

Abbreviated CTL BUFF Classroom Observation Framework

Last updated 08-04-2025

Frameworks with specific observation criteria can provide more structure to classroom observations. We include here a simplified version of the [CTL's BUFF classroom observation framework](#). This framework includes four dimensions: **Be** prepared, **Use** active learning strategies, **Foster** an inclusive and equitable learning environment, and **Feedback** & assessments. This framework can be used to guide pre-observation meetings, to take notes during observations, and/or to help organize live notes after an observation to provide more concrete feedback.

Classroom observation process checklist	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Before: Request & review the course syllabus and optionally any other course materials provided, e.g., Canvas site/LMS, lesson plans, assessment materials.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Before: Meet with the faculty member to understand course goals, teaching practices, observation focus areas, etc., and to schedule the class visit.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Before: Create a copy of this framework and enter known information into the Course Information section.
<input type="checkbox"/>	During: Arrive early. Find an unobtrusive place to sit in the classroom. Sit where you can best observe students' interactions and engagement with the instructor and the learning environment.
<input type="checkbox"/>	During: Complete the Course Information and Course Setting sections below.
<input type="checkbox"/>	During: Use the framework as a guide to take notes during the observation.
<input type="checkbox"/>	After: Review your live notes immediately after the observation. Map notes to the BUFF Framework dimensions. Summarize takeaways for the instructor.
<input type="checkbox"/>	After: Meet with the observed faculty member to share observation takeaways, discuss any feedback, and help them make a plan for any changes they may want to implement.
<input type="checkbox"/>	After: Share a final report summarizing pre-meeting notes, key takeaways from the observation, and post-observation meeting notes with the observed instructor. If a formal peer letter based on the observation/interview is requested, you may use the template peer letter provided at the end of this document and/or follow departmental guidelines for writing and submitting a peer letter.

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Course Information

Observer name	
Instructor name	
Course number and section	
Course Title	
Course Building & Room	
Observation date & time	
Did class start on time? (Yes/No, if No enter start time)	
Did class end on time? (Yes/No, if No, enter end time)	
Semester and Year	
Number of TAs and LAs who assisted with the class (or N/A)	
Does this course have any associated labs, recitation, or discussion sessions? (Y/N and which)	
# Learners who attended* / # Learners enrolled** *for very large classes where it may be difficult to count, you may approximate, or ask the instructor for attendance if they collect it. **if you didn't get the enrollment from the instructor you can find that info at https://classes.colorado.edu/	

Course Setting

Use this space to briefly describe the physical classroom setting in which the lesson took place, including a description of the room, seating arrangements, audiovisual setup (sound, screen visibility), etc.

Look for evidence of student engagement

It can be helpful to periodically scan the room and note the way(s) students are engaged or disengaged. Who's participating? How many? In what ways? Are they more/less engaged during different parts of the class session?

Example engaged behaviors

- Listening
- Taking notes (by hand or on a device)
- Asking questions (verbally, Zoom chat, etc.)
- Answering questions (verbally, clickers/polls, Zoom chat, etc.)
- Participating in discussions, group work, or other class activities
- Using devices as instructed for course work

Example disengaged behaviors

- Using their phone, computer, or other device for non-class work
- Talking to peers about non-course work
- Asleep or otherwise tuned out (e.g., listening to music)

Notes on additional observed behaviors or other observation notes related to student engagement, including instructor actions to promote student engagement:

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Live Observation Notes

Most people have found it easier to take live notes during the observation and then later map those notes to the framework, so this is a space to accommodate that. However, you may also/alternatively take live notes directly in the framework below.

Mapping to the BUFF Framework

Please keep in mind that it is not expected that every course will attend equally to all four dimensions below or that you could observe all dimensions or example behaviors within a single class period. There are also many more possible observable examples than are included here (see for example the [CTL's full BUFF observation framework](#)). The framework is meant to provide more structure to classroom observations and serve as a jumping off point for conversations about teaching and teaching development.

Be Prepared

Observable behaviors that demonstrate instructor preparedness, readiness, and classroom management techniques for the purpose of providing a structure for learning to occur.

