

Observing teaching: Discovering and developing the individual's teaching style

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In 1973-74, the Indiana University English Department offered its faculty and teaching assistants a chance to participate in a formal teacher observation program. The department chair appointed a faculty member experienced in observation and knowledgeable about its theory to design a program. Thirty teachers signed up to be observed. Since then, we have observed the teaching of more than 150 faculty members and TAs. The key feature of the program, which we continue to emphasize, is its focus on teachers' needs, not on evaluating teachers for administrative purposes.

The program began with three basic assumptions: that knowing what individual teachers want to accomplish is essential to helping them with their teaching; that teachers need information about their own teaching styles and not about some hypothetical "best" way to teach; and that detailed information about teaching is more valuable to teachers than generalized evaluations. With these assumptions in mind, we designed an observation program having a three-step consultation process. First, the observer gathers information about the objectives, concerns, and style of the teacher. Second, the observer describes in detail what went on in the teacher's class. And third, the observer connects what the teacher says she or he wants to achieve with what the observer saw and heard in class. To implement this consultation process we established three corresponding steps in the observation procedure: the preobservation interview, the observation, and the follow-up conference.

Observation procedure

1. Preobservation interview. In the preobservation interview the observer attempts to discover the teacher's concerns. *Discover* is the key word here. It means that the observer must listen as the teacher discusses goals for the class, feelings about teaching, attitudes toward students, what goes well and what doesn't, and what his or her special teaching style is. The observer asks questions to elicit a fuller description of the teacher's general goals, style, and concerns. But mainly the observer listens. By listening, the observer learns what is important to the teacher and what is especially important to attend to when visiting the teacher's class.

2. Observation. During the class observation, the observer's principal task is to compile a detailed, accurate record of precisely what is seen and heard. Again, as in the preobservation interview, the observer must discover what the teacher's style is, what the teacher does that helps accomplish the goals discussed in the preobservation interview, and what the teacher does that interferes with these

goals. Throughout the observation, the observer's primary task is to describe what happens in minute detail, avoiding generalizations, analysis, and evaluation. While trying to avoid imposing a structure or pattern on what is seen and heard, the observer also tries to focus especially on important concerns which the teacher discussed in the preobservation interview. To take notes effectively, the observer has to devise a shorthand system to record observations quickly, thoroughly, legibly, and in detail. Detailed, accurate, descriptive notes require the observer to focus on specific, observable behavior, as in this sample from a 1974 log recording the observation of a large lecture class:

People talking to T before class in front of class. BELL. T keeps talking, 4 seconds. T walks in front of class up side aisle, right. T explains where class left off last time. Refers to S remark from last class. 4 Ss come in late, chairs banging. T: look at p. 117. (pause) All Ss I see find page. 2 Ss come in, bang desk tops. 1 more late S. T looks at class, then at one S while talking, smiles. T: energy in story—refers to one S remark from last time. T: Sharon. S: Q, What happened to... T: Anyone? S. S. S. . . .

Notice that nothing in this record is analytical or evaluative. It is as entirely objective, descriptive, and detailed as possible. The accumulated detail reveals important patterns and shows both the observer and the teacher exactly how something happened. For example, in the log entry quoted here, we can see that the teacher seems to remember students' names despite the large class and lecture format, refers to previous student comments, and gives students enough time to find a passage in the text, which she later talked about briefly.

Any behavior in a class may turn out to be significant, but since the observer cannot know in advance what will prove important, everything possible should be recorded. Because certain phases of classes and specific behaviors prove useful in almost every observation, the suggestions below point to typical focal areas for observers.

Behavior before class begins. Because the tone of the class often reveals itself subtly before the class officially begins, the observer should begin recording behavior as soon as students begin to arrive in the room. Do students talk to each other? How are the chairs arranged? What does the teacher do before the class begins? Often, how well the teacher plans or how well he or she knows students may become evident at this point. For example, a teacher who gets to class to put directions on the board has obviously planned. One who talks to students using their names has taken the time to get to know them.

