

# Observer Guide

## HELS Faculty Observations

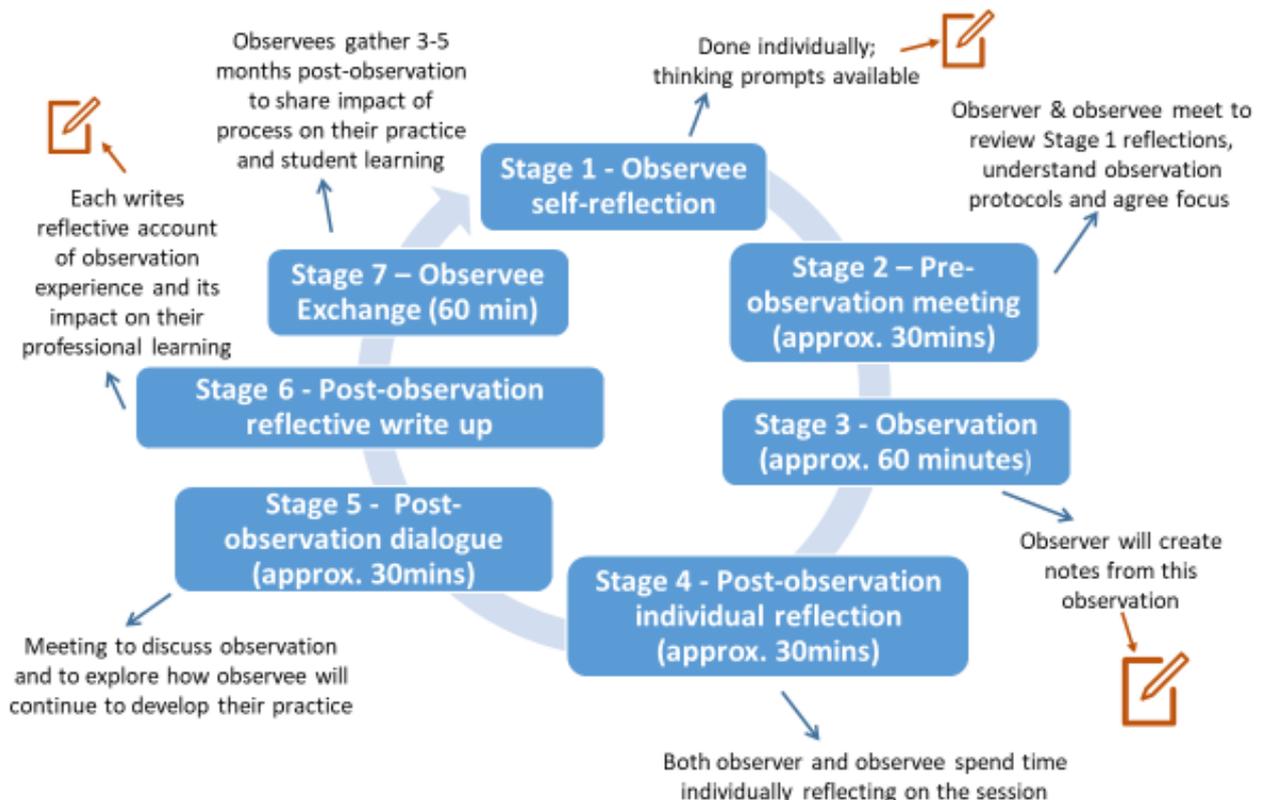
2016/17 saw the launch of a new approach to teaching observations across the faculty of Health, Education and Life Sciences. Our approach is based on an ethos of collaborative inquiry, critical reflection and prioritising professional dialogue.

You have volunteered to be part of the observation process as an observer. In order to join the observation team, you will have already taken our training with Matt O’Leary and Suzanne Savage in non-judgemental observation techniques and peer coaching methods to support collaborative inquiry. This guide is designed to be used after the training to remind you of the Observation Cycle and explain what you need to do at the various stages.

This guide includes an overview of the Observation Cycle (below) followed by an explanation of each stage on the following pages.

To help gain an insight into practice across the faculty, we have received ethical approval to collect anonymised documentation generated by colleagues (observers and observees) during the observation cycle so that it can be analysed to identify recurring themes and patterns. Further information about the research can be found in [Appendix 1](#) on page 7.

