
THE FORUM

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Comments on Peter Master's “The Etiquette of Observing”

A Reader Reacts. . .

The Dynamics of Classroom Observation: Evening the Odds Through Information

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In a recent article in The Forum (Vol. 17, No. 3, September 1983), Peter Master notes some behaviors that contribute to an etiquette of classroom observing. On a superficial level, most of us will have no quarrel with the niceties that he suggests. On another level, however, there is a danger that the profession may easily slide over the deeper problem of administrative observation: secrecy. In my experience, secrecy (in its various forms—both intentional and unintentional) is the major contributing factor in unsuccessful observations. I would like to suggest ten steps toward a less secretive and therefore more useful observation for administrative purposes.

1. Involve the observer. In informed observation, the observer must do some hard thinking about the reasons for the visit—to this teacher, to this class, at this time. The observer must first clearly decide, and then communicate to the teacher, how the observation will proceed and what the standards of judgment will be. What is the observer's description of “good teaching,” for example? How will its presence or absence be evaluated? Is progress since a previous evaluation to be considered? What form will the feedback take? Will it be a checklist, a narrative, or some combination of the two? I have found that the less observers are explicit about the purpose for the evaluation and the standards for evaluation, the more likely they are to use themselves as standards.

2. Reduce the stakes. Reducing the consequences of a visit can result in a more representative class. No important decision should

rest on a single observation. The immensity of such stakes as hiring or firing reduces the opportunity to observe a typical teacher-student learning situation. When the stakes must be high, the teacher should realize that there is a possibility of requesting an additional visit with another class or another observer.

3. Plan the visit. The number of complicating variables influencing a given class is so great that even planning can help to control only a few. The question, it seems to me, is how good a class can be when all controllable variables are lined up on the favorable side. It is very difficult to imagine a situation where I would purposely try to catch a teacher's worst class, although I can clearly remember many instances of class dynamics being destroyed by unplanned visits. Furthermore, in my experience, the teacher who expects a visit does not teach any better or worse. The teacher may teach more confidently, but not differently in any significant way. Planning the initial visit not only influences the first visit but also increases the odds of representativeness on subsequent visits, which can more easily be unannounced.

Master quite appropriately notes that a teacher and class need a period of time in which to develop a working relationship. Specifically in ESL classes, with all the cross-cultural, age, and motivational heterogeneity as well as late arrivals, class changes, and so on, I have found ten hours to be a reasonable threshold for stability in group cohesiveness. (Other variables can sometimes shorten this time.)

4. Involve the students. As described by Master, the three-way relationship of teacher-student-observer, like any triangle, is bound to have an "odd man out." Too often this outsider group is the students, as he notes. The solution that I have recommended to teachers about to be observed is to involve the students in "collusion" (McDermott and Goldman 1983:155), an interesting educational theory which involves the teacher and students working together to overcome factors which weaken their educational environment. In this case, an outsider threatening to intrude on their learning space is the factor to be overcome. Generally during an administrative observation, the students recognize that the teacher is uneasy, and they too become uneasy without really knowing why. In contrast, when a teacher frankly tells the students that someone important is coming to watch the class in order to observe the teacher, the students are both freed from the fear that they are the target of the observation (a surprisingly common fear!) and committed to helping the teacher "look good." If any rapport at all has developed between teacher and students, they seem to perform as if their futures were

on the line. In this way, the observer is free either to join in as an active participant in the class or to remain the impartial outsider whose presence is less able to influence the class. The alternative, as described by Master, is a performance in which a teacher is trying to teach a class in a situation where the students have been left out. Such a performance has to be ruled out by my very definition of teaching.

5. Discuss the lesson. In informed observation, it is useful to make a distinction between lesson planning and lesson facilitating. In my opinion, the question to be used in evaluating teaching (i.e., lesson facilitating) is: How well does a teacher do what he or she sets out to do? The question is obviously easier to answer when the observer knows what the teacher has set out to do.

As either observer or observed, I consider it useful to have information about the context available in the form of answers to four questions: 1) What are the goals of this lesson today? 2) How does this material fit in with previous learning? 3) How will today's lesson be developed, expanded, or evaluated in subsequent lessons? 4) What special problems might be anticipated?

