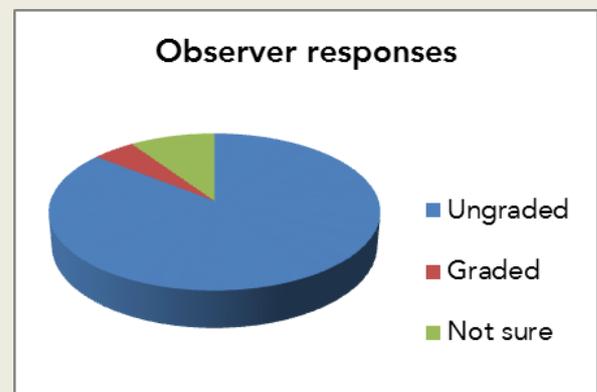
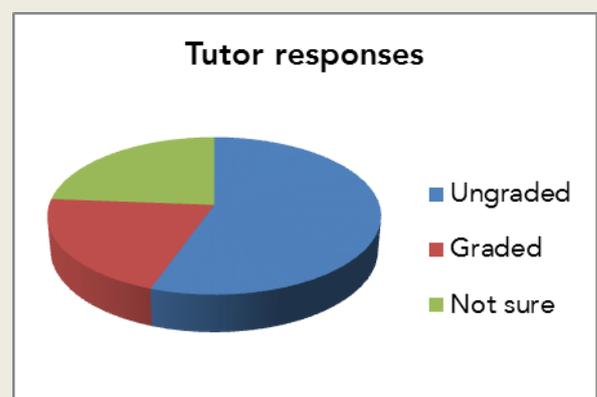
As a result of the survey, we will be revising our practice next year. Classroom visits will continue, but won't be graded. Instead we will use them to develop professional discussions about learning - and in a variety of ways.

Thanks to those of you who took part in these surveys. The key findings are below.

### Ungraded or graded?

458 staff completed the tutor survey and

Overall, would you prefer observations to be graded or ungraded?



42 staff completed the one for observers.

The response rate for both was fantastic with many thoughtful comments.

A clear majority of tutors supported the move to ungraded observations (56%) with 21% wanting to stay graded and 24% unsure. A far larger proportion of observers supported the move (87%). See the charts above for a visual view.

## Summary of feedback from tutors

### Why ungraded?

A 'tick box' question asked people to respond to commonly cited advantages or disadvantages of graded observations. The most popular disadvantages were:

- **Tutors worked hard for observations and it was time consuming.**
- **Tutors felt anxious and nervous and it affected teaching and their students.**
- **Graded observations felt judgemental rather than supportive and developmental.**

Tutors were also invited to add their own reasons why they would prefer one or the other. Below are the commonest themes:

### **Observer judgements could be unreliable.**

'Different observers grade the same thing differently. I've never really felt comfortable with the way a grade is achieved. It seems there is a large personal element to it which I don't quite understand.'

### **Grading is chiefly a management exercise.**

'Graded observations are primarily of benefit in producing data for the organisation'

{Graded observations feel} '.at odds with the relaxed, creative ethos of City Lit. I find the informal advice and support I already receive progresses my development much more as a teacher'

### **Those who had experienced ungraded observations elsewhere preferred them.**

'In an ungraded situation it is an opportunity to share teaching best practice - the focus

being on ways to develop, not passing the observation/getting a good grade'

### **Difficulty of demonstrating all the criteria in one session.**



'I feel that graded observations are like a driving test in that you have to demonstrate you can do everything that is required of a teacher in a single session when in fact it is more effective often to use

a smaller range of approaches in each lesson.'

'In {a particular session} it was highlighted that I didn't make use of IT or electronic resources and I felt really frustrated because whilst I DO make use of these things, on the day of the observation I was focusing on other resources and activities.'

### **Graded observations could distort the normal pattern of teaching.**

'They are very time consuming with lots of paperwork to organise. Very stressful/worrying and it depends on the day and how you are feeling - things can go wrong. Students also worry even if you tell them in advance and do not act as freely and confidently as when there is no observation.'

