Debriefing geography lessons

After an observation of a trainee’s lesson, you should have a constructive discussion to review how the lesson went and the progress the trainee teacher is making in their teaching – this is the generally known as a lesson debrief. Especially later on in their training, it is important to give a trainee space and time to reflect on a lesson so that they develop their critical evaluation skills. Often ITE trainers or mentors can dominate the discussion. Margaret Roberts suggests they should operate the 50% rule, where they are talking for only half the time. It is important that you listen to a trainee teacher so that you understand how the lesson appeared to them - only then will you be able to move them forward.

The lesson debrief will take time and you should arrange a quiet room where you will be free from interruptions. Agree in advance of the lesson the time the discussion will take place - later the same day if you can. To reduce trainee anxiety, particularly in the early stages of the training, make some immediate comment on their lesson, especially if there is a long gap before the post-lesson discussion happens. Your comments should always be supportive, but honest. It is not fair on a trainee to say immediately, ‘that was fine’ and then pull their lesson apart in a review later.

Consider:

- The key messages you want to convey - avoid the temptation comment on everything
- Letting the trainee give their evaluation of the lesson first, while you resist making comment
- How to give due emphasis to strengths (trainees often only hear the negative!)
- Always make comment on the trainee’s planning and subject knowledge, as well as their teaching, in the lesson
- How to focus on the success (or otherwise) of the lesson in terms of the geography that was learnt? Using questions such as:
  - Do you think the lesson objective to................?  
  - Were higher attaining pupils sufficiently challenged by the task on....? 
  - What do you think the pupils understood about ...... concept?  
  (for more ideas refer to the trainee support sheet Where is the Geography)
- Matching the type and quantity of feedback to the trainee’s stage in the training
- Acknowledging improvements made from the previous observation, where possible, so that trainees are able to begin to see links between the different lessons they teach and how the skills of teaching are transferable.
- The next steps – for the trainee and the pupils’ geography learning. Discuss with the trainee what the observation will focus on in the next observation
- Checking the trainee’s perception of what has been said and of how they understand they are progressing
- Providing written, in addition to oral, feedback.
Reading for ITE trainers/mentors

- Download and read *Classroom observation techniques* (from King, S. (2000) *Theory into Practice: Into the Black Box: Observing Classrooms*. Sheffield Geographical Association (available in the GA shop). This has a section on the observation debrief and provides excellent advice on the effective debrief.
- Read the support sheet *The post-lesson discussion* in which Margaret Roberts describes a non-judgmental style of supervision which involves collecting data and discussing it afterwards.

Providing written feedback

As well as an oral debrief, trainee teachers are entitled to written feedback. ITE trainers/mentors can provide this either on a form or as written notes. The latter used to be the most common, but increasingly ITE providers expect all mentors to record their comments on a standard pro-forma and relate comments to the Teachers’ Standards. Download some examples of the type of forms commonly used: Example 1, Example 2.

A form can be a useful aide-memoire but should not constrain an ITE trainer/mentor from making pertinent comments. Official pro-forma can make the observation and feedback process very formal so that formative dialogue and discussion are lost. Forms that require a mentor to ‘tick’ Standards can prevent, rather than facilitate, effective feedback.

Detailed observation notes, without comments, provide a good starting point for discussion. Using this approach is particularly helpful to draw out evaluative comments from a trainee teacher and the judgements about the lesson can be agreed jointly by the trainee and the mentor after discussing the evidence. Sometimes it is appropriate for the trainee to summarise the key points covered in the discussion.

There is no right or wrong way to provide written feedback. Good practice cannot be identified from the written evidence alone; it must be seen in relation to the context in which it was written. Here are some different geography examples of written feedback to illustrate the variety of types that are found, but in each case they cannot reveal the detailed discussion that the mentor had with the trainee. Nor is there an indication of the intention of the feedback.

Download these *Feedback geography examples*. Neither of these use a form. In the first the mentor provides the trainee teacher with notes to discuss and the second focuses on description rather than evaluation, raising questions for the trainee to ponder.

Considerations about feedback

- What is written down can be reflected on and referred to later, by both you and the trainee.
- Observation forms can provide a useful ‘aide memoire’, but they should not be a straitjacket.
- Be flexible in the type of written feedback you provide and make it appropriate for the situation.
- Feedback comments should conclude with evaluation and targets for the trainee to work on. Download *Targets and action planning*.
- Is it clear you are writing about a geography lesson? Look at these *Comments by geography mentors*.
- Over several feedbacks you should include different types of comment, for example:
  - observation of trainee teacher actions;
Developing your practice

Strive to develop and improve on the quality of your debriefing and written feedback as you get more experienced. Here are some ways you could do this:

- Observe your trainee alongside another teacher. Prepare separate notes and compare what you identify to be the salient points. Lead the post-lesson discussion and ask your colleague to act as a critical friend to comment on your debriefing.
- Ask your trainee to give you some honest feedback on your approach.
- Compare your written feedback with other ITE trainers/mentors. Use the checklist below to review your practice.

Checklist to review your practice.

✓ Do I consider when it is most appropriate to focus on particular standards and when on the whole lesson?
✓ Have I observed and commented on whether sufficient good geography teaching and learning took place?
✓ Am I judging the quality of the teaching and learning, or am I being influenced by the ‘structures’ that I expect to see in a lesson - such as objectives written on the board, a starter and a plenary?
✓ What did this lesson tell me about the trainee’s subject knowledge? Have I commented on any inaccuracies, where the trainee needs more depth of knowledge or alternative ways of presenting it to pupils?
✓ Did I comment on how the trainee found out about the pupils’ prior knowledge and how they built on that in the lesson?
✓ Did I think the pupils made progress in their geographical learning during the lesson? Did I concur with the trainee’s view? Did I comment on what the trainee did to influence progress of the class, groups, and individuals?
✓ Who worked the hardest and did most purposeful talking in the lesson – the trainee teacher or the pupils? Did I say so?

Moving trainees on after a teaching observation

The lesson observation should not end with the debrief and written feedback. To be truly effective a mentor needs to use what they have observed and discussed to move the trainee on. Conclude your discussion by agreeing specific targets for areas that the trainee needs to develop.

Download this support sheet derived from Newcastle University’s PGCE course on 'Moving trainees on'.

A Footnote - Feedback on lesson planning
It is, of course, important to discuss lesson planning in the context of a lesson observation as part of the post-lesson discussion. Look at this example of a lesson plan annotated by an ITE trainer during his lesson observation. However, it is a good strategy to carry out a review of a trainee’s lesson plans from time to time and discuss your observations with them. The large amount of time spent planning lessons is often cited by trainees as being very demanding. Providing structured feedback on this process can highlight where they are being less effective and help them to plan more effectively, thereby reducing their workload and stress. See the support sheet Reviewing lesson plans.

**Reading for ITE trainers/mentors**

- Davidson, G. ‘Using Ofsted criteria to develop classroom practice’, *Teaching Geography*, January 1996, which provides an excellent model of analysis of a geography lesson plan and discusses good classroom practice.

(Last updated February 2019)