### Stages of the HELS observation cycle



## Stage 1: Self-reflection on Teaching and Learning-- some thinking prompts

The Observation cycle of the HELS faculty puts the observee at the heart of the process. This is an opportunity for them to think about their practice, to identify strengths and build upon them, and to examine areas for further professional learning.

A separate Observee Guide has been developed to explain the cycle to them. When you first make contact with the observee to schedule the Stage 2 meeting, please encourage them to make use of the Observee Guide.

The first part of our cycle is the observee's own self-reflection. When they are informed that they are to be observed, they will need to set aside time to think about their role, the aspects of their practice with which they are confident, as well as the areas they want to develop; this stage is crucial to make the observation work for them. There are no tick boxes or checklists of expected behaviours—they have the total freedom to do this self-reflection in the manner which works best for them personally, and to focus on the areas **they** identify. Furthermore, the self-reflection should not be limited to the lecturing role: practice-based teaching, research supervision, tutorials, skills demonstration sessions and studio-based activity are some examples of practice which they may decide to bring into scope.

At the suggestion of previous observees, we have developed some questions which could act as a stimulus for their thinking (see overleaf). It is by no means a requirement that they answer all (or any) of these prompts. For it to have any benefit, the self-reflection must be personally meaningful. Therefore, these prompts will be shared and observees may pick and choose any which resonate, or they may modify them to make them more applicable. And, if they want to follow a completely different self-reflection process, then they are very welcome to do so.

Those who wish to further explore models and approaches to reflection may enjoy reading Findlay's (2008) "Reflecting on 'Reflective practice'" found at this [link](#). A short excerpt:

Does [reflective practice] embody professional artistry, encourage critical self-aware evaluation and embrace transformation and change? Or is reflective practice bland and mechanical with practitioners disinclined to ask awkward questions... We need to continue to reflect critically on these questions. Then, reflective practice will fulfill its potential to help us "make sense of the uncertainty in our workplaces" and offer us the "courage to work competently and ethically at the edge of order and chaos" (Ghaye, 2000, p.7). (Findlay, 2008:20).

The observee's self-reflections need to be documented in some form and shared with you, the observer, no less than 3 days prior to the Stage 2 meeting (see more information on this Stage overleaf). If there are any elements of the self-reflection which they prefer to keep private for any reason, they are completely free to do. Observees should edit the version they send to you and include only those things they wish to share. **It is the observee's responsibility to send an anonymised version of these reflections to Sherron Parkes as well. Please prompt them to do so.**

### **Some thinking prompts for self-reflection on teaching and learning:**

- How would you describe your approach(es) to teaching?
- What are the key factors that shape/have shaped your approach(es) to teaching?
- Which aspects of your teaching do you feel relatively confident with and why?
- How do you ensure you build on the above strengths?
- Are there new things which you'd like to bring to your practice but haven't yet found the time/support/courage to do? Explore why you are interested in them but also what might be holding you back.
- Are there any areas of your practice where you lack confidence, or where you feel less effective than you'd like to be? Explore these and the feelings they bring up.
- How effective is your planning? Do you face any barriers to planning?
- How do you understand your student's needs? How do you adapt your practice to meet these needs? Which approaches have been effective? Would you like to explore this more?
- If you lecture together with colleagues, how effectively do you work together?
- How do you plan for your sessions?
- How do you determine the key aims/outcomes of your sessions? How do you know when they have been met?
- How do your sessions link to work students do outside university teaching?
- Are there any aspects of your practice where you feel the input of an observer would be useful, in order to reflect back what they have seen to aid your development? (You are encouraged to identify a particular area of focus for the observer—although you may also just ask for a more generalised observation if you choose). This question is one to explore more -in-depth with your observer at stage 2, but thinking about it now may be a good catalyst for your reflections.

