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ABSTRACT

This two-part paper offers some guidelines for training in observation skills. Part one describes nine guidelines for observers. Part two delineates 10 tasks in observing and identifies ways of accomplishing them. Tasks include identifying goals of the learning task; gaining evidence of teacher's planning; determining student motivation level; assessing teacher's strategies; determining student interest, morale, commitment; determining the degree to which learning activities are based on student needs; determining the degree to which learning outcomes are being adequately assessed; determining the degree to which learning outcomes are adequate; and determining the degree to which democracy is practiced in the classroom. (PD)

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# TRAINING IN GENERAL OBSERVATION SKILLS

## Some Guidelines

(Prepared by Bernard McKenna, July, 1972)

This paper is divided into two parts. The first presents and describes guidelines for observers. The second delineates some tasks in observing and ways of accomplishing them.

Part of training for observation is training for reliability. Although the activities suggested in this paper may contribute to reliability, they are not specifically aimed at that goal. Reliability activities are dealt with in a separate paper. The nine guidelines listed below are elaborated on in brief paragraphs on each:

1. Begin with a reliable instrument.
2. Study the instrument until you've nearly memorized it.
3. Don't take the instrument into the teaching-learning situation.
4. Observe at a time mutually agreeable to both the teacher and observer.
5. Try to observe the teacher at his best.
6. Reach agreement that the observer might observe the teaching-learning situation several times.
7. Observe both teacher behavior and student behavior.
8. Use all senses in observing: sight, sound, touch, body language.
9. Observe seat work, display tables, books, equipment in use, and bulletin boards.

Begin with a reliable instrument: See the paper "Developing Reliability in Existing Instruments."

Study the instrument until you've nearly memorized it and Don't take the instrument into the teaching-learning situation.

One should have so well in mind the kinds of behavior he intends to look for that as events take place during the observation he can automatically relate them to criteria in the instrument.

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There are several reasons for not taking the instrument into the teaching-learning setting. One is that there is little opportunity in a situation where several activities may be progressing at once to refer to an instrument. Another is that the use of an instrument in the teaching-learning situation can introduce artificiality and create a climate that threatens the teacher. When teachers are threatened in the face of observers, they frequently resort to more formal procedures, review, seat work, and generally behave in ways that reflect an inaccurate picture of the learning climate typical of the situation.

Observe at a time mutually agreeable to the teacher and observer and try to observe the teacher at his best:

Normal (typical) behavior is more likely to occur when the person being observed feels at ease about the observation situation. Surprise or reluctant acceptance of the appointed observation can lead both to poor and atypical performance.

All of us get in a mess sometimes. Even the most skilled teachers find themselves in periods when for one reason or another things go poorly for several days at a time. The teacher should be taken at his word on this and a time selected when he feels things are on an even keel.

A modicum of experience will make it possible for the observer to quickly identify "canned" activities staged for the evaluator.

Reach agreement that the observer might observe the teaching-learning situation several times:

For some evaluation purposes, several short observations are superior to one continuing over a longer period.

Short return observations are particularly useful in avoiding observing for a considerable period an activity which does not lead to increasing the observer's understanding of the classroom situation.

Observe both teacher behavior and student behavior:

What the students are doing, what they are saying, how they are reacting are as important indicators of the wholesomeness of the learning situation as the teacher's behavior. Recent findings on the importance of active involvement of students in the learning process indicate that evaluation take into account student as well as teacher behavior. During the observation, the observer should learn to position himself in a variety of places in the teaching-learning situation so that he can view student activity directly, hear their talk, and watch their expressions.

Use all senses in observing: sight, sound, touch, body language:

Any system of evaluation which attempts to measure several variables in the teaching-learning situation must rely upon a variety of means of gathering data. The skilled evaluator will use all the senses and draw on every aspect of behavior on the part of both students and teachers to strengthen his conclusions.

Observe seat work, display tables, books and equipment in use, and bulletin boards:

The "things" of education and the manner in which they are used to achieve the learning task at hand are important evaluative indices. Evaluators need to learn to be alert to all the displays and materials in the teaching-learning situation and to make associations with individual criteria in whatever system they employ.

Some Specific Tasks in Observing

- I. Ways to Identify Goals of the Learning Task:
  - a. Listen for teacher's directions.
  - b. Listen for responses to students' questions on "why?"
  - c. Look at material being used (texts and other).
  - d. Ask the teacher.

e. Ask for lesson plans (questionable)

f. Other \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

II. Ways of Gaining Evidence of Teacher's Planning:

a. Order and logic with which teacher approaches learning task.

b. Materials available.

c. Equipment available

d. Time allocation.

e. Other \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

III. Ways of Determining Student Motivation Level:

a. Are students self-starting?

b. Does attention to task remain high throughout, fluctuate, diminish toward end?

c. Do students suggest own activities?

d. Other \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

IV. Ways of Assessing Teacher's Strategies:

a. Verbal behavior (use verbal category system).

b. Inductive - deductive.

c. Formal - informal.

d. Active - passive role of students.

e. Other \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

V. Ways of Determining Student Interest, Morale, Commitment:

a. Kind of attitude students radiate.

b. Ask students what they like that they are doing.

c. Ask students how they feel.

d. Learn if they carry things through to completion.

e. Other \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**VI. Ways of Determining the Degree to which Learning Activities are Based on Student Needs:**

- a. Students' ability to be successful with learning tasks assigned to them.
- b. Level of difficulty of material in use.
- c. Use of material reflecting sub-cultures present in the student body.
- d. Degree to which learning activities reflect the real world of the community in which the school is located.
- e. Other \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**VII. The Degree to which Learning Outcomes are Being Adequately Assessed:**

- a. Are tools other than standardized achievement tests in use-- home made evaluative devices, performance tests, attitude inventories and the like?
- b. Are students evaluating themselves?
- c. Are students evaluating each other?
- d. Other \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**VIII The Degree to which Learning Outcomes are Adequate:**

- a. Are the products of student work reflective of the teacher's goals and student ability?
- b. Do students display their work with pride?
- c. Do student verbal and other performances reflect the learning expectations of the situation?
- d. Other \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

IX. The Degree to which Democracy Is Practices in the Classroom:

- a. Do students and teachers plan together?
  - b. Is there shared decision-making on a broad range of matters?
  - c. Do students assume a variety of leadership responsibilities--  
lead small groups, teach other students and the like?
  - d. Other \_\_\_\_\_
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