

Observation Techniques – A Selection

At the New Mentors and New Professional Tutors' briefing day in July 2009 the following examples of observation techniques were discussed. Participants thought that these techniques might be welcomed by established mentors and professional tutors too.

Some student teachers need to be encouraged to use their opportunities for observing established teachers constructively, to help them develop their own practice effectively. If you have a student teacher who feels that she/he is “not really doing anything, just observing” you might find it helpful to print out one of the following techniques, perhaps on a card and give it to her/him. It won't take much time, the instructions to the observer are very clear, and the student teacher may be better able to understand the complex workings of the classroom.

DEVELOPING A 'PRESENCE' IN THE CLASSROOM

Part a) of this activity can be completed individually and part b) with another beginning teacher or colleague

- a) Draw an outline human figure in the middle of a sheet of paper. This is the teacher you are observing. As the lesson proceeds, annotate your diagram with anything that you notice which helps that teacher to teach effectively. You will probably find several things to note about eyes and voice, as well as some about hands, mouth, shoulders, legs and so on. Try to be aware of non-verbal communication or body language, and to look out for signals which convey confidence, self-assuredness, calmness, enthusiasm, and so on - all the things which you will want to emulate in your own physical presence. Be prepared to show the finished product to the teacher you have been observing and discuss your findings. Reflect on the important signals this gives you in considering your own practice in the classroom.
- b) Once you have completed this exercise ask someone to produce the same diagram based on their observation of you.

From Dymoke, S. & Harrison, J. (2008) *Reflective Teaching and Learning*, London: Sage

WHERE IS THE TEACHER DURING A LESSON?

The movement of teachers in the classroom may say a lot about their relationship with pupils, about how they keep an eye on activity and behaviour and about their interest in the pupils.

Draw an A4 map of the classroom in which you are observing. Mark on key points: teacher's desk, pupil desks, whiteboard, projector, etc. Have several copies of the map available. At regular intervals throughout the lesson, e.g. every minute or so, mark on your map where the teacher stands and where they have moved from, to build up a picture of position and movement. At the same time record the time and what is going on in the lesson. This enables you to relate teacher movement to lesson activity. Analyse your map and discuss the following:

- ❖ Where is the teacher most often positioned during the lesson? What possible reasons are there for this: writing on the board; explaining with a projector; helping pupils with written work?
- ❖ Does the teacher keep an eye on all events in the room and, if so, how?
- ❖ Is it done by eye contact from the front or does the teacher move around the room?
- ❖ How did the teacher know that pupils were on task for most of the lesson?
- ❖ Were some pupils given more attention than others? What evidence do you have for this? What explanations are there for this?
- ❖ Was teacher movement related to pupil behaviour in any way? Examine this idea and look for the evidence.
- ❖ Did the nature of the subject matter dictate teacher movement? How might movements change in different subject lessons? Give an example
- ❖ Some teachers use their desk and board and equipment as a barrier between them and pupils; others move in among pupils and desks. Are there 'no-go areas' which the teacher does not visit? Are there similar spaces for teachers which the pupils do not visit?

Reflect on what information your 'map' gives you about 'teacher territory' and 'pupil territory'. Share your information with other student teachers.

ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING

Observe a class and during the lesson write detailed notes about any activities the teacher initiates to assess pupils' understanding of the work. The teacher may use many strategies but the most common include:

- ❖ Direct questions
- ❖ Discussion
- ❖ Asking pupils to present their work to their partner, the whole class or a group
- ❖ Reviewing work on a computer, whiteboard or in exercise books
- ❖ Through role play or display activities
- ❖ Setting another task to test understanding
- ❖ Posing a problem to solve to evaluate and deepen understanding

Also note down what the teacher does to correct misconceptions and misunderstandings or to deal with total lack of understanding and to advance the learning. How does the teacher reassure and motivate? How does the teacher consolidate the learning? Discuss your observations with the teacher.

From Capel, S. Leask, M. & Turner, T. (2009) *Learning to Teach in the Secondary School*, Oxford: Routledge

ANALYSIS OF TEACHER TALK

Complete the following checklist for a section of the lesson or the entire lesson.