## **Stage 2: Pre-observation Meeting—establish rapport and choose focus**

This initial meeting is an opportunity for you and the observee to get to know each other better. There are several important areas to explore:

1. Ensuring the observee understands the Observation Cycle and feels comfortable with the observation process and protocols, and that they are fully aware of the collegial and non-judgemental ethos of this programme. This is an opportunity to clarify any misunderstandings or misgivings they may have about the process, and to emphasise the holistic nature of the observation process.
2. Discussion of their self-reflection (which should have been done in Stage 1 and sent to you at least 3 days before this Stage 2 meeting so that you have time to review it). This is a chance to explore issues and themes which have arisen through their reflective process, and an opportunity to expand on those reflections where appropriate. Ensure the observee is using this opportunity to reflect on their teaching as a whole and not focussing only on the episodic session you will observe. Depending on how they have undertaken their reflection, you may find some of the thinking prompts in Stage 1 to be useful coaching questions here.

3. Agreement of observation focus: As emphasised above, the observation should encourage observees to reflect on their practice as a whole. Nonetheless, it is not possible to observe all aspects of their practice, therefore they may choose a specific aspect of their teaching where they feel the input from a supportive observer would be useful. You can help make them feel safe to try something new and receive some objective feedback to help reflect on how it went. They may choose to focus on an area they would like to improve, or a specific skill where they lack confidence. It is important to remind the observee that you are not there to judge the effectiveness of their teaching, but to provide them with another pair of eyes to reflect the observed teaching and to help stimulate their own reflections. It would be useful to note this focus in your observation notes for Stage 3 (see below).
4. Agreement of time/date for both the observation (Stage 3) as well as for the follow-up meeting you have together in Stage 5.
5. Please prompt the observee to send their anonymised Stage 1 reflections to Sherron Parkes.

### Stage 3: The Observation

Having agreed the time and date of the observation, it is up to the observee to decide whether it is necessary to inform students of your presence as an observer. In a large lecture the observer may not be noticeable, but in smaller teaching situations it is important for the students to understand that they are not being observed.

As discussed in the training, there is no prescribed way for the observer to take notes but note that a written record is required (see text box here right). Some examples of observer notes have been included in [Appendix 2](#) on page 8 to prompt your thinking on how you might take notes.

 **Documentation:** You should document your notes in some way such as the Notability App or Word documents. Send these notes to Sherron Parkes, (anonymising any personal information) and name the file **Stage 3 Notes**

Be sure to inform the observee if you will take photographs and ensure this is appropriate for the session to be observed. Remember that you do not have a checklist of behaviours to look for or forms to be filled in. Use your skills of observation to remain as objective as possible and simply record what you see, removing judgement and evaluation. Your goal is to be another pair of eyes through which the observee can gain an additional viewpoint of what happened in the session.

The observation should last approximately 60 minutes. Discuss with your observee how you can best enter and leave the observation space to minimise disruption to the students. As per the text box above, **it is your responsibility to send an anonymised copy of your notes to Sherron Parkes.**

### Stage 4: Post-observation Reflection- by both observer and observee

Take some time after the session to review it for yourself, particularly in light of the focus you agreed with the observee in Stage 2 (although you are of course free to record other things which come up as well). Strive to remain free of judgement. Remember that the focus of the observation is not simply this episodic event, so think about how this particular observed session relates more holistically to the observee's practice. Be also aware that the reflective process may inspire you to notice aspects of your own teaching.

The observee should also reflect on the session and be prepared to discuss it with you in Stage 5. You don't need to share these reflections with the observee and you may choose whether to document them.

## Stage 5: Post-observation Meeting- how will you develop your practice?

You will **not** offer a judgement of the perceived effectiveness of the session. Instead, share what you observed and explore this further with the observee. Your role is that of a supportive coach, facilitating the conversation with the goal that the observee decides how they want their own teaching to develop. You may find it useful to refer to the Powerful Coaching Questions handout you received during the Observer Training session.

There are two main goals to achieve in the Stage 5 discussion:

1. As observer, you will share what you saw and use coaching questions to help stimulate the observee's reflections on the observed session. But don't forget to emphasise their wider practice rather than letting the episodic event guide the whole focus.
2. Setting objectives: Through dialogue, you will help the observee to decide how they will use the insights they have gained in the observation process to impact their teaching in the future. Rather than offer opinions, you will use coaching questions to stimulate their thinking. By the end of Stage 5 the observee should have an idea how to take things forward for themselves. Have they identified some new skills they would like to introduce/further develop? Have they decided to change the way they are doing something? Have they identified any support needs and available resources to meet those needs? Let them know they will need to make a short plan about how they will achieve this and send it to you as part of Stage 6.

