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Conducting Effective Peer Classroom Observations

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Peer classroom observations—if conducted systematically, professionally, and collegially—can provide significant documentation of what occurs in a university classroom. Most important, the collegial dialogues they engender also serve as catalysts for teaching enhancement. This article discusses some of the issues and options associated with classroom observations and provides experience-based guidelines for conducting them.

Classroom observations can serve both summative and formative purposes. Ideally, of course, well-conducted observations will lead to reflective changes in teaching. Unless the observations are part of a carefully conceived, systematic process, however, there are a number of potential barriers that can prevent their success. A major barrier to peer observations, as Seldin (1980) notes, is that faculty are sometimes reluctant to open their classrooms to visitors. In addition, Eison (1988) suggests that some faculty question the reliability of observations because of: 1) vague, general impressions growing from imprecise definitions of good teaching; 2) the disruptive influence of the observation itself; 3) biases, prompted by observers' own teaching behavior or values; and 4) observer leniency or, conversely, observer negativity. He notes that faculty also raise concerns about the effect of peer ratings on departmental productivity and about their value when matched with the day-to-day observations of students. To this list of concerns, one could also add Centra's (1979) comment that "Little improvement comes from occasional class observation by colleagues or administrators who do not know what to look for or who may not be particularly effective teachers themselves" (p. 84).

Despite these reservations, observations remain a powerful way to

document teaching activities and to improve teaching performance. Edgerton (1992) encourages faculty to lay aside their reservations and focus on the “greater goal”:

There are many arguments against classroom visitation by peers, including much evidence that peers are not reliable judges of the teaching performance of their colleagues. But to be deterred by this evidence would be to accept a view that is ultimately demeaning of teaching—the view that faculty peers are not necessary judges of the quality of teaching. It would be far better, we believe, to press ahead with the search for more effective methods of peer review. (p. 4)

The Case for Peer Classroom Observations

Edgerton (1991) speaks eloquently of a larger vision of teaching, one that regards teaching as a “situated act” directly connected to the subjects being taught. Such a vision should result in ongoing, sustained conversations about teaching. Teaching is dramatically visible in college and university classrooms where faculty, students, the subject matter, and the environment “connect,” much as a play unfolds on opening night. Often the performance/interaction has been preceded by careful planning and preparation; ideally, it also should be followed by analysis, review, and reflection that will shape further performances.

There are a number of reasons why peer classroom observations are valuable for providing input about teaching. Part of the case in favor of observations lies in their potential for getting instructors to be reflective about their instruction and to discuss it with others. The observations provide needed opportunities for reflection, particularly when multiple visits provide input for an ongoing program of development. The process prompts instructors to think about what they do and about strategies for doing it better, thus leading, one hopes, to subsequent teaching improvements. In addition, classroom observations build on the known positive results of one-to-one consultation to effect positive changes (Brinko, 1990; Erickson & Erickson, 1979; Katz & Henry, 1988; Menges & Brinko, 1986; Mortensen, 1982; Stevens & Aleamoni, 1985; Wilson, 1986). Faculty, in consultation with their visitors, can plan specific changes, and then, through follow-up observations, receive feedback about the effectiveness of the new classroom practices. Observations therefore encourage faculty members to communicate openly about their teaching, fostering the “culture of teaching” promoted by the American Association of Higher Education’s Teaching Initiative. Menges (1987) emphasizes that faculty enjoy reciprocal consultation: “Participants report high satisfaction, more interaction with other faculty members, increased motiva-

tion, and renewed interest in teaching” (p. 91). Edgerton (1989) regards such exchanges as “collegial dialogues” and recommends that “we move to a culture in which peer review of teaching is as common as peer review of research” (p. 8).

The information provided through classroom observations can be particularly useful. Educators advocate multiple sources for teaching improvement or for teaching evaluation, and classroom observations provide a source of input that can be balanced against some of the more common forms of instructional feedback such as student evaluations. Working through the observation process with a colleague who is familiar with the discipline or with academia in general can provide insights unavailable from other major sources. As Evertson and Holley (1981) assert: “Classroom observation gives us a view of the climate, rapport, interaction, and functioning of the classroom available from no other source” (p. 90). Visits are particularly valuable for those relatively new to teaching. Menges (1991) suggests that “In a busy classroom, the teacher is hardly an objective or comprehensive observer. New teachers especially feel overloaded and have nowhere to store everything they perceive” (p. 29). Furthermore, when the visitor approaches the observation in an objective, professional manner, the information obtained can be documented for future use. Particularly when this documentation is based on multiple classroom visits, it can be useful not only for instructional improvement of those involved but also for promotion and tenure reviews, for inclusion in teaching portfolios, or for market viability, particularly for faculty changing positions or for teaching assistants facing their first job search.

