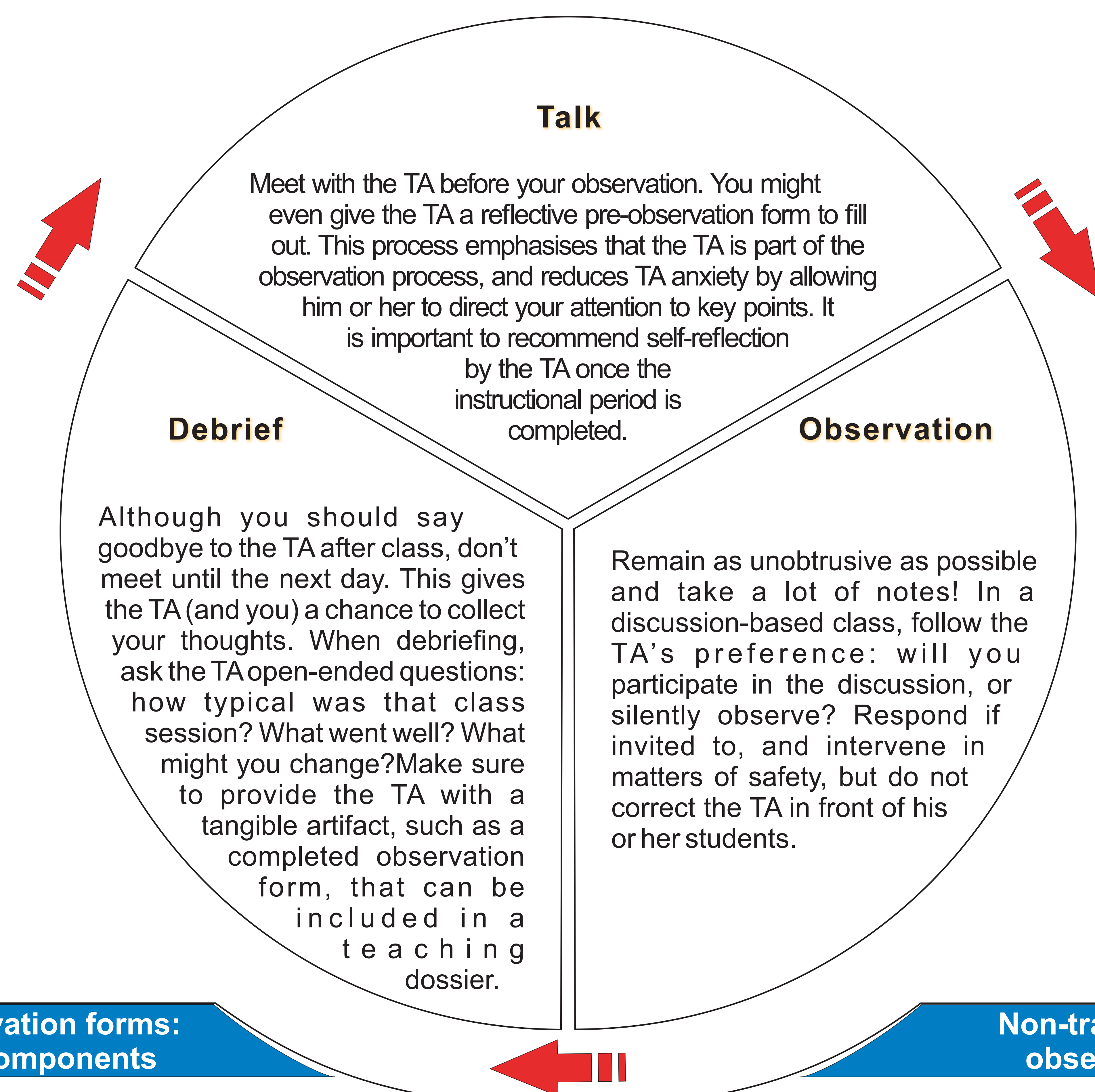


The process



Marketing teaching observations

Improving Student Learning

Teaching Assistants have an enormous impact on student learning in large universities. Observation of new TAs by peer mentors is an effective way to provide formative **feedback**, build **community** and promote **professional development**.