At a minimum, the answers to these four questions can be written on a single piece of paper and handed to the observer at the beginning of the class. The imagination of the observer is less likely to wander to less essential aspects of the lesson when the greater context of the lesson is clear. If time is available for even a five minute discussion beforehand, the observer can sometimes use neutral comments like "This looks like a lot of material?" or "This is hard to teach." Even such brief comments can give a teacher a feel for the rules or even suggest possible empathy from a teacher who has been there.

6. Share the materials. If at all possible, the teacher who is about to be observed should borrow a book, run an extra ditto, or xerox the page the students will be using in the class. Access to the same materials helps the observer look and feel like a member of the class or conversation group. The visitor not only has the possibility of seeing more accurately through the students' eyes but also has the possibility of participating. The outsider can get a better sense of the appropriateness of such crucial functions as teacher clues. An added bonus is that quick circling of words, or quick markings in the margin of the student materials, facilitates a more specific discussion of the details of the lesson in the later written or oral comments.

7. Involve the teacher. Teachers, the natural ones—both trained and untrained, have an uncanny sense of whether a class has gone well or not. Training seems to help us articulate the “whys,” but the feeling itself is present in even the most novice teacher. It is this most intense feeling of self-evaluation that must first be taken care of before the usefulness of an observation “postmortem” can take over. As an observer, I often begin the discussion with a comment which is fairly neutral, followed by “What did you think of the lesson?” Telling a teacher that a class was good or bad, when the teacher already knows it, not only belabors the obvious but, more importantly, denies the teacher’s role as self-evaluator and gets the discussion off to a bad start. Another useful question is: How does the way this lesson developed influence what you plan to do tomorrow? Not only does this approach allow the observed teacher to take the initiative in this patently unbalanced role situation, but it also allows the teacher to ask for suggestions rather than being given them and being forced to react defensively. In my experience, step seven is one of the most illuminating features of an evaluation designed to measure teacher potential as well as performance.

8. Make the evaluation. Some observers may feel that this approach to informed observation could lead to greater leniency in the evaluation. However, it is my opinion that all the information relevant to a class and a teacher should be considered as part of the evaluation. My feelings on this matter are so strong that I think it is much less useful to write up the evaluation until after the post-observation discussion. We all have bad—even very bad—lessons occasionally. However, if we recognize that a class was unsatisfactory and have some inkling of what to do about it, then somehow that strength should be part of the evaluation. By the same criteria, a teacher who has had an unsatisfactory lesson and either does not realize it or does not know how to begin to patch it up should have that weakness noted in the evaluation too.

For some observers, it is harder to be detached when writing the evaluation after they have talked to the teacher. They may think that mitigating circumstances will subvert all criticism. However, quite the opposite situation is often created. When steps are followed to ensure greater depth, representativeness, and fairness, much more stringent evaluation is justified.

9. Provide feedback. The observed teacher should receive either a copy of the written evaluation or an oral summary of it. As Master also points out, teaching styles cannot help but influence expectations in observations. Therefore, the teacher should be made to feel

comfortable in requesting another observation or even another observer. Though not a necessity, a further nicety in an informed observation is an indication of some positive suggestions to help the teacher develop in any weak areas noted in the observation.

10. Come again? When the preceding signs of courtesy and respect are observed, the visitor can be welcomed back to the class by both the teacher and students. A second-time visitor is less likely to be considered a physical intrusion on learning space. Given the context provided by the previous visit, the follow-up visit can be unannounced. Surprisingly, teachers seem willing to allow five or ten minute follow-up visits when the first visit is perceived as "fair." The chances are, however, that when professional respect has been made obvious through the first nine steps, the initial observation will have been representative enough that another visit will not be necessary except in the most troubling cases.

While I agree with many of the points that Master makes, my concept of "informed observation" gives much greater importance to a knowledge of what is going on in the classroom than to the arrival time of the visitor. In emphasizing the professional courtesies of administrative observation, there is a danger that Master has downplayed professional respect. Professional respect is necessary in order to even the odds that a given observation will be representative and, therefore, useful.



REFERENCE

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