Conducting Peer Observations

As the previous discussion suggests, peer observations can enhance collegiality and provide useful feedback for focusing on the quality of teaching. However, such benefits cannot be realized unless the observations are conducted systematically over time by trained observers. Unfortunately, as Acheson (1981) points out, “There is no single most appropriate technique or set of techniques that everyone should use in observing, just as there is no panacea that will solve all the problems faced by professional educators” (p. 1). Some general guidelines, however, can help faculty avoid the potential barriers cited earlier and capitalize on a unique opportunity to involve fellow faculty members in their teaching improvement.

The following guidelines are drawn from experiences with the systematic peer observation program that has been in place at The University of Maryland University College since the mid-1980’s (for a further description

of the program, see Millis, 1989). Consistent with the process established in that program, the guidelines presume the use of written reviews and discussion as part of the peer observation process.

1. Classroom observations must be conducted in an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect. Such an atmosphere requires a collaborative approach to the process. Weimer (1990) advocates reciprocal visits with a "colleague as helper." Wilkerson (1988) notes:

A collaborative approach recognizes the professional status of both the teacher and the observer. It can help reduce the threat perceived by the teacher in being observed, lessen the impact of observer bias, and enhance the skills of the teacher in accurately assessing and improving his or her own teaching. (p. 96)

Cashin (1989) makes a distinction between observers as "peers" ("faculty members knowledgeable in the subject matter") and "colleagues," those individuals "familiar with higher education's academic enterprise—but not knowledgeable of the specific subject matter" (p. 2). In practice, these distinctions are readily acknowledged and can shape the subsequent exchanges. Occasionally, classroom observations, usually those conducted for summative purposes, are clouded by "political" issues or "hidden agendas" that can affect the atmosphere of the observation process and, ultimately, the relationship of the faculty involved. In small departments where people are in competition for a limited number of tenure slots, for example, faculty members may need to look outside their immediate disciplines for someone in a related discipline who might provide more objectivity and a safer atmosphere for useful discussion. Colleagues from outside a discipline bring strengths: they are not blinded by their own preconceptions about how a topic can best be taught; they can easily assume a student perspective because they are unfamiliar with the material; and they can focus on the pedagogical activities unfolding in the classroom because they are not overly focused on content issues. Any content issues not covered by an out-of-discipline classroom observer can be addressed, if necessary, in a separate review of course materials. Ideally, also, ongoing classroom reviews can be conducted by two observers, one within the department (a "peer") and one outside it (a "colleague").

2. Individuals involved in classroom observations should take advantage of opportunities for training in conducting observations. Centra (1979) notes that trained observers make sounder observations than those who have not been trained (p. 76). If training in conducting classroom observations is available, either through departmental initiatives or through a campus-wide

center for teaching excellence, then both parties should take advantage of such an opportunity. Often training sessions address the entire observation process but focus on two key practices: how and what to observe and record and how to provide constructive feedback. Annual training sessions at the University of Maryland University College (UMUC), for example, begin with an overview of the peer visit process and then move into role plays focused on giving constructive feedback about relevant classroom data. The role plays are triggered by a short videotape of a teacher in action, by a staged presentation where a lively faculty member simulates a classroom lecture, or by case studies of teaching scenarios with accompanying questions. The three hour session concludes with small group discussions of key issues.

3. Both faculty members should recognize that effective peer classroom observations are part of a consultation process, not an end in themselves. In order for the full benefits of peer observations to be realized, both parties must accept the fact that the peer observation is a process of which the actual observation is only one part. The program as it has been instituted at UMUC has several important stages including an initial meeting between the observer and the instructor, the observation, preparation of the narrative document that describes the observation, a post-observation conference, and ongoing activities to follow up on efforts to enhance the instructor's teaching. These stages will be reflected in the guidelines that follow.

4. A pre-observation conference between the instructor and the visitor is necessary for clarifying expectations, logistics, and protocol for the observation process. The Peer Visit Packet (Millis, 1987) used in UMUC's partially FIPSE-funded peer visit program offers the following suggestions for this meeting:

The instructor should give the visitor an overview of the course as a whole. How does s/he feel things are going? Are the students well-prepared and well-motivated? Are they at the level he or she anticipated? Do they contribute willingly during class discussions? Is the physical classroom environment comfortable? What does the instructor hope to achieve during the semester? What are the course goals? If time permits, the instructor and the visitor might exchange some ideas about teaching philosophies and preferred teaching styles. They could discuss issues such as grade inflation, multiculturalism, or plagiarism.

The conversation should turn at some point to the specific class that the observer will visit. What are the objectives for that particular session? How do they fit in with the overall course goals? What activities will occur (small group discussion, a role play or debate, oral reports, a lecture, etc.)?

Why does the instructor feel these activities will help achieve the objectives s/he has set? Has the instructor used these techniques before? What activities or assignments have preceded this particular class?

Finally, the instructor should tell the visitor what type of feedback would prove particularly helpful. Is a class well-organized? Are students attentive? Does the pacing need to be modified? Does the visitor notice any distracting mannerisms? Can the instructor be heard at the back of the room?

During this discussion, the instructor should share with the visitor all relevant classroom materials, including the course syllabus. This would be an opportune time to review other materials such as examinations or assignment guidelines. (pp. 1-2)

As Sorcinelli & Sorcinelli (1988) note, the pre-observation conference also provides an opportunity to discuss logistical details of the observation. Such details can include the dates, times, and location of the visit and the seating arrangements for the observer. It is also a good idea to clarify protocol about the amount and degree of interaction that will take place between the students and the observer. Students, particularly adults, often want to "chat" with visitors. There is always the possibility that the visitor will be privy to comments that are not solicited. Although such comments can provide good feedback, the faculty member being visited should agree that he/she is receptive to this source of information. In addition, the two peers or colleagues should discuss the desirability of the visitor's becoming involved in class activities or discussions. Usually visitors take notes openly but remain essentially detached observers. In some cases, however, the instructor might invite the visitor to participate along with the students in order to assess the effectiveness of specific instructional activities. The rule here should be "no surprises": the visitor should not unexpectedly jump into a class discussion, nor should the faculty member suddenly demand that the visitor answer questions or participate in class activities.

5. Before the observation, the two parties should decide on the instrument or approach that will focus the observation. Typically, if there is time, this decision is also made during the initial meeting. Certainly the decision must be resolved before the observation, as the instrument determines not only the kind but also the quality of the information obtained.

Historically, few predesigned instruments have been available (Seldin, 1980). Consequently, in the summer of 1990, UMUC's Office of Faculty Development conducted a literature review and polled all members of the Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education (POD), asking that they share instruments and information about classroom

observations. Although over 60 institutions responded to the poll, relatively few instruments suitable for widespread faculty use in classroom observations surfaced from respondents or from the literature review.

For a variety of reasons the available instruments are not particularly conducive to the peer observation process. Checklists, for example, are often useful for inspiration about good teaching but are cumbersome in practice as visitors fumble for the appropriate boxes. Furthermore, such checklists, like most student evaluation instruments, presuppose that given behaviors contribute to effective teaching. Instruments using complex systems for analyzing and recording information, often with diagrams about speakers and their intent, serve as powerful research tools but have limited value during actual observations. Other instruments that narrow the focus of the observation to specific topics, such as questioning skills or student participation, often do not capture the breadth and depth of teaching. Similar instruments designed for lecture, discussion, and small group formats have the well-intentioned purpose of respecting the validity of the pedagogical approach, but become too rigid when faculty members, particularly those teaching in three-hour blocks, switch to other classroom approaches. Some complex instruments require specialized training for those who use them and are thus not accessible to the average faculty classroom observer.

Our experience suggests that most faculty favor a focused narrative review based on extensive, objective classroom notes. Such a review also seems to be a valuable stimulus for instructional improvement. Evertson and Holley (1981) recommend a narrative approach because it is more natural, more holistic, and more contextual (p. 104). Faculty are comfortable with a straightforward, flexible, common-sense approach. A narrative instrument captures concretely and logically the actual classroom events as they unfold without preexisting assumptions about what should occur.

