Theory into Practice

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
FOR GEOGRAPHY TEACHERS

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Into the Black Box: Observing Classrooms

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Introduction

Even in an educational world of increased openness and scrutiny, classrooms are still largely the private domain of the teacher. Many long-serving teachers have taught upwards of 40,000 lessons with only a handful observed by other adults. However, classroom observation is becoming increasingly common. Teacher appraisal, novice teacher supervision and increased research into classroom processes have led to a wider scrutiny of classroom practice.

If a lesson is worth observing it should be worth analysing properly. Most teachers would not wish an observer to leave their lesson with a vague comment such as 'Thanks. That was a good lesson'. They would rather have an opportunity to discuss the context and the outcomes of the lesson in a detailed and useful way.

Observation should be an integral part of teaching. We can all learn from watching each other no matter how long we have been teaching. This book examines the contexts, purposes and types of observation, together with their uses. Skilled observation can ultimately raise standards for everyone in the classroom; informing and improving the quality of the activity. Observation without purpose or without sensitive, intelligent analysis, can rightly be resisted by staff who become hostile to the whole observation process.

Recent developments in education have led to schools becoming more committed to school effectiveness and improvement. Such developments include the introduction of the revised national curriculum, publication of performance tables and Ofsted inspection cycles, and the increased autonomy of schools through Local Management of Schools and the Standards Fund. Schools now see themselves as pro-active in self-improvement. As part of this complex process, systematic, professional observation work is being used to inform the work of teachers, departments and schools. It is my belief that classroom observation will become a more integral and accepted process, used regularly by all teachers.

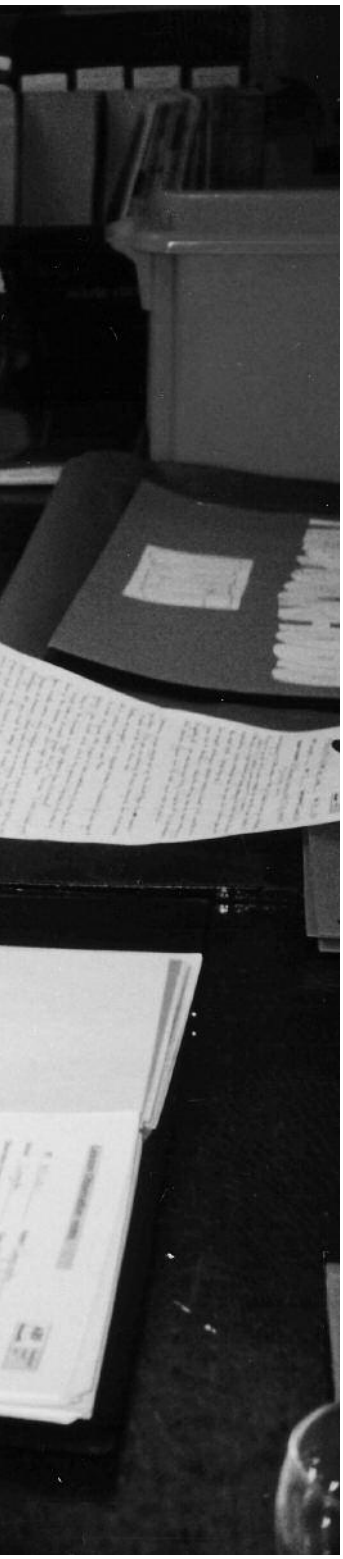
Several useful texts advocate reasons for, and describe techniques used in, observing classrooms, including: Wragg (1999), Tilstone (1998) and Adelman and Walker (1976). This book draws on such research and gives a concise general background to the issues surrounding classroom observation. It then focuses on the ways in which geography teachers and other professionals can benefit from observation practice. Chapter 1 examines some of the practicalities necessary before embarking on any observation work. Chapter 2 describes observation techniques which are useful to any teacher. More specialised, geography-related observations are then discussed in Chapter 3, although teachers of other subjects and the humanities in particular will be able to adapt some sections for their own use. Chapter 4 addresses the reasons why experienced teachers will find themselves undertaking classroom observation. Finally the video lessons, which can be purchased as additional materials to accompany this book, are described in Chapter 5.

