Tools for Teaching

Barbara Gross Davis
Watching Yourself on Videotape

Watching a videotape of yourself is an extremely valuable experience. Videotaping allows you to view and listen to the class as your students do; you can also scrutinize your students' reactions and responses to your teaching. By analyzing a videotape of the dynamics in your classroom, you can check the accuracy of your perceptions of how well you teach and identify those techniques that work and those that need revamping.

Faculty members at all levels and in all disciplines have benefited from seeing videotapes of themselves. The suggestions below are designed to help you use videotape to gain insights that will help you improve your teaching.

General Strategies

Arrange for videotaping through your campus media office. Many colleges and universities offer free classroom videotaping services to faculty members. Contact the media office to find out what services are available. If your campus does not offer such services, ask a colleague to observe you in the classroom. See the section on colleague observation later in this tool.

Select a typical class. Choose a class in which you are teaching as you generally do, using the chalkboard, overheads, handouts, and so on. If possible, try to pick a class that is a mix of lecture and discussion.

Let students know in advance that the class will be videotaped. Explain that the taping is a way for you to review your performance—not theirs—and improve your teaching. Assure them that the tape will not be preserved.

Ask the camera operator to tape the students as well as you. The cameraperson will know not to disrupt the class in any way. But feel free to remind the camera operator to break away from focusing on you in order to show your students' reactions to you and to each other. (Source: Knupnick, 1987)

While you are being videotaped try to focus on your teaching, not on the camera. Video equipment is not intrusive; no extra lighting is required.
Though you may feel uncomfortable and awkward at the beginning of taping, these feelings wear off quite quickly. Keep in mind that no one will see the tape except you, unless you choose to invite others to view it with you. Remember, too, you can erase the tape whenever you wish.

**Viewing the Videotape**

**View the videotape as soon as possible.** Plan to view the tape on the day it is made or the next day so that your memory is fresh and you can readily recall what you were thinking or feeling during class. Run the tape through once or twice just to get used to seeing yourself on tape. During these first viewings, be prepared for a dose of “video-induced despair” (Krupnick, 1987), a common ailment brought about by the visual distortions of the medium. Most people tend to notice their voice, appearance, gestures, and mannerisms—Do I really sound like that? Is my hair always this disheveled? Why didn't I notice that my shirt was untucked? It is important to realize that these details are exaggerated on tape and are far less noticeable and distracting in real life. In any case, a wrinkled blouse or a crooked tie has nothing to do with effective teaching. (Source: Krupnick, 1987)

**Plan to spend twice as long analyzing the tape as it took to tape your class.** Once you’ve adjusted to seeing yourself on tape, set aside sufficient time to analyze it, about two hours to review a one-hour class session. As you start to analyze the tape, remember to focus on your strengths as well as aspects needing improvement. The problem areas are likely to jump out at you, but don’t overlook those things that you are doing well: talking to the class, not the board; answering questions clearly; and so on.

**View the tape with a supportive consultant.** Many campuses have offices of faculty development or instructional improvement whose staff members can assist you in identifying your strengths and areas for improvement. In addition to providing helpful suggestions, the consultant can help you temper your natural tendency to be hypercritical.

**Go for the gestalt.** Run the tape straight through and answer the following questions:

- What are the specific things I did well?
- What are the specific things I could have done better?
- What do students seem to enjoy most?
- What do students seem to enjoy least?
Watching Yourself on Videotape

- If I could do this session over again, what three things would I change?
- How could I go about making those three changes?

(Source: Fuhrmann and Grasha, 1983)

Focus on selected aspects of your performance the next time you view the tape. For example, review the tape looking solely at the kinds of questions you pose or noticing your voice characteristics or presentation style. Identify both your strengths and those areas that need improvement. (Source: Acheson, 1981)

Chart the frequencies and types of classroom interactions. One simple method for analyzing classroom talk in discussion classes is called Contracted BIAS (Brown’s Interaction Analysis System). As you watch a segment of the tape, stop every five seconds to make a tic mark in one of three columns: Teacher Talk, Student Talk, Silence. The totals will show you how much time was devoted to your comments and to students’ comments. For a more detailed analysis, record a Q for question, each time you or a student poses a question. (Source: Brown and Atkins, 1988)

Write down verbatim comments of a given type. Useful types of comments to copy down include teacher’s questions, students’ responses to teacher’s questions, students’ questions, teacher’s responses to students’ questions, teacher’s responses to students’ statements, teacher’s reward and praise statements, and teacher’s criticism. For example, if you are concerned about your use of questions, view the tape and write down all the questions you asked. Then you can examine such issues as these:

- How many questions actually requested a response from students?
- Did all the questions start with the same phrase?
- Did they all require yes/no or short answers?
- What level of thinking was required in the responses?
- Did you allow sufficient time between questions for students to respond?