At UMUC over one hundred peer visitors have been trained to use a narrative approach based on a Classroom Visit Form, which was designed by a faculty committee and endorsed by surveys in 1988 and 1992 of both visitors and those visited (for a list of the information on the form, see Appendix A). The instrument does not presuppose any particular pedagogical approach, but attempts instead to capture—with focus—what actually occurs during the observation.

6. Faculty members being visited should consider the value of completing pre- and post-observation self-assessment instruments in order to stimulate the reflection needed for meaningful change. Self-evaluation—defined by Carroll (1981) as “making judgments about one’s own teaching” (p. 180)—can be a powerful tool for teaching improvement, particularly

within a broader context of data collection from multiple sources (Nyquist & Wulff, 1988). As faculty development specialists recognize, meaningful change occurs most often when assumptions are challenged and faculty have opportunities to rethink their basic approaches to teaching. There are a variety of instruments available in the literature that can be used to accomplish this purpose (for instance, see Bergquist and Phillips, 1975). One such self-assessment instrument used at University College is included in Appendix B (For the purposes of this article, the form has been consolidated without the usual amount of space for visitors to write responses). Then once the observation has been completed, the faculty member being visited might also consider filling out a post-observation instrument (see Appendix C) so that the visitor and faculty member will have additional points for comparison.

7. *The instructor and visitor should make the classroom visit as comfortable as possible for everyone involved.* The length of a classroom observation may vary depending on the class schedule and format and the purpose of the observation. For classes extending beyond a typical fifty-minute period, visitors should arrive well in advance of the beginning of class and exit during breaks. In addition to modeling courteous, non-disruptive behavior by following such guidelines, the visitor might also consider using pre-class or break time for brief exchanges with the instructor to reinforce the collegiality underlying the visit. For their role in the process, faculty members should be open with students about the nature and purpose of visits, telling them beforehand what will take place and why and encouraging them to behave naturally. Ideally, faculty members should introduce visitors to the classes, and the visitors should feel free to sit with students, sharing textbooks and presentation materials.

8. *Only after the observation should visitors complete a narrative instrument such as UMUC's Classroom Visit Form.* During the observation, the visitor should assume the dual roles of a student notetaker and an analytical, sympathetic "critic." Thus, observers, like students, can come to a class well-prepared because of the pre-observation discussion. They can literally transcribe lecture notes or small group activities, just as a student would, so that there is a rich contextual record of the classroom activities. Adjacent to these student-oriented notes, the observer can record reflective marginal comments, making it easy to provide specific information about the unfolding "situated act." The specifics of the narrative instrument should not be completed, however, until the visitor has left the classroom.

At some point the faculty members should agree on the procedures for preparing the final narrative document. There are several options the two might consider. In some cases, the form is completed only after consultation

with the instructor. This approach ensures that both parties understand what will be included in the written instrument and also allows for clarification of any ambiguous points. The visitor, for example, may have misinterpreted the purpose of a small group exercise. For cases in which the faculty member first wants an opportunity to reflect in private on the observer's comments, however, it could be helpful for the visitor to complete the narrative form, clearly mark it a "draft," and give the instructor time to review it before the post-observation discussion. In rare situations, two faculty members, perhaps colleagues visiting one another's classes, may be comfortable sitting down with the final document between them as they discuss possible action-oriented teaching enhancements.

In some cases the visitor may find it helpful to consult with instructional/faculty development specialists before completing the form. In these instances, the visitor might ask such questions as: How can I provide the faculty member I have visited with constructive comments that will lead to change, not resistance? What specific teaching resources (articles, books, videotapes, etc.) can I recommend? What specific teaching innovations, such as "think-pair-share," a cooperative learning technique, can help this faculty member meet specified goals such as ensuring student interaction in a large auditorium?