The beginning of class. The teacher's planning and organization is often reflected in the first few minutes. Does the teacher start with a question? Start looking through a briefcase for notes? Come running into class late? Have the class write briefly in order to point to the major focus of the class discussion that day? Put students in groups?

Patterns of talk. As the observer notes the frequency and nature of exchanges between students and teacher, patterns and modes of discussion will emerge. Do students respond to each other directly? Do students all talk at once? Does the teacher ask all the questions? Often, noting how much time teacher and

students actually talk reveals patterns that surprise teachers who think their classes involve more discussion than timing reveals.

Classroom movement. Noting movement can prove useful even when the observer initially has no idea what it means. Does the teacher pace? Do any students tentatively raise their hands or move forward slightly when the teacher asks a question? (This pattern is sometimes characteristic of more timid students.) Do students slide back in their chairs halfway through the period? Does the teacher pick up on nonverbal cues or movement and call on students?

Eye contact. By noting who and what teacher and students look at in the course of a class, the observer can often find out why a discussion is shaped the way it is. Does the teacher look directly at students? Does the teacher look at the ceiling or out the window when talking? (To listen to someone who doesn't look at us is difficult unless we are intensely interested in the subject.) Does the teacher look down when asking questions? Does the teacher look around the class while students discuss? (If so, the teacher may involve others who look eager to take part.) Do students look at each other or at the teacher while other students talk? (If students look solely at the teacher during discussions, little fruitful discussion among students will take place. If the teacher wants students talking to each other, then the observer and the teacher can work out ways to change the pattern.)

The blackboard and other audiovisual equipment. How are these used? Are they used effectively? Do both students and teachers use them? What happens in the class as the teacher writes on the board? Are students following along?

Questions and directions. Does the teacher ask simply factual questions or questions at several cognitive levels? Are the questions too difficult? Do students pair up and briefly discuss a major question to stimulate discussion? Are questions rhetorical? Does the teacher tolerate brief silences after questions? Or ask questions back to back? Or answer his or her own questions frequently? Are directions printed out? Are directions on the blackboard? Are directions given in a rush at the end of class? Do students write directions down?

Voice and mannerisms. Is the teacher's pacing and delivery too fast? Are students all talking softly? Does the teacher smile or nod approval? No matter how insignificant it may seem or what the mannerism is, it is best for the observer to record it in detail so that the teacher and observer can assess its importance.

End of class. Does the teacher summarize or have students do it? Is the teacher clear about what students are to do for next time? When the bell rings do students get up as the teacher continues talking?

Of course, other behavior or phases of the class could be included in this list, but the point is that observers should note particulars in *descriptive* terms, recording as much detail as possible in order to represent accurately what went on in the class. Including many details gives the observer a better chance to analyze significant patterns with the teacher.¹ The following excerpt from a log I kept as an observer illustrates the point. Before the class began, I drew a sketch of the classroom layout. Then I assigned numbers to the students (S1, S2, etc.) for easy reference. This preparation makes it easier to keep track of the flow of a conversation in which many class members talk. In keeping track of the conversation,

sometimes the substance of a question or remark is important. Then the observer writes down a few words that will help observer and teacher to reconstruct the exchange later. At other times, substance is less important than the nature of the exchange itself. Then, the observer simply indicates with a "Q" that a question was asked, or by a "T" or an "S" that a comment was made. Following each of these signs, the observer indicates how long each speaker speaks, points at which students raise their hands to speak ("hand"), and so on.