Oral Feedback	Examples observed in the lesson	Learning impact on pupils
Giving information		
Correcting errors or misapprehensions		
Praising		
Questioning to check understanding		
Questioning to deepen understanding		
Asking pupils to focus on specific aspects		
Summarising learning		
Encouraging pupil reflection		
Coaching in skills		
Answering pupil questions		
Correcting poor behaviour		
Guiding pupils back on task		
Outlining next learning tasks		

Discuss your observations with the teacher after the lesson

TEACHERS' QUESTIONS

Questions are often classified into 'closed' and 'open'; focusing on recall of fact or using prior knowledge to speculate about events or anticipate new ideas.

What types of questions do teachers ask? Are they simple questions with one-word answers or are they more complex involving explanation? Investigate the frequency of different types of questions. The following questions may help to focus your observation. Does the teacher:

- ❖ Ask mainly closed questions?
- ❖ Ask both open and closed questions according to purpose and circumstance?
- ❖ Accept only right answers?
- ❖ Dismiss wrong answers?
- ❖ Give enough time for pupils to give an answer?
- ❖ Encourage pupils to frame a reply?

How does the teacher respond to right and wrong answers given by pupils?

Discuss your responses and your interpretation of them with the class teacher or your mentor.

From Capel, S. Leask, M. & Turner, T. (2009) *Learning to Teach in the Secondary School*, Oxford: Routledge

LEARNING RESOURCES AND PUPIL LEARNING

Identify the teaching/learning resources and aids used in activities in a lesson you observe and analyse the pupil learning benefits.

The resource	Learning activity	Learning benefit
Text book		
Prepared study guide or worksheet		
Pictures, mind maps, graphics		
Video, CDs, DVDs		
Computer programs including internet		
Tape recording		
Television programme or film		
Experiment		
Games, puzzles, models and activity cards		
Whiteboard		
Electronic whiteboard and digital camera		

Discuss the lesson with the teacher and selected pupils

THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Consider a classroom or teaching space you are going to be teaching in on school experience and how you can use this effectively.

- ❖ Is this space a specialist room or a general classroom? Is the space used mainly by one teacher?
- ❖ Sketch the layout of the space and the seating arrangements. Identify the light source and other features of note such as the board and the teacher's desk/display boards.
- ❖ Note your perceptions of the advantages and limitations of the room layout to pupil and teacher learning and teaching.
- ❖ Describe any displays. Note the different proportions of pupil work and teacher/published material displayed. Are the displays colourful and well cared for? Do the displays prompt pupils to value their own work and the work of other pupils more highly?
- ❖ Comment on whether you would like to be taught in this room and whether the environment promotes the subject and pupil learning. Give reasons for your response.

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ANALYSING THE BEGINNING OF A LESSON

There are three stages to the beginning of a lesson:

1. Outside the classroom
2. Entrance of pupils and settling
3. Introduction to the lesson and possibly a starter activity

Useful prompt questions are:

Outside the classroom

- What procedures were used for pupils gathering outside the classroom?
- Were pupils free to enter as they arrived or did they have to line up?
- Did the teacher wait for the class at the classroom door - were they welcomed on arrival outside the classroom or did the teacher stay inside the classroom until the class were directed to enter?

Settling into place

- Did the pupils sit where they pleased or did they have their own places? Did they wait to greet the teacher standing before they were told to sit down?
- Was a register taken and in what manner?
- What signals did the teacher use to indicate that the lesson had begun?

The beginning of the lesson

- How did the teacher explain the learning objectives and expected learning outcomes of the lesson?
- How long was it before the lesson proper began?
- What problems or issues did the teacher have to deal with before the lesson began? How did they do this?
- In settling the class, what praise or reprimands did the teacher use and how did pupils respond?

If possible discuss this list of questions with another student teacher and add to them. Then undertake the observation. In carrying out this task you should arrive at least five minutes before the beginning of the lesson.

Record your observation using a similar checklist to that drafted below.

Observer name						
Teacher name						
Class name and subjectDate						
Real Time	Place	Pupil Actions	Teacher Actions	Pupil Talk	Teacher Talk	Other Notes

After the lesson discuss with the teacher what you have noted to check for any misunderstandings and to discuss further the strategies you have observed.