### **The quality of feedback is more important than the grading.**

'I feel the experience of receiving a graded observation is very dependent on how the feedback is given. I have experienced graded observations where the feedback was given very fairly and I was motivated by constructive comments and suggestions; I've also had bad experiences when I felt the observer was not experienced in giving

feedback and did not in my opinion use the criteria adequately to make a fair assessment of the grade.'

'Everything depends on the observer and whether they approach it as an opportunity to develop you as a teacher and have a dialogue with you about your teaching, or fire everything into their own monologue and nit-pick for their own reasons (these being the most unhelpful observations).'

### **Why graded?**

21% of tutors were in favour of graded observations and found them beneficial.

The commonest advantage respondents ticked was 'Grades are useful to show myself and City Lit that the sessions I teach are good or outstanding.'

Many felt grades also gave them a clear indication of the quality of their teaching and when it was improving.

'They offer a standardised benchmark to track progress and development'

'Yes they are a bit scary, but also exhilarating. I also find them a useful check on my teaching as, knowing an observation is on the cards, I would look more closely at my teaching and how to make it better. However they can be a real anxiety'

### **What should be the main purpose of observations?**

Respondents were asked to rank statements about the purposes of observations in order. Almost everyone agreed that the most important were to 'ensure our learners are getting the best possible experience in their classes' and 'to support teachers to develop and improve their lessons through discussion with other professionals'.

Respondents were also asked if they wanted to add any purposes of their own. Common themes were as follows:

Observations could provide an opportunity to share good practice with other colleagues

Observations enabled the tutor to feel connected with their department and teams - and less isolated. One tutor, teaching too infrequently to be observed, commented:

'Probably would be good to get an observation at some point as it would make me feel that someone has noticed that I actually teach there.'

Observations also demonstrated the organisation's commitment to quality to students and the outside world:

'It provides an opportunity for students to see that we do keep track and care about what happens in the classroom when they are on their course, and are not just focused on getting them enrolled.'

### **How could a visit by a colleague most benefit tutors?**

49% of respondents cited honest and constructive feedback as the most beneficial - feedback that highlighted their strengths and offered new perspectives and practical ideas



for their classes. Many also mentioned that feedback should feel more like a professional discussion than judgement.

'Wanting it to feel like a discussion between

equals, and a space to share ideas with other teacher professionals.'

'To open a real dialogue/discussion with opportunities for me to raise questions and concerns as well as getting feedback on my teaching.'

Some felt strongly that the observer should be a subject specialist:

'To have an informed practitioner with current knowledge of practice and theory in both the subject specialism and pedagogy'

### **What post observation support would be most beneficial?**

Most commonly, tutors wanted to be able to discuss their teaching less formally with a manager or colleague, not just when being observed. People also suggested more peer visiting, more opportunities to share best practice and more frequent informal observations:

'To feel free to talk to my manager about areas I feel I'm not strong enough. Knowing that I could feel supported, not judged, or taking it as a weakness.'

'...informal 'sharing and learning' across teams and departments...'

'Observations should happen more often more informally to be helpful so that teachers don't feel under threat'

The need for more frequent and transparent training and development opportunities was also mentioned:

'Departmental and inter-departmental workshops used to take place on more than once annually and sadly have fallen by the wayside...'

'Offering outside training to staff in their specialist subject so we can advance our skill and see how other teachers and colleges/universities approach the subject...'

### **Feedback from observers**



An overwhelming 87% of observers were in favour of ungraded observations. Of these, almost all felt that having to give a grade dominated feedback at the expense of professional dialogue.

'Tutors focus on the grade rather than the feedback. It also positions observations as a threatening judgement rather than a supportive CPD process.'

'{An ungraded observation} favours a more equal relationship between observer and observee and is more likely to lead to a constructive professional discussion... Grading can demotivate and is not a good overall representation of a teacher's practice.'

Some observers, though, felt that tutors *wanted* to know their level; and some felt we should use a mixture as there were some advantages to grading.

Observers gave other useful feedback which will help plan for the future.

We will keep you up to date about innovations we are considering in 18-19 and continue to get your feedback.'

If you would like to see the full results of the surveys, or you would like a digital copy of this issue, contact [Wendy.Moss@citylit.ac.uk](mailto:Wendy.Moss@citylit.ac.uk)