Classroom quiet, students not talking, sitting, some looking at books. BELL. T: passing back papers. T: Q. 45 sec. S2: 5 sec. T: Q. Who? S1, 2 sec. T: Q. S3. T: Chris. S2: I didn't know it had to be formal [seems irritated??] T: Becky. S4: I didn't. . . T. S4. T: explains title, 30 sec. Next paper—symbolism, 22 sec. S5: Q. What frequency papers, 10 sec. T: 15 sec. Pause, 3 sec. T: paper, 42 sec. T: Let's return to story, explains, 15 sec. Pause, 3 sec. S1: Q. Must it be precise info, 22 sec. T: Q. Epiphany. (Hand up, S1, after 20 sec.) T: explains. T to S2, is that your question, let's look at it, p. 43. S2: Q. P. 44 isn't it? T: reads (S1 hand up after 90 sec.) S2: What I mean. . . T: Q. Where are they going? 10 sec. S2: 4 sec. T: Q. 15 sec. Chris. S2: 30 sec. [T: face shows slight look of not sure about answer??] S2 goes on. T: Glad you picked that. . . 20 sec. Q. on scene—Is light important (S2: hand), 25 sec. S2: I think. . . , 23 sec. T: so he's avoiding. . . 15 sec. Let's look at p. 17. Reads—describe scene to me—reads again, 70 sec. (S2 hand up then down, 15 sec.) Chris. S2: 20 sec.

In this entry, covering the first ten minutes of a class, I record the first two phases of the class hour: the beginning, in which the teacher passes back papers and discusses them briefly; and a second phase, in which the teacher returns to the discussion of a story begun in a previous class.

I begin taking notes before the bell rings and record that students do not talk to each other, a silence which may mean that the class has not yet provided them with an opportunity to get to know each other. The teacher begins talking with a rather long question (45 seconds) that is supposed to set the stage. "Student one" replies briefly. The teacher asks a brief question ("Who?" referring to the name of a character in the story) and the same student replies briefly. The teacher asks another question, and "student three" responds. The teacher calls on Chris (S2), who has just looked at his paper, and who switches the topic of discussion by saying that he didn't know that the paper had to be formal. Becky (S4) says the same thing. The teacher responds briefly, and Becky says something in response. The teacher explains further and then starts talking about the next paper. And so on.

Obviously much is happening here that the teacher does not expect, and all of it is worth discussing. One apparent pattern revealed in the log is that all talk during the class flows through the teacher. The rest of the log on this class shows much the same pattern. After every student remark, the teacher responds in some way. Students do not generally comment on each other's remarks in this class, or engage in discussion among themselves. Also, once the discussion of the story begins, the teacher has exchanges with only two students, and S2, Chris, is the dominant figure.

This log entry also reveals that it is frequently difficult for the observer to avoid drawing inferences or making possible evaluations. In doing so, however, the observer should set these inferences and judgments off in some way from the rest of the entry. I used brackets and question marks to remind me that these are only possible conclusions and that I should ask the teacher in conference what, for example, he was feeling at the point where I wrote, "T: face shows slight look of not sure about answer??" I could not assume my inference made on the spot, without reflection, was right. The teacher's behavior simply suggested what *might* be going on inside the teacher, who was after all the only one who could say what he was in fact experiencing at the time I made my notation. Of course it may be better to avoid making such judgments entirely, since they undercut the "objectivity" of the log, and could tend to prejudice the conference discussion with the teacher later.

3. Follow-up conference. The third step in the observation program is a private discussion between observer and teacher, in which the consultant helps the teacher analyze what went on in the class and how what happened relates to his or her objectives.

Teacher's recap. First, the teacher should outline again the specific objectives and activities that had been planned for that class period, so that the observer understands how the teacher now perceives those plans, how clearly the class activities were tied to the goals originally formulated, and what is important to the teacher in both plan and execution. This procedure reinforces the earlier discussion of general goals. It helps the observer see if the teacher can translate general goals into specific objectives. And it often reveals the extent to which teachers are vague about just why they are doing what they do.

Then, the teacher should describe in detail the events of the class as he or she remembers them and compare this account with what had been planned. Such an approach shows the teacher how a class period has discernible parts which can be described and analyzed. Throughout these follow-up conferences, teachers should be urged to use descriptive terms in discussing teaching so that they will come closer to understanding the dynamics of their own classroom. If the teacher says, "This was the worst class I ever taught," or "They just weren't themselves today," the observer should ask for specifics. For example, did the teacher ask questions at the beginning that only one or two students answered, or did students not seem to know what to do when they were put into groups? What exactly happened?