Example behaviors:

- Introduces learning objectives or shares agenda for the class period at the beginning of the session
- Structures content and activities in an organized and coherent manner
- Provides clear instructions for activities
- Provides timing cues for activities and allows adequate time for learners to complete and debrief activities
- Clearly summarizes key points/concepts of the lesson

Additional observed behaviors:

Observation notes:

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Use Active Learning Strategies

The use of learner-centered strategies that engage learners in doing activities/problems, thinking and writing about what they are learning, and/or idea-sharing with their peers and instructors.

Example behaviors:

- Fosters a growth mindset (e.g., through raising learners' confidence, normalizing mistakes as part of the learning process, encouraging learners to challenge themselves, and providing guidance on how to improve)
- Asks higher level questions (e.g., goes beyond the literal, such as asking learners for inferences)
- Pauses to allow learners adequate time to think and respond
- Uses a variety of discussion techniques (e.g., debate, case study, think-pair-share, Socratic questioning)
- Provides opportunities for learners to engage with each other, problem-solve, and make decisions in small groups
- Provides opportunities for learners to reflect on their learning (e.g., through minute papers or journaling)
- Utilizes advanced active learning techniques, such as experiential learning, self-directed learning, or activities such as role playing

Additional observed behaviors:

Observation notes:

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Foster an Inclusive and Equitable Learning Environment

Inclusive and equitable learning environments promote learning through strategies that identify and are responsive to the respective needs of students, while fostering belonging among all students.

Example behaviors:

- Addresses learners by their names
- Creates a caring environment by listening to learners
- Explains the relevance of the course content to learners' lives, interests, goals, identities, and/or communities
- Use of opposing perspectives OR perspectives from marginalized groups
- Creates opportunities for all learners to engage, e.g., asks questions, encourages questions from students, encourages notetaking or other writing exercises, creates time for individual and/or group work, tasks students with using a computer or other technology, etc.)
- Uses multiple media to present the content of the lesson (e.g., video clips, online resources, audio/visual files, models, and/or interactive white board)
- Provides opportunities for learners to demonstrate knowledge/learning in a variety of ways (i.e., presentations, small group learning, partner sharing, etc.)

Additional observed behaviors:

Observation notes:

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Feedback and Assessments

Assesses learning and the learning environment through frequent and varied low-stakes (low point value) means, provides equitable and timely feedback to learners, and uses feedback and assessments to improve learning and the learning environment.

Example behaviors:

- Embeds regular opportunities for learners to participate in ungraded or low-stakes formative quizzes
- Asks questions to learners as a means of monitoring their understanding
- Encourages learners to explain their understanding of concepts
- Follows up during class discussions to acknowledge, clarify, and/or affirm learner answers
- Is even-handed in acknowledging learners' strengths and areas for growth (e.g., doesn't restrict praise or feedback on areas of improvement to only certain learners / certain groups of learners)
- Reviews assignments/activities from previous session/week as a class (e.g., reviewing common mistakes/misunderstandings)
- Utilizes class time for structured peer or self-assessment (learners use a rubric or clear criteria to review their own work or that of a peer)

Additional observed behaviors:

Observation notes:

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Summary Notes

Immediately after the observation, review your observation notes and summarize some takeaways for the instructor. What feedback and questions arose that you'd like to discuss with the instructor during the post-observation meeting?

Strengths

Describe strengths of the course and/or the instructor's teaching practices.

Curiosities

Describe moments that sparked your interest and/or questions you have for the instructor.

Actionable suggestions

Describe opportunities for the instructor to strengthen the course and/or their teaching.

Supplementary Observation Materials

Pre-Observation Meeting Guide

Plan for a 30-minute conversation (or one hour if you will observe each other and are scheduling a single meeting to discuss both observations). **Recommended: request and review the course syllabus before the meeting.**

Purpose of the pre-observation meeting

- Establish comfort and trust in the process
- Understand the instructor's goals for the observation and/or their course
- Discuss particularly relevant BUFF framework dimensions
- Identify a date to observe their course

Get an understanding of their goals for the specific class session to be observed, e.g., you might ask:

- How's class going this semester?
- How is a "typical" class session structured?
- How do you get students to engage with one another and with you as the instructor?
- How do you know if students are engaged in class and with the content?
- Are there any new things you're considering trying out (e.g., an active learning technique, an inclusive practice, a new module, etc.)?
- What are you aiming to improve, and why?
- What advice would you like for improving?
- What are they hoping to learn and/or do with what they learn from this process?

