

# Revising the Mentor-Mentee Observation Process in UniPa's Mentor Program: A Proposal for a Standardized Observation Form

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## *Introduction*

The University of Palermo's "Programma Mentore per la Didattica" has been an integral part of the academic landscape for many years, witnessing a steady increase in faculty participation. This initiative has been decisive in fostering a culture of continuous improvement and collaboration among educators in our community (1, 2).

Central to this program is the peer observation framework, where mentors and mentees are considered equals in a collaborative exchange aimed at refining teaching methodologies and enhancing classroom delivery (3, 6). In this approach, each participating faculty member, referred to as a mentee, is paired with two mentors. These mentors are also participants in the program, playing dual roles as both guides and learners, which enriches their understanding and empathy towards the teaching challenges faced by their peers.

The mentoring process includes multiple stages of interaction and observation, starting with in-class observations by mentors throughout the academic year to assess teaching practices. This is followed by meetings with students to gain additional perspectives on the mentee's instructional impact. The process ends with a final meeting between mentors and the

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mentee to discuss observations, highlight strengths, identify areas for improvement, and plan interventions for the next academic year. A mentor observation form, modeled on a checklist, has been used in classroom observations to guide mentors and systematically identify points of attention, though its use is optional but recommended.

During the last annual assembly, it was agreed to revise the observation form to make it more effective and user-friendly, addressing the evolving needs of mentors and mentees. The revisions aim to streamline the observation process, making it less cumbersome while capturing effective teaching nuances. There is also a growing need for a formal evaluation of the mentoring process and program outcomes. Transforming the observation form into a monitoring tool aims to provide feedback and quantitatively assess improvements in teaching practices. This enhancement is expected to offer valuable insights into the mentorship program's effectiveness, guiding future initiatives and refining mentoring practices within the university.

### *Form development*

The design of the new observation form for UNIPA's mentoring project was influenced by the project's multifaceted and complex nature. The project includes classroom observations, seminar training, residential workshops, and social activities, involving relational dynamics such as mentor-mentee, mentee-students, mentor-co-mentor, and the broader mentor community. Given this complexity, a constructivist approach (4, 5) was adopted, supporting mixed methods to capture changes in teaching and mentoring processes.

This approach emphasizes the evaluator's role not merely as an external observer but as an expert participant in educational processes, recognizing the value of transformative relationships within the educational environment. The new form accommodates feedback from various stakeholders, allowing for real-time interventions and the inclusion of new ideas or initiatives as needed. It addresses classroom dynamics from both mentors' and mentees' perspectives, ensuring a comprehensive evaluation that aligns with the project's activities and relational complexities. Such

approach captures intercultural interactions and supports the development of culturally sensitive teaching practices.

The “Intercultural Reflection on Teaching” framework also shaped the revised form (7, 11). It encourages mentors to consider cultural influences on teaching styles, integrating diverse perspectives into educational practices for a holistic understanding of the educational environment. This method involves teachers reflecting on their cultural assumptions and biases, considering their influence on teaching methods, student interactions, and interpretation of behaviors and performance. The form prompts mentors to consider cultural influences on teaching strategies and classroom dynamics, leading to more culturally responsive feedback.

The initial evaluation of the old observation form in the mentoring project highlighted several areas for improvement. The original form had poorly distributed items, unclear questions, and overlapping items, causing confusion and redundancy. It mainly featured open fields often used for binary responses (yes/no), limiting feedback depth. Additionally, it lacked automated evaluation capabilities and sufficient demographic information, hindering data analysis.

The redesign aimed for an “evolution” rather than a “revolution”, refining the form’s usability while maintaining its familiar framework. The new form improved item distribution and clarity, reduced overlaps, and introduced a mix of open and structured response fields to enhance data quality. It incorporated features that allow for automated data analysis and expanded demographic questions for comprehensive evaluation. This approach ensured continuity for users while enhancing functional and analytical capabilities.

In redesigning the form, content and functionality were refined. Items were strategically redistributed for better internal grouping and section distinction, streamlining the assessment process. The form now includes more socio-demographic information, providing a comprehensive participant profile and enriching contextual data for analyses. A significant enhancement was the inclusion of a quantitative evaluation component with four-point Likert scales (ranging from “not at all” to “very much”), allowing graded responses while also providing space for qualitative feedback. This dual approach captures both intensity and nuances of participants’ experiences. Additionally, the revised form serves as a self-evaluation tool,

encouraging reflective practice and fostering personal and professional growth.

The revised observation form defines several key dimensions (8, 9):

- **Use of Time:** This dimension evaluates how effectively teachers<sup>1</sup> manage class time. It includes indicators such as punctuality and the ability to organize content or activities in a manner proportionate to the allotted time. This ensures that teachers are maximizing instructional time and keeping activities well-aligned with session objectives.
- **Use of Knowledge and Skills:** This dimension focuses on the teacher's ability to remain focused and engaging, which is crucial for capturing and maintaining student attention and curiosity. It also assesses the teacher's ability to stimulate critical thinking and guide students through reasoning processes, reflecting a deep engagement with the students' intellectual development.
- **Use of Tools and Methodologies:** This dimension examines the teachers' use of various teaching tools and methods, including the use of analogies, examples, and metaphors which enrich the learning experience. It also evaluates the appropriate use of non-verbal communication tools such as body language, spatial awareness, movement, eye contact, and vocal modulation.
- **Interaction:** This dimension measures the teacher's ability to foster peer relationships among students and to ensure that students understand the material. This involves actively encouraging interactions that are conducive to learning and checking for comprehension, which are key to student engagement and success.
- **Observation of Students:** Finally, the dimension of student observation focuses on the responsiveness of students to the teacher's questions, their initiative in participation, and their ability to engage critically and creatively with the subject matter. This feedback is instrumental in gauging the effectiveness of the teaching methods and the level of student engagement.

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<sup>1</sup> Given the academic context in which the form was used, the term teacher was preferred to the broader term educator.

Together, these dimensions provide a robust framework for evaluating the multifaceted aspects of teaching and mentoring within the educational setting. The revised form not only captures a wide array of teaching behaviors and strategies but also facilitates a deeper understanding of their practical implications on student learning and interaction. This comprehensive approach ensures that the evaluation process is aligned with educational best practices and the goals of the mentoring project.

### *Conclusion and future work*

The development of the new observation form has undergone a process, beginning with its internal creation followed by an initial trial with a small group of mentors to gather preliminary feedback. This phase was crucial for identifying any immediate revisions needed and for assessing the form's overall effectiveness in a controlled environment. Currently, the form is in the midst of a more extensive trial phase, being tested across the entire program to evaluate its performance in a diverse range of mentoring situations and to ensure its applicability on a broader scale. This expanded testing phase will be useful for collecting comprehensive feedback that encompasses the varied experiences and insights of all program participants. Based on the outcomes of this larger test and the feedback gathered, there are plans to finalize any necessary adjustments and officially adopt this form as the standard evaluation tool for the program.

A key development under consideration after the adoption of the final version of the form is the creation of a dedicated web platform specifically designed to manage the anonymization of data, facilitate streamlined data input, and enable initial analysis and elaboration of the collected information, simplifying the process of data handling, making it more efficient and reducing the likelihood of errors.

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