Who should engage in classroom observation?

The short answer to this question is all teachers, at all stages of their careers. However, in reality observation is most frequently practised by:

- Novice teachers
- Newly-qualified teachers
- Mentors observing novice teachers
- Initial teacher training tutors observing novice teachers
- Appraisers
- Teachers engaged in action research
- Local education authority and Ofsted inspectors.

It is hoped that this book will encourage more teachers to build regular, focused observation into their work and through so doing raise their standards of teaching and the levels of their students' achievement. Forward-looking geography departments will find that observations, formally scheduled into the year and discussed at subsequent departmental meetings, will highlight best practice and provide data for raising standards and improving the department as a whole.



1: Classroom observation techniques

Working with the class teacher

It may seem an obvious point but before observation takes place it is essential to seek the agreement of the class teacher and to discuss the process. Details of the task, the focus and methodology for observation should be discussed in addition to the time and location of the lesson, and how any feedback will take place. It is important to remember that the ethical foundations of classroom observations are founded upon two issues: firstly, the informed consent by the participants and agreed access to the classroom and, secondly, the appropriate use of information gained from the observation (Barnard, 1998).

Whether students know the observer or not, it is likely that as the lesson progresses they will ask the observer for help with their work or want to talk about what they are doing. It is usually desirable that the observer does not participate in the 'life of the classroom' and this may need to be explained to the class in advance. Any observer, whether known by students or not, is likely to influence what goes on. (Newly-qualified teachers may find their lessons abnormally quiet and well behaved when the Head of Faculty observes the lesson.) Generally, the more 'open' the classroom and the more students are used to having unknown observers in their lessons, the less the observer will influence the usual atmosphere.

Sometimes the observer will benefit from joining in activities and talking to students during the lesson. This is referred to as *participant observation* as opposed to an observer playing no part in the lesson, or *non-participant observation* (see Tilstone, 1998, p. 63; Wragg, 1999, p. 15). Figure 1 is a case study of Jenny, a newly-qualified teacher who used observation as one strategy to improve her understanding of teaching physical geography. During the observation time, she needed to discuss students' understanding of their work on glaciation, therefore some interaction with them was necessary. It is essential that agreement on the observer's role is reached with the classroom teacher before the lesson takes place.

Figure 1: Case study of a newly-qualified teacher's observation to improve her teaching of glaciation.

Jenny was a newly-qualified teacher (NQT) working in Kings Langton Comprehensive School. Recognising that her knowledge of physical geography needed improving, she arranged, through the NQT mentoring tutor at the school, to spend (limited) time working with an experienced geography teacher.

After a discussion with the teacher about the strategies she was adopting to teach glaciation to a GCSE class, Jenny arranged two lessons for observation, two weeks apart. She saw how the teacher put across difficult terminology and concepts and discussed with students what they were finding straightforward, more difficult, helpful to their understanding and interesting about the work.

A further discussion with the teacher, after the unit was completed, built on the observation experience. Finally, Jenny was able to compile a list of ideas which she could use to inform her own work and which she shared with the teacher and her mentor. Jenny was also asked to report back at a subsequent faculty meeting so that other teachers could benefit.

Jenny's findings included:

- Geographers use a complex vocabulary. Ask students to keep a glossary at the back of their exercise books and regularly check students' understanding of terms covered earlier in the year. Cards could be made as new vocabulary arises with the term on one side and the meaning on the other. They could then be put into a class box and 'dipped into' at the ends of lessons to reinforce learning.
- Visual images through slides, video or photographs help students to see and understand complex physical processes and landforms.
- Students learn by doing, so episodes of lessons should include students talking about what they have learnt (e.g. in pairs, students explain different processes to their partner. Noisy, but constructively so!)
- Students need to know content for examinations so use homework for them to learn and then be tested on the work. Reinforce and revisit concepts.
- Try to avoid students copying out diagrams. Most students find this easy but feel they learn little. Teacher (or students) could cut and stick diagrams into their book ready for labelling in later lessons.
- The rules for skills work need to be reinforced each time the skills are used.