Select focus areas from the BUFF Classroom Observation Framework

- Collaborate to identify dimension(s) or specific subcategories from the BUFF classroom observation framework to focus on during the observation
- What dimension(s) best fit the needs/goals of the observation?
- Which areas are they trying something new and want feedback?

Identify an observation date

- When selecting a class session (or sessions) to observe, it should be a typical class session. In other words, avoid test days, days with guest speakers, or days with back-to-back student presentations.
- The observation will need to be completed in time to have a post-observation meeting before the Teaching Triads wrap-up meeting near the end of the semester.
- Ideally also identify a date for the post-observation meeting at this time.

Is there anything else about the course/class you would like to discuss prior to the observations?

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Post-Observation Meeting Guide

Plan for a 30-minute conversation (or one hour if you observed each other and are scheduling a single meeting to discuss both observations).

Purpose of the post-observation meeting

- Share and discuss insights from the observation
- Engage in reflection on teaching practices in light of the observation
- Set goals for short- and/or long-term changes

Share observer insights from the observation, e.g.,

- Focus on dimensions from the BUFF classroom observation framework (above)
- Highlights (what you observed or didn't observe)
- "Curiosities" and/or questions you have based on your observations
- "Actionable Suggestions"

Reflection questions (for the observer to pose to the instructor)

- How do you feel the class(es) went?
- What worked (or didn't work) in the class?
- What questions came to mind as you reviewed observation feedback?
- What are important / interesting things you learned about your teaching practices from this process? What makes this important / interesting to you?
- What, if anything, surprised you?

Next steps / actions

- What is a small / easy to implement change you would like to make?
- What is a larger / longer-term goal you'd like to work towards?

Is there anything else you would like to discuss?

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Template Peer Observation Letter

This template can be used if helpful as a baseline to write your own letter for the peer you observed. All highlighted portions should be updated to reflect the actual observation, but you can of course also change any part of this template, use other templates or departmental examples, or start from scratch.

—

Letterhead

Date

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing to share a teaching evaluation of (name of observee). I observed (title of course) course on (date). The class met from (time/location).

I used the CTL's BUFF Classroom Observation Framework to evaluate (name of observee). The BUFF Framework draws from scholarship on teaching, department examples of classroom observation protocols, and the CTL staff's experience observing classes across multiple disciplines. This framework covers four dimensions of teaching: Be Prepared, Use Active Learning Strategies, Foster an Inclusive and Equitable Learning Environment, and Feedback and Assessments. Across all four dimensions, (name of observee) demonstrated... (e.g., exceptional teaching ability).

[include a brief description about the design/sequencing/flow of class session]

[write 2-3 short paragraphs describing some of the instructor's strengths in the context of the framework, providing specific examples that you observed. E.g.,

“(Name) was well-prepared for the course meeting, sharing an agenda, providing context for the session, clearly summarizing the lesson's key points, and providing adequate time for students to complete and debrief in-class activities.”

“During the class, (Name) used multiple active learning strategies, including asking learners to contribute their ideas and experiences to the concepts covered in the class-wide discussion and using small group discussions to enable students to collaborate and build knowledge.”

“In class-wide discussions, (Name) was exemplary in fostering an inclusive and equitable learning environment. He made efforts to learn students' names, he incorporated movement into the course activities, and his course materials were multi-modal, with an engaging mix of text, video, and audio elements.”

“(Name) utilized low-stakes feedback and assessment. In his interactions with small groups, he checked for understanding and asked them to explain their understanding of the concepts discussed during that class. In offering affirmations for students' ideas, he was even-handed in his encouragement, providing all students the same level of assurance.]

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[Include some suggestions for improvement or opportunities to try some new teaching strategies, e.g.,

“There may be opportunities to engage more students in discussion, however engagement was high (more than half of the class contributed verbally and the rest appeared to be engaged through listening), and students were clearly listening to each other. In my post-observation meeting with (Name) we discussed some strategies related to bringing more students into discussion during class time, e.g., incorporating brief reflection / writing during class and/or think-pair-share to engage students in small group discussions before full class discussion. “]

(Name) is an exemplary educator based on the four dimensions of the BUFF Framework. [include a sentence or two summarizing key observations].

If you have any questions or if I can be of further assistance, please do not hesitate to contact me at the email below.

Sincerely,

(Signature of observer, program name, contact information)