## Stage 6: Post-Observation Reflective Write-up

Both you and the observee will take individual time to reflect back on the whole observation cycle and decide what learning you will take away from it. The observee should document the goals they identified in the Stage 5 meeting, although they are free to adapt and enhance it here at Stage 6.

Take time at this point to reflect upon yourself as an observer. As with all parts of this process, you are free to reflect in your own manner, but below are some prompts you may choose to consider. We've also included some reflections from previous observers in [Appendix 3](#) on page 10 which might provide additional stimulus for your thinking.

- How did the cycle work for you and the observee? Was the observee able to positively engage with the process? Do you have any suggestions for improving/adapting the Observation Cycle?
- How did it feel to step into the role of non-judgemental observer and coach? Are there any skills you need to develop in this context?



### **Documentation:**

Anonymise your own write-up and send to Sherron Parkes, naming the file **Stage 6 Observer**. Please ensure the observee is aware they need to send theirs to Sherron as well.

- Did engaging with another colleague's practice prompt you to reflect on your own teaching practice? If so, please elaborate.
- Did you and/or the observee identify any issues which could have a wider impact on your department/school/faculty? These could be anything, such as curriculum matters, room configuration, a wider developmental need across the team, etc. This is an opportunity to create a broader dialogue of areas for development beyond individual members of staff.

Both you and the observee will need to document these reflections. Be sure to **anonymise your reflections and email to Sherron Parks as per the text box on the previous page. Please prompt the observee to do so as well.**

## Stage 7: Observee Exchange- collaborative inquiry

Several months after your "practice" observation, you will be invited to a focus group with everyone else who has been an observee. In this stage you will be participating as an observee as well, sharing and reflecting on the insights you gained and the plans you made in Stage 6, and to discuss how this has impacted on your teaching and also on students' learning. The purpose of this is to ensure that the observation process doesn't become a closed, administrative practice where a box is ticked to say it's been done, without reverberating into your practice. We seek to foster an ethos of collaborative inquiry (Fullan and Hargreaves, 2016; DeLuca, Bolden and Chan, 2017) where teachers take ownership of their professional development and support each other through professional dialogue. It's an opportunity for you to have meaningful conversations about teaching and learning with your colleagues and to ensure that the observation process remains dynamic and relevant to you. By the end of this exchange you should have, together with your colleagues, reviewed the objectives you set out in Stage 6, considered the impact these have had, and refined your plan for continuing to develop your practice.

## References and further reading:

DeLuca, C., Bolden, B., & Chan, J. (2017). Systemic professional learning through collaborative inquiry: Examining teachers' perspectives. *Teaching and teacher education*, 67, 67-78

Findlay, L. (2008) Reflecting on Reflective Practice. Open University. Available from: [http://www.open.ac.uk/opencetl/sites/www.open.ac.uk/opencetl/files/files/ecms/web-content/Finlay-\(2008\)-Reflecting-on-reflective-practice-PBPL-paper-52.pdf](http://www.open.ac.uk/opencetl/sites/www.open.ac.uk/opencetl/files/files/ecms/web-content/Finlay-(2008)-Reflecting-on-reflective-practice-PBPL-paper-52.pdf)

Fullan, M. & Hargreaves, A. (2016) *Bringing the profession back in: Call to action*. Oxford, OH: Learning Forward.

Hargreaves, A. & Fullan, M. (2012). *Professional capital: Transforming teaching in every school*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Nieuwerburgh, C (2017) *An introduction to coaching skills: a practical guide*. Los Angeles: Sage.

O'Leary, M. & Wood, P. (2017) '[Performance over professional learning and the complexity puzzle: lesson observation in England's further education sector](#)', *Professional Development in Education*, Vol. 43(4), pp. 573-591.

# Appendix 1

## Researching and Understanding the Observation Cycle

The recent introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) has put the quality of university teaching firmly in the HE policy spotlight. Situated against the backdrop of the TEF and wider global interest in understanding and improving HE teaching and learning, the HE&LS faculty has developed an innovative, research-informed approach to observation over the last two years. Focusing on the use of observation as a form of collegial, educational inquiry rather than as an assessment of the teaching performance of staff, our approach seeks to capture evidence of authentic, situated teaching with a view to informing and bringing about collaborative improvement. To help gain an insight into practice across the faculty, it requires access to the documentation generated by colleagues (observers and observees) during the observation cycle so that it can be analysed to identify recurring themes and patterns.

Colleagues are assured that the purpose of this analysis is to develop a greater understanding of teaching across the faculty with a view to identifying existing strengths and those aspects of practice that would benefit from greater support collectively. This is NOT an exercise in targeting the practice of individual members of staff. In March 2017, the Faculty Academic Ethics Committee reviewed and approved this research element of the observation work. Staff are reminded again that their identities will remain protected at all times and all data will be anonymised.

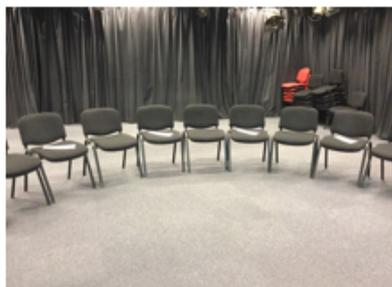
## Appendix 2

### Stage 3: Observation Notes

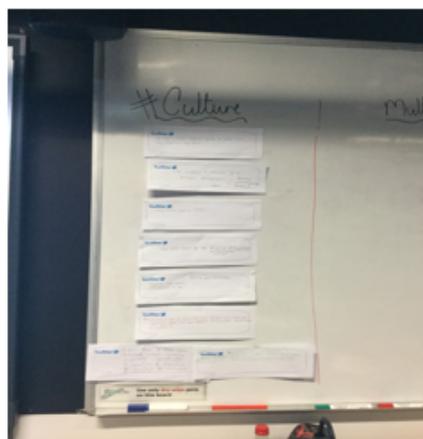
We cannot stress enough that there are no criteria for evaluation of the observed session. There is also no formula for taking notes. Following we have included 2 very different extracts from longer observation notes to give you a flavour of the kinds of descriptive logs you might make. In both cases, the observers have noted questions they might bring to the Stage 5 discussion, but they have done so in very different ways. You are encouraged to experiment and find a way that works for you. And keep striving to avoid judgement.

#### Observer A:

Handouts had been prepared and learners were provided with a plan for the day, which included the learning outcomes for the day and key texts. Tell me more about this. [Question for post observation reflection.](#)



The classroom was set out in a horse shoe; this enabled all learners to see each other and I could see learners took the opportunity this arrangement lent itself to for discussion and sharing ideas. [Question for post observation reflection.](#)



Learners were welcomed and the context of the lesson was explained in detail. It was interesting to see that challenges learners might face were referred to. It seemed to send the message that this lesson was going to stretch them and push them out of their comfort zone. Was this intentional? [Question for post observation reflection.](#)

Twitter feeds on definitions of culture led to the overall topic of the lesson.

Why twitter? [Question for post observation reflection.](#)

You kept offering learners opportunities to ask questions and check understanding. Learners answered peer's questions, as in 'what is epistemology?' instigated by 'who can tell her...' Is this normal practice? [Question for post observation reflection.](#)

Learners then worked in groups creating posters that explored [different themes]. Method for undertaking activity; modelling good practice? [Question for post observation reflection.](#)

Learners then presented; nominations for next presenters came from learners. Learners used iPads to share images to support and explain their ideas.

"Learn something new together - we're not experts, as these dance genres are embedded into tradition". What was your thinking behind this comment? [Question for post observation reflection.](#)

## Observer B:

Observation	Question
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The room is prepared in advance with note making materials.</li> <li>As the student arrive and settle, you move from table to table engaging the students in conversation, asking after their welfare and talking to them about first appointments.</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>You start promptly at 1.15pm</li> <li>You introduce the session and explain your expectations in terms of engagement and interaction.</li> <li>You outline your own experiences on the topic of E-Safety and the potential 'unpleasant' aspects of the topic.</li> <li>Learning outcomes are listed in colour on the screen</li> <li>In talking through the learning outcomes you make the link between this session and generating evidence for the Part 2 Standard</li> </ul>	<p>What uncomfortable issues might arise in this session? Do they need identifying at the start so that students are aware?</p> <p>Is there any significance to the colours used on the screen?</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A large group arrive a few minutes after the start of the first activity</li> </ul>	Are the students arriving within an acceptable time from the start of the session?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>During the first discussion task, you move from group to group appointing a scribe, explaining that s/he will not be required to read aloud.</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>You keep to the time limit strictly, bring the conversation to a close and the attraction back to you.</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>You talk through the statements on the screens</li> </ul>	Might the students consider the implications of each statement?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>You collect a chair for the 2 people who arrive later.</li> </ul>	Are the students arriving within an acceptable time from the start of the session?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>You ask [student] if everything is alright. There are some whispered conversations in 2 other places in the room.</li> </ul>	Were you aware of this? What are your views about these conversations?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>As you talk you move from one side of the room to the other. As the students talk in a discussion task you move into the whole room as far as you able with the room so full.</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The second discussion task is also timed. The pairs near me have a varied approach to time restraints with one pair using their phone to time each other (using technology)</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>You use a strategy to bring the group together, and link the feedback by referring to a conversation you have been part of.</li> <li>Feedback is collected from each table. You use humour to recognise the human behaviours common to all.</li> </ul>	Were you aware of the impact of your comments and reactions to the contribution made by students?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>During your talk, you have paused two or three times and looked at specific students.</li> </ul>	Do you remember pausing? Do you remember why?

## Appendix 3

### Stage 6: Observer Self-reflection

An unintended consequence of this observation cycle has been the opportunity for observers to learn from the observation process as well. As with all reflections, it is very personal and there is no format for how to do it, but we have again included a few examples to give you a flavour of other observers' experiences. We encourage you to be open to learning throughout this process, about yourself as a teacher, yourself as an observer, and what learning you can bring to the wider department/school/faculty as well.

#### Observer C

The session raised an interesting question of the observer/observee dynamic. It was clear to me that [observe] was nervous when the topic turned to [X], which derived from the fact that I am [very experienced in this field]. This highlights an aspect of the observation process that can have unexpected consequences relating to power dynamics. Fortunately in this case I think the impact was minimal (and not noticed by students) as [observe] is an experienced lecturer, however, a more inexperienced lecturer might find this has a greater impact.

A recurring thread throughout the observation process has been the lack of time; from the lack of time to properly prepare through time to print registers, to the desire to develop technology-based skills. In order to ensure that students get the best possible learning experience and that staff are able to fully develop their teaching skills, there must be an adequate (and realistic) recognition of the time that this requires. I don't think this is appreciated by the wider university.

#### Observer D

I have found the opportunity to observe interesting but really really difficult to simply reflect and aim to aid your enquiry. I was really conscious of just how limited my observation was in capturing the detail of what was going on. The discussions before and after were really though provoking.

I really want to apply some of your thinking to my teaching. One aspect that aligns with my own action planning is being more specific about outcomes expected and sharing this explicitly with students. From your teaching I am keen to develop your highly structured use of supporting handouts or at least share this with my team as we write new modules.

#### Observer E

##### Incidental learning for Reviewer

[This session encouraged me to] consider ways to encourage greater attendance at revision sessions, such as new and additional resources that might be seen only in the session time and contribute a small percentage linked to the exam in the form of a seen question.

### **Observer F**

The observee continued to ask me for advice which I found challenging. Through continued discussion, however [the observee] was able to come up with own solution. The coaching approach does not yet come naturally to me and I feel I need further support in this area.

I really want to apply some of your thinking to my teaching. One aspect that aligns with my own action planning is being more specific about outcomes expected and sharing this explicitly with students. From your teaching I am keen to develop your highly structured use of supporting handouts or at least share this with my team as we write new modules.

### **Observer G**

This comment is not related to X's teaching and was an independent observation which I found interesting as a consequence of my presence in the session.

During the session I noticed several students surreptitiously looking at their mobile phones on and under the desk and viewing unrelated content on laptop screens. I am aware that this happens in almost all sessions and it can be a challenge to keep students engaged but I also feel that the use of laptops and phones is also a distraction that the student are just not capable not using for unrelated activities when in the classroom... Emphasising the importance of engagement is a challenge and possibly a difficult concept for the student to appreciate, as the temptation to access the phone or PC is just too tempting and as a consequence becomes increasingly distracting.

As a larger issue across the faculty I am curious how we address this.