Reading the log. After the teacher has discussed the plan and objectives and described the class, the observer should read the log aloud, reinforcing points the teacher has made, and allowing new patterns of behavior to emerge. As it turned out in the sample log entry quoted above, what was most memorable and important to the teacher was the discussion pattern, dominated by one student, Chris. The teacher recognized that students did not talk to each other and that only a few students responded. This gave us two things (closely related) to work on.

Again, the purpose of reading the log is to discover patterns to be worked on or reinforced. As the observer reads through the log, he or she stops to discuss behavior with the teacher when an accumulation of evidence warrants it or when the teacher wants to explore the meaning of recorded events. How observer and

teacher go through the log will depend on the patterns that develop, the concerns of the teacher, or the phases of the class (beginning, end, group work) that need most attention. As patterns are analyzed, they may show that the teacher needs to work more on questioning skills, needs to rearrange the class setting, needs to organize more, needs to clarify goals, needs to attend to student behavior, needs to write out or clarify directions, or needs to change the discussion format, and so on. What should also surface in the reading of the log is teacher behavior that furthers his or her goals: smiling and nodding to reinforce student behavior, using eye contact effectively, using the board to illustrate points, praising students, allowing students time to find evidence for statements, using contemporary examples to clarify material, or coming with handouts for students to work on. Whatever furthers the goals of the course should be underscored.

When the log has been read and the behavior analyzed, teacher and observer should plan for the next observation by deciding dimensions (planning, directions, voice, eye contact) to be worked on. Then they should discuss possible ways problems can be overcome. For example, if the log and discussion show little exchange among students and a reluctance to talk, the observer might suggest that the teacher begin with a centrally important question and pair students at the beginning for three minutes to discuss it. Students might also quickly write their answers to the question, and these could be exchanged, or the teacher might lay out some brief rules for a five- or ten-minute discussion session in which students are to talk to each other (not to the teacher), provide evidence for their opinions, etc. While any number of approaches for stimulating discussion are possible, the observer should suggest a host of procedures that the teacher can choose from. It is important that whatever procedures teachers decide to use, they should feel comfortable with them and be able to take them seriously. Obviously, the observer should possess a large repertoire of approaches to different teaching tasks; at this point, when a teacher needs to solve a particular teaching problem, methodology is most important.

After the teacher and observer have planned, the teacher may need a week or two to try out strategies before the observer visits the class again. Sometimes, however, teachers want the observer to visit the class right away in order to get immediate information on how any new strategies or methods are working.

How many times teachers are observed depends upon how much they benefit from the observations. In general, three to five observations are enough, although I have visited some teachers as many as nine times and others as few as one. At Indiana University, a solid preservice and inservice teaching program has allowed us to limit the number of observations, because TAs are taught how to plan, formulate objectives, and use a variety of pedagogical techniques long before they are visited.¹

Effects of the observation program

How well does this program work? The best evaluation of it must come from those who participated in it and who have evaluated our program and its effect on them as teachers. The following representative comments by teachers who had been observed indicate not only that these teachers appreciated getting help, but that they appreciated the approach used.¹

1. Comments on the approach

A. Faculty member, 20 years teaching, literature course, lecture: [The observer] had no programmed critical approach—no arbitrary check-list—no model teaching procedure. He was well aware of a number of symptoms of effective and ineffective teaching—symptoms sometimes far more apparent to an observer sitting in the class than to the teacher himself—but he was open to a variety of ways of achieving them. As a result, he tried to learn at the outset my own dissatisfaction, doubts, and plans for change. He then gave me a kind of straight playback of my lectures—or rather of my total behavior in the classroom—with some special focus on the matters I was concerned about....After this “playback” and my sequent responses to it, we discussed the issues that appeared. In this way [the observer] avoided ever confronting me initially with any direct criticism of his own—a wise tactical procedure.

B. Faculty member, three years teaching, language course, lecture: One of the many good points of the consultant’s approach is that he is careful to reinforce the effective aspects of a teacher’s present manner of instructing, and to work within the general mode which is most natural to that particular teacher. That is, I never felt that he was imposing set methods on me; rather that, with a keen sense of what suited my personal style, he was helping me to develop previously unrealized potential.

C. Teaching assistant, three years teaching, literature/composition course, discussion: As he observes the class, he makes a transcript of what happens. Each interchange between members of the class or between the teacher and a class member is recorded. He also records pauses and gestures.... In recalling a class it generally seems to me to have been a very brief period of time; I remember the high points, but until seeing a transcript of the class I had no sense of the number and variety of interchanges that occur. I found the transcripts and [the observer’s] interpretation of them gave me a much greater sense of my strengths as a teacher, and, consequently, more self-confidence.... At the same time, ... [the] observations helped me understand why a particular method I had used hadn’t worked.

2. Comments about specific teaching strategies learned

A. Faculty member, three years teaching, literature course, lecture: I learned a great deal about varying the kinds of discourse within a single lecture. I expect to quote more “outside” texts, to use hand-outs, to list on the board, to use questions and silence more effectively.

B. Faculty member, one semester teaching, literature course, discussion: Breaking into small groups; student presentations (as opposed to actually leading the discussion, which seems difficult for students to do); distribution of lecture-outlines (accompanying or sometimes in place of lectures);...

C. Teaching assistant, two years teaching, literature/composition, discussion: One [strategy] was particularly effective: proposing a question or topic to the students, and giving them five minutes or so to discuss it with each other or to take some notes before beginning the general discussion.

3. Comments about teacher’s sense of self and teaching behavior

A. Faculty member, 11 years teaching, literature, discussion: I feel more imaginative and aggressive about dealing with problems that come up during a

class hour—I'm more likely to try to do something about it, to articulate what I sense the class to be feeling and not saying.

B. Teaching assistant, no college teaching experience, composition, discussion: As a result of the consulting efforts, I learned that as a teacher I had a tendency to be defensive, frequently apologetic, and generally insecure. The reasons for this behavior were understandable from my viewpoint, but only as a result of the consultations did I become aware of how these attitudes and feelings were manifesting themselves in my teaching. . . . I realized there was really no reason for me to be defensive or apologetic in the classroom, and coupling this realization with the realization that I was not coming off as I would have wished, I was able to change my behavior.

C. Teaching assistant, six years teaching, composition, discussion: I'm more self-confident as a teacher than when the program began. It gave me a lift to think that I taught just as well, perhaps better than many of the people in the writing program.

Of course, the other side of this is the increased courage to be critical of your own teaching. You can't very well be hard on yourself if you aren't sure how good a teacher you are; how could you be sure you weren't simply noticing a small error that was really part of an immense incompetency? If you know you're fairly competent, then you can say, "All right, now I'll work on this sloppy planning that makes me work harder than I should have to; now I'll practice looking at the class; now I'll stop worrying about how good a teacher I am—and stop looking so hard for approval from the students—and start developing some better standards for grading, judging revisions, and so on."

These comments are typical of responses about the observation program's effectiveness. No one to date has found the program threatening, once they have participated in it or understood how it operates. The reason for this acceptance, I believe, is the program's nonjudgmental nature. An effective observation program should not impose a method or style of teaching on others. Instead, it should aim to teach teachers how to become effective evaluators of their own teaching by learning to describe and analyze it, and then to decide whether it is accomplishing what they want for themselves and for their students.

Notes

¹The detailed recording that we did as observers in class might have been approximated by video taping, but we decided against using video cameras because of the negative teacher response to anything "mechanical" in their rooms, and because of the built-in restricted focus of a video camera. Actually, video recording a class can be a valuable support in analyzing what goes on, but many of our teachers felt uneasy about being videotaped, or hostile to it.

²Over the past two and one-half years we have developed a series of video tapes on teaching and on the teaching of composition in particular. One tape in the series is "Observing Teaching," which runs fifty minutes. A list of the tapes is available from E. Richardson, Audio Visual Center, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana 47401.

³For a copy of complete evaluations of one semester's work, write to the author c/o English Department, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana 47401.