Observers familiar to the school may find it difficult to detach themselves from what is going on in the classroom. They may teach some of the students or have already formed beliefs and prejudices about the class, the teacher or the lesson objectives. Unfamiliar observers, while more detached, may take longer to relax into the environment and may misinterpret events.

The observer must be sensitive to the feelings of the observed teacher during the observation and also in any post lesson discussion. Few teachers enjoy being observed. Many feel threatened by observation and perform less effectively. Observers with a higher status than the classroom teacher should take care not to use this to affect the

students or teacher. The pre-lesson discussion, when the observation objectives are being outlined, is an opportunity to help the classroom teacher feel more relaxed about the process.

When novice teachers observe experienced teachers' lessons the observation process is rather different. This often takes place in the early weeks of the course when novice teachers are getting to grips with the multi-dimensional, changeable and busy places that classrooms tend to be. When novice and experienced teachers do not know each other very well the novice will need help to make best use of the process. Any outcomes of the observation will need to be discussed and handled sensitively during feedback to the class teacher, if the novice teacher is going to be able to analyse them effectively. Novice teachers should be encouraged to avoid making assumptions about the teacher's thinking and actions. They should make notes of questions that they wish to ask the teacher and about the situations to which they refer.

Recording observations

Observations can be recorded in various ways. Teachers wishing to research a particular aspect of classroom life often use pro-formas to structure their work. Several pro-formas are included here as exemplars - but observers are also encouraged to adapt or create their own versions which fit the exact purpose of their observation.

Novice and newly-qualified teachers are entitled to written as well as oral feedback. Written feedback can take a variety of forms from pre-drawn pro-formas to unstructured, hand-written notes. Wragg *et al*. (1996) found that 75 per cent of 1000 teachers questioned who were involved in appraisal used freehand notes to record their observations. The observer is then challenged to draw key points from these *ad hoc* statements and to focus points for future action. Many institutions responsible for initial teacher training have a standard observation sheet with predetermined headings, often printed on self-carbonating triplicate sheets. This enables observers to give a copy to the novice teacher, file a copy with the school and keep a copy for themselves.

Written accounts can be descriptive or evaluative. Novice teachers often use descriptive accounts when they observe a more experienced teacher's lesson and to help to focus questions about what went on in the lesson. Descriptive observation notes might look like this:

10.28 Desks rearranged into groups before the bell. Students lined up outside – greeted and asked to enter. Stood behind desks and sat down quietly. Register taken and then recap on last week's lesson followed by objectives (written on board earlier) of today's lesson. (Do you always take register at beginning of lesson? Is this always the best time?)

10.37 Discussion of what makes Burton the same as some towns and different from others. Students thought of many appropriate answers as well as a few silly ones. They engaged well with the activity and were keen to answer and to listen to other students' ideas. The boys near the window took very little interest or part in the activity. (Did you notice?)

Evaluative accounts concentrate on the quality of what is observed. The same part of the lesson described above may be recorded as:

Main focus for lesson = what students are learning.
Very good pre-lesson preparation and classroom organisation.
Students greeted and brought into lesson well.
Register taken effectively although it took considerable time. (Could this have been done once students were on task?)
Recap on last lesson effective although you could have asked the students to tell you more answers. Objectives for this lesson were clear and well addressed.
Discussion on Gateshead went very well with most but not all students taking part. (Which group did not?) You managed to quash silly replies and to praise thoughtful examples very well. I thought this was an episode which really made students think and gained their attention. (It is a pity you didn't encourage the girl who mentioned McDonald's in Moscow to expand.)

Figure 2: Recording observations: advantages and disadvantages of different approaches. Adapted from: Wragg, 1999.

Method	**Advantages**	**Disadvantages**
Written account	Immediate and fresh account available; economic use of time; account may be available immediately after lesson; full picture of events available to observer at time of observation.	Observer must make immediate decisions about what to record, so account may be superficial or unreliable; no chance of 'action replay'; some effects on class behaviour because of observer's presence.
Video cassette	Good visual and sound recording which can be replayed several times; no pressure to make instant decisions; focus can be on teacher only or on individual or a group of lessons; lesson can be discussed with participants watching.	Loss of information such as events out of camera shot, smells and temperature; effects on class of presence of camera; