PROFESSIONAL & ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT in HIGHER EDUCATION

A Handbook for New Practitioners

Emily C. Wadsworth, Editor
Classroom Observation:
The Observer as Collaborator

By LuAnn Wilkerson

It is hard to say how many classrooms I sit in the back of each year, absorbed in following the process of teaching and stimulated by new ideas. As an educational consultant, I have found that feedback to teachers based on the direct observation of classroom process is a powerful and effective faculty development strategy. It provides individualized feedback and assistance based on the needs and interests of the teacher, whereas workshops, a more frequently used approach to faculty development, introduce skills and ideas which may not meet individually felt needs. While videotaping also provides an individualized perspective and a more complete record of classroom events, it is more intrusive, with both students and faculty reporting uneasiness and modification of behavior to some extent. The observer, on the other hand, is usually seen as a less disruptive addition to the classroom environment. Additionally, the observer requires no special technological arrangements and can be counted on to function smoothly on almost all occasions! However, the process of classroom observation and feedback carries with it the potential for abuse. Each of us can remember an occasion when comments made by someone who had just attended a class that we were teaching made us feel uncomfortable or even angry. How can we reduce the potential for abuse and enhance the potential for teaching improvement through the use of classroom observation and feedback?

A Tool for Improvement or Evaluation?

The observation of classroom teaching is regularly utilized in the supervision and evaluation of elementary and secondary school teachers and teacher trainees. Less frequently, classroom observation plays a minor role in the evaluation of teacher effectiveness at the college and university level. However, the faculty development movement of the last fifteen years has adopted classroom observation as a primary tool for the improvement of teaching. The difference between observation for purposes of evaluation and improvement is not so much the method by which observations are recorded, but, rather, the degree to which the observed teacher participates in the formulation of conclusions about the quality of the teaching observed. When classroom observation is used for the purposes of evaluation, judgments are usually summative and the teacher plays little, if any, role in making them. On the other hand, when observation is conducted for the purpose of teaching improvement, judgments are formative and the teacher is actively involved in the assessment of teaching quality and needed improvement.

Recognizing the importance of the teacher's ownership of the process of change, I have moved over the years to a more collaborative approach to classroom observation and feedback, seeking to increase the responsibility of the teacher for making decisions about his or her own teaching improvement. Through a process of collaborative observation, I engage with the teacher in "classroom research" (Cross, 1986), together
determining what questions need to be answered during observation and designing methods of data collection and analysis for answering them. A collaborative approach recognizes the professional status of both the teacher and the observer. It can help to reduce the threat often perceived by the teacher in being observed, lessen the impact of observer bias, and enhance the skills of the teacher in accurately assessing and improving his or her own teaching. Collaborative observation is characterized by the use of a pre-observation conference, descriptive observation notes, and teacher direction of the post-observation conference.

The Pre-Observation Conference

In order to serve as an effective observer of the teaching behavior of another person, you must first carefully examine your beliefs about effective teaching and learning. Before the observing, you might ask yourself the following questions:

- What do I think is essential in the classroom process for learning to occur?
- Is there anything distinctive about this particular subject or these students that might alter the usual process of learning?
- When I say effective teaching, what standards am I using to determine effectiveness, e.g., student learning, a set of teaching behaviors, student enjoyment, etc.?

Since we cannot escape our biases, training, and beliefs, we must recognize that our observations will ultimately represent only one version of the classroom event. The perception of the observer influences what will be recorded and how it will be analyzed. In addition, Everton and Green (1986, p. 162) remind us that “these factors form the frame of reference of the observer and influence the decision-making as well as the observational process.” We can reduce the impact of observer bias by consciously recognizing our personal perspectives as just that and not mistaking them for “reality,” by involving the teacher in planning for observation, and by collecting data about the classroom from a number of different sources, i.e., videorecording, student evaluations, multiple observers or observation methods.

The pre-observation conference begins the process of collaboration. As in any research project, the collaborators will need to discuss and agree upon the purpose of the investigation. What questions would the teacher like to answer? Are there others you might want to add? What special interests, fears, and beliefs does each of you bring to the endeavor? The pre-observation conference provides a time for you to discuss the teacher’s beliefs about teaching and learning in general and in relation to the specific class to be observed.

Critical decisions need to be made during the pre-observation conference:

1. when and where to observe,
2. what features of the classroom on which to focus,
3. what methods to use in collecting data,
4. how to introduce the observer to the students,
5. how the data will be analyzed, and
6. who will have access to the results of the study.

In each of these decisions, the teacher is an active participant. The greater the role the teacher plays in making these decisions, the more valid the data collected will appear to him or her.

Observation

An important feature of the collaborative approach to classroom observation is the collection of descriptive—as opposed to evaluative—data which you and the teacher can analyze together as you seek to answer the questions posed during the pre-observation conference. Descriptive data provide an account of classroom behavior and interaction without making an effort to judge these events as good or bad, right or wrong, effective or ineffective. Description represents, in as far as possible, a neutral stance on the part of the observer. It avoids pejorative language and inferences. Judgments which are eventually made will be reached in collaboration with the teacher. For example, I observe a discussion leader who asks long, tortuous questions which elicit little if any student response. This is a judgment on my part. Operating out of a descriptive framework, I might create a list of instructor questions—verbatim—and describe associated student responses. The descriptive approach leaves the instructor free to “discover” the pattern in his own behavior and to assess—with my assistance—its effectiveness or lack thereof.

Observations can be collected in any number of ways and numerous observation instruments and methods are described in the literature (Hoge, 1985; Dunkin & Biddle, 1974; Rosenshine and Furst, 1973; Simon & Boyer, 1970). In a recent review of observational methodologies in the Third Edition of the Handbook of Research on Teaching, Everton and Green (1986) describe four broad types of observational tools from which we might select depending on the particular goals of our study. Each is capable of being used to produce either descriptive or evaluative data.

a. Category systems contain closed, preset categories which are used to tally (descriptive) or rate (evaluative) samples of behavior, e.g., Flanders Inter-
action Analysis, Cognitive Interaction Analysis System, rating forms.

b. Descriptive systems usually have preset categories but call for the collection of detailed description within each category with attention to the context and multiple aspects of the behaviors observed, e.g., incident technique.

c. Narrative systems contain no preset categories. An attempt is made to record broad segments of behavior using the syntax of those being observed, e.g., anthropological field notes, diaries.

d. Technological systems can be used to record events verbatim, e.g., videotape, audiotape, photographs.

In general, I use a narrative system in which I attempt to record as much as possible of the verbal and nonverbal behaviors of the teacher and the students during the class period. Arriving a few minutes before the beginning of class, I note the physical environment of the classroom, e.g., size of room, type and arrangement of chairs, audio-visual and board facilities, etc. I set up my paper for notetaking in a way that allows me to document the flow of student-teacher interaction by dividing the page lengthwise to create two columns, one labeled Teacher and one, Students. (See Table One) In a discussion class, these columns might be of equal width. In a lecture class, the teacher's column would be much wider than that of the students. I then record some portion of the verbal interaction using verbatim narrative and/or summaries of the content of the discussion. In parentheses, I describe nonverbal events or comment on the group process. I also keep track of the passage of time.

I am more likely to use a more focused descriptive or category system when the purpose of the study is more narrowly defined, i.e., we have agreed to study the nature of questions and responses. I rarely select a category system because of the narrow vision of classroom events that can be captured with quantitative ratings. However, with appropriate training, an observer can use a category system to provide a detailed record of classroom events. For example, the Cognitive Interaction Analysis System results in a numerical record of the occurrence of selected teacher and student behaviors, maintaining the interactive pattern by coding classroom activity at 3-second intervals (Johnson, 1987; Lewis, 1986). Whatever system chosen, the major criteria should be that the approach provides for the fullest description possible of the classroom events under study with the least amount of observer inference and judgment required. The observation system should also be appropriate for the type of class and the preference of the faculty member for numerical versus verbal versus visual data.

**Post-Observation Conference**

Once observational data have been collected, I meet with the teacher to analyze the results and reach a collaborative judgment about what action might be taken in response to the data. I generally send a copy of my observation notes to the teacher for consideration prior to this meeting. To begin the discussion, I first ask the teacher to reflect on the class session itself. Was this typical or atypical? How did it match with the plans he or she had made before class? The teacher's self-assessment introduces the issues which form the focus of our work together.

Second, I ask the teacher to react to the observation data. Has the observation instrument used generated an accurate picture of the class? The teacher usually responds by reflecting on that portion of the data which is of most personal interest, perhaps the most surprising or that which confirms his or her own views most strongly. Working together, we determine answers to the questions posed during the pre-observation conference, sharing perspectives and interpretations.

The collaborative mode does not suggest that the observer avoids making judgments or never offers advice, but rather that the discussion entails the mutual definition and resolution of problems. I try to withhold my judgment until the teacher has analyzed the data and reached his or her own conclusions as to their meaning. Judgments offered too quickly may destroy the collaborative nature of our work or discourage the teacher from developing those skills in reflective self-assessment essential to the ongoing improvement of

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teaching. After encouraging the teacher to select the initial focus of the discussion and to take the lead in interpreting the data, I indicate topics of concern to me and share my interpretation of the data collected. The issue is not one of directive versus non-directive consultation, but of the sharing of direction with an attitude of mutual respect.

Limitations to Classroom Observation

We have already discussed the limitations posed by the bias of the observer and the tools chosen for data collection. There is an additional limitation to classroom observation as an approach to teaching improvement. Classroom observation, when used as the single source of data on teaching effectiveness, produces an incomplete picture of the teaching and learning that is occurring. Are students accomplishing intended learning outcomes? What do students perceive to be promoting or discouraging their achievement? How do course assignments and examinations relate to the stated objectives of the course?

In order to more completely depict the full range of teaching variables, we need additional data, such as student performance results, student evaluations of teaching, observations by other observers or on other occasions, videotaping of classroom sequences, and review of teacher-prepared materials including the course syllabus. Such information, when coupled with the observation, can provide the broadest possible base for interpreting the events of the classroom. By reinforcing observational data with information collected from a variety of other sources, we can more accurately collaborate with the teacher in identifying, assessing and improving his or her own teaching skills.

References


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