In completing the final written documentation of the observation, visitors should provide information that is objectively phrased, balanced, and action-oriented. It is helpful if they adopt a conversational style, use the second person, if possible, and avoid judgmental terms such as "good" or "poor." They should describe specifically what they observed, giving direct quotations and examples. For instance, rather than say, "Class interaction was terrific," visitors could write: "Students participated eagerly. In fact, fifteen hands shot up when you asked for a definition of marginal costing." Some visitors may prefer to record in the narrative instrument only objective observations, saving any specific recommendations for the face-to-face discussion, a practice particularly well-suited for teaching portfolios where faculty can subsequently offer reflective commentary on the objective "artifact."

Visitors will want to avoid, of course, anything that smacks of a "white-wash" or "cover-up": the narrative should be balanced, noting both positive areas to reinforce good teaching practices and areas in which the teaching practices seemed less successful. Teaching improvement suggestions should also be action and future oriented. If faculty are to make constructive changes in their teaching expectations and behaviors, however, they should feel "ownership" of the consultation process. Constructive feedback should be

worded so that the faculty member clearly has the option—not a visitor-mandated charge—of initiating changes, as in the following example:

Students' body language (clenched fists, perspiration, frowns) suggested tenseness during the drill over the imperfect past tense. Have you thought about having the entire class repeat a mispronounced word rather than the individual student? Have you looked into homework checks conducted in long-term small groups where students are more comfortable about taking risks?

Three important steps, then, are involved in moving from the observation to the written document: a) note taking during the observation; b) reflection, sometimes coupled with additional consultation; and c) completion of the narrative instrument. Careful attention to each of these steps can produce constructive, sensitively worded feedback and productive post-observation consultations.

9. *The post observation is critically important in moving the instructor toward changes that can enhance teaching.* For this reason, it is important to provide the feedback in a setting where instructors feel comfortable discussing their teaching. Then both parties can get to the heart of the teaching issues. Faculty members who have been visited should take an active role in the feedback session, avoiding defensive behaviors and identifying and describing teaching areas they wish to explore. They should be receptive to new ideas and willing to consider possible changes. The visitor should be certain that the feedback is focused and nonjudgmental. Even in the most collegial settings, many faculty become defensive. At best, they concentrate more on what occurred than on what can take place later. Thus, visitors should be as specific as possible in the feedback they offer. To avoid a prescriptive stance, rather than offer direct advice, they must encourage colleagues or peers to explore teaching options, starting with some that have been suggested in the written document. Their role is to draw out these possible changes through probing questions. Teaching anecdotes or descriptions of their own teaching practices may be helpful.

Ultimately the consultation should move to a point at which the instructor makes choices about areas to change to enhance the teaching and specific strategies to assist in making those changes. A simple grid such as the Teaching Action Plan (Appendix D) used at UMUC can focus discussion, assist the instructor in determining specific areas for changes, and establish timelines for making those changes.

10. *Finally, the instructor and the observer should plan and conduct activities designed to follow up on ideas discussed during the post-observer*

vation meeting. The action plan grid can also ensure that both parties commit to following through with a specific plan of action. Too often, faculty members or administrators leave meetings filled with energy and resolve, only to discover days later that competing claims for attention leave them wondering: "What did we discuss? What did I say I would do?" Conscientious faculty members complete the blank areas on the grid as they develop plans for trying new activities. Such follow-up efforts might also include additional visits to document and assess the results of teaching enhancements. In such cases the visitor might return to the classroom with open-ended questions that focus the observation primarily on areas in which the instructor has improved and areas needing further improvement. To provide additional follow-up, the pair might discuss effective ways to integrate the information gleaned from the visit(s) with other teaching data such as student evaluations.

Conclusion

Following these guidelines, both visitors and those visited at UMUC find value in the systematic program for peer classroom observation. In surveys conducted in 1988 and in 1992 participants in the peer observation program have identified a wide range of benefits. Faculty members often mentioned the effects of visits on their teaching: The visitor gave me "one excellent piece of advice which I immediately put to use and continue to use" and "the program has been very helpful in my teaching." Others recognized the importance of reinforcing positive teaching practices: "The comments on what she liked helped me recognize my strengths." Collegiality was mentioned often: The program offers an "opportunity for faculty in different disciplines to connect through a common interest—effective instruction" and is "especially helpful for those of us teaching off campus." Faculty mentioned that "University College does care about the quality of its programs and about faculty," and it also "builds student confidence in me and in UMUC." Many visitors commented on their own professional growth: "I have learned many new approaches and techniques as a peer visitor" or, more modestly, "I learned as much as a *visitor* as I imagine a *visitee* learned from me!" One faculty member enthusiastically declared: "Affirming! I believe validation, growth, and community are the three principle positives." As the comments suggest, well-conducted peer classroom observations provide eloquent, specific, "connected" visions of teaching at its finest.