Building Community

Where no pre-existing relationship is present, it is vital to:

- Initiate contact early in the student's tenure
- Emphasize the professional development opportunities of teaching observations
- Emphasize collegiality rather than enforcing hierarchical power structures

Where pre-existing relationships are present, such as in small departments, TAs may not recognize your ability to provide useful feedback or you may think you have to avoid giving negative feedback so as not to offend colleagues who are also friends.

- Foster existing relationships, which can actually encourage TAs to participate. TAs may prefer to be observed by someone they already know and trust (Carroll and O'Loughlin, 2014).
- To encourage buy-in from TAs who are nervous about performing in front of a friend or who have trouble viewing you in a position of authority, stress that you are learning as much from observing as the TA is from being observed.

When providing feedback, avoid judgement and instead provide objective statements that can provoke the observed TA to make subjective statements on his or her own.

Professional Development

Framing peer teaching observations as professional development opportunities presents a number of benefits:

- Encourages TAs to situate their current teaching work in their future professional lives, whether they will be formal educators or will use educational methods in leadership and group situations.
- Generates materials that can be included in a teaching dossier, including observation forms and letters of recommendation from observers.
- Ensures that TAs receive timely feedback on teaching skills, allowing for training and modification as needed rather than penalization after end-of-term student feedback. (Departments appreciate this!)
- Builds a culture of collegiality in which observations are routine and positive forms of support, thereby diminishing reluctance from both TAs and departments.

Moving Forward

Possible challenges

- **Intimidating the students.** Particularly awkward in small classes or classes where you're seen as an instructor by the students – professor for the course or have given substitute lectures. Have the TA warn the students before your visit, and explain the purpose of the observation.

- **Influencing the TA.** Is this the TA's authentic self, or are they unusually nervous or unusually over prepared because you are here? Make sure the TA will know what to expect and can control the situation, by having the pre-observation meeting and sharing your materials ahead of time. This is also an advantage to having multiple observations.

- **Competing models for observation.** Some TAs already have access to observations from faculty members, and might not see the value of a peer observation. Peer observations provide a different perspective and formative feedback. Department buy-in and promotion can be helpful in overcoming this perception.

- **Are observations mandatory?** If observations are mandatory then all TAs will be reached, even those who might be resistant or shy. Non-mandatory observations fit better with a culture of collegiality and peer professional development.

Benefits and challenges

- Peer feedback networks are key to observation-based feedback programs (Bell and Mladenovic, 2008)
- Creation of invaluable teaching dossier and professional development material
- Decreased levels of anxiety for those being observed
- Lack of ability to use towards performance evaluations

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“

The feedback provided by my TAC was invaluable in improving my teaching and provided me with a unique opportunity to obtain documents very useful for professional development.

”

Observation forms: key components

Observation forms will vary by discipline, but some features are universal:

Timing

When did the TA arrive, and when did class begin? How much class time is spent on lecture, lab work, announcements, worksheets, etc.? When did class end?

Mastery of the material

Does the TA explain or discuss material accurately?

Respect for students and student questions

Do students seem comfortable participating in discussion? Does the TA create space for student questions?

Presentation skills

Was the TA audible and easy to understand? Were projected slides or chalkboard writings legible and organized? Was the pacing appropriate?

Non-traditional observations

Observations outside the classroom

One of the most important interactions between TAs and undergraduate student occurs in the evaluative and formative function of marking. While marking is not conventionally thought of as a site of 'teaching observation' for professional development, arguably, it is in this mode of interaction that one of the most indelible marks is left on students; thus, peer-marking sessions provide a key arena for shaping TA practices. See hand-out for the set-up of a peer marking session as a form of peer teaching observation.

Observations outside your own department

It is imperative that you make connections within the foreign department to help keep lines of communication open. A key method for success is finding an advocate in the department you are going to, such as another TA or course coordinator.

“

Feedback on teaching is one of the most valuable tools a new or inexperienced teacher can have. [My TAC] had feedback for me that was insightful, thorough, and helpful that enabled me to do better on future teaching opportunities

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