In reviewing your videotape, you may find that you are asking too many questions or not pausing to give students time to answer. You can then work on improving your questioning skills. (Source: Acheson, 1981)

Use checklists to focus your analysis. Create your own checklists that reflect your particular areas of interest or select items relevant to your teaching style and subject matter from the following checklists (adapted...
Organization and Preparation
Do you

- State the purpose of the class session and its relationship to the previous class?
- Present, on the board or in a handout, a brief overview or outline of the content at the beginning of the session or state the problem to be solved or discussed?
- Emphasize or restate the most important ideas?
- Make smooth transitions from one topic to another?
- Restate, at the end of the class, what students are expected to gain from the session?
- Summarize the main points or ask students to do so?
- Relate the day’s session to upcoming presentations?
- Include neither too much nor too little material in a class period?
- Seem at ease with the material?
- Begin and end class promptly?

Style of Presentation
Do you

- Speak in a clear, strong voice that can be easily heard?
- Speak neither too quickly nor too slowly?
- Speak at a rate that allows students to take notes?
- Talk to the class, not to the board or windows?
- Listen carefully to students’ comments and questions without interruption?

Clarity of Presentation
Do you

- Define new terms, concepts, and principles?
- Give examples, illustrations, or applications to clarify abstract concepts?
- Explicitly relate new ideas to familiar ones?
Watching Yourself on Videotape

- Seem to know whether or not the class is understanding you? whether students are puzzled or confused?
- Use alternate explanations when students do not understand?
- Slow down when discussing complex or difficult ideas?
- Refrain from needlessly digressing from the main topic?
- Use handouts and audiovisual aids effectively?
- Write legibly and clearly on the chalkboard?

Questioning Skills
Do you

- Ask questions to determine what students know about the topic?
- Ask different levels and kinds of questions to challenge and engage students?
- Periodically ask questions to gauge whether students need more or less information on a topic?
- Pause sufficiently after all questions to allow students time to respond?
- Encourage students to answer difficult questions by providing cues or rephrasing?
- When necessary, ask students to clarify their questions?
- Ask follow-up questions if a student’s answer is incomplete or superficial?
- Request that difficult, time-consuming questions of limited interest be discussed during office hours?

Student Interest and Participation
Do you

- Encourage students’ questions?
- Accept other points of view?
- Provide opportunities for students to practice what they are learning?
- Engage students’ intellectual curiosity?

Classroom Climate
Do you

- Address some students by name (and with the correct pronunciation)?
- Call on men and women students in equal numbers?
- Call on students of different ethnic groups in equal numbers?
- Evenhandedly listen attentively and respond to students’ comments and questions?
• Give feedback, encouragement, criticism, and praise evenhandedly?
• Avoid language patterns or case examples that exclude or derogate any groups?

Discussion
Do you
• Encourage all students to participate in the discussion?
• Draw out quiet students and prevent dominating students from monopolizing the discussion?
• Refrain from monopolizing the discussion yourself?
• Encourage students to challenge one another?
• Mediate conflicts or differences of opinion?
• Bring closure to the discussion?

Having Colleagues Observe Your Class

Invite a faculty development consultant or a colleague to observe you teach. If your campus has an office of faculty development or instructional improvement, one of the staff members can observe you teach. If your campus has no faculty development office, ask a supportive colleague to sit in on your class. If possible, try to select someone who is familiar with the course's content. If no single class is representative of your course, ask the observer to attend two sessions. Let the students know in advance that you have invited an observer to sit in.

Plan for the observation. You and the observer should meet before the visit to discuss class goals, students, and teaching strategies. Offer the observer a copy of your course syllabus and an outline of topics for the class period, and mention which particular features you would like the observer to focus on during class. At this initial meeting you and the observer can also decide on the method of observation (for example, checklist, rating form, open-ended comments). Some researchers recommend limiting the observation form to six or eight open-ended questions that will provide a narrative description of aspects of your teaching, such as organization of presentation, instructor-student rapport, clarity of explanations, and so on (Millis, 1992).

Meet with the observer within a week or so after the visit. A good way to begin the session is for you to identify your own impressions about the class and those aspects that went well and those that did not. Then ask the observer to comment on various aspects. It is sometimes helpful if the
Watching Yourself on Videotape

observer has prepared a brief written report that includes examples. Ask the observer to be concrete and specific, focusing on behavior and actions. You and the observer can also discuss the degree to which your goals for the class were accomplished. At the conclusion of the session, you may want to ask the observer for any suggestions for improvement in two or three specific areas. (Source: Davis, 1988)

References