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Appendix A

Classroom Visit Instrument (Consolidated)

University College
Undergraduate Programs
Classroom Visit

Faculty Member: _____ Course & Section: _____
Date: _____ Length of Visit: _____ Place: _____ Visitor: _____
Number of Students Present: _____

Classroom: Note any inadequate aspects of the classroom (size, temperature, acoustics, lighting, etc.)

Instruction: Comment on the presentation of the material: points to be covered and their relevance to class session, knowledge of subject matter, organization of lecture, explanation of terms and concepts.

Instructor/Student Rapport: Comment on student involvement and interaction with the instructor: opportunities for students to ask questions, answers to questions, guidance of class discussion, openness to suggestions and ideas.

Style of Presentation: Comment on gestures, physical movement, pitch and tone of voice, eye contact with students, use of resources such as blackboard, audio-visual media, handouts and other materials, demonstrations, student presentations and group activities, and the integration of various elements of the class session.

Syllabus: Comment on the syllabus and other written materials provided by the instructor. (Please refer to the *University College Syllabus Construction Handbook*.)

General Comments: What part of the class seemed particularly to enhance the learning process? What specific suggestions can you give for improving this particular class?

Appendix B

Self-Assessment Instrument For General Teaching (Consolidated)

FACULTY SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONNAIRE

1. How or why did you decide to become a teacher?
2. What do you enjoy most about teaching?
3. What do you enjoy least about teaching?
4. If you were not in your current profession, what would you like to be doing?
5. Within your discipline, what area or areas do you regard as your strongest?
6. Which do you regard as your weakest?
7. What is your greatest asset as a classroom teacher?
8. What is your greatest shortcoming as a classroom teacher?
9. What do you consider your greatest accomplishment as a teacher in the last three years?
10. Your greatest failure?
11. What is the one criticism that you are most fearful of receiving from a student? From a colleague?
12. What three things would you most like to change about your teaching?
13. What is the most important thing a student can learn from you?
14. Do you feel that your discipline is best taught by a particular approach (method) or teaching strategy and, if so, which approach, and why do you feel it is the best?
15. What have you found most gratifying in your work with University College? Most disappointing or frustrating?

Appendix C

Self-Assessment Instrument For Specific Session (Consolidated)

CLASSROOM SESSION SELF-APPRAISAL

by Barbara J. Millis

Complete this form as soon as possible after the conclusion of the session. Check A, B, C, or D and then complete the sentences underneath. Be as specific and as objective as you can.

MY OVERALL RESPONSE TO THE SESSION WAS:

A. _____ EVERYTHING WENT SUPERBLY. My teaching was dynamic and effective, the students were responsive and seemed to learn a great deal, the objectives for the overall course and this particular class were met, etc. I would not change anything.

1. I think the session went so well because:
2. The aspects of my teaching that seemed most effective were:
3. My teaching is/is not usually this good because:
4. I plan to repeat the following activities, approaches, or teaching strategies:

B. _____ IN GENERAL, THE CLASS WENT FAIRLY WELL.

1. I was disappointed in:
2. I would change the following things by doing:
3. I was most proud of:

C. _____ THIS SEEMED TO BE AN AVERAGE CLASSROOM EXPERIENCE.

1. I was disappointed in:
2. I would change the following things by doing:
3. I was most proud of:
4. I think the following things (teaching strategies, student shortcomings, physical environment, etc.) contributed to the mediocrity:
5. I will change the following before I teach this course again:

D. _____ THE CLASS WAS GENERALLY NOT SUCCESSFUL.

1. I think the session went so poorly because:
2. My worst moments were when:
3. My teaching is/is not usually this ineffective because:
4. I plan to eliminate these activities, approaches, or teaching strategies:
5. I will change the following (give timetable):

Appendix D

Name:	Course:	Teaching Action Plan	
Date:	Section No.:		
Area of Change	Suggested Change	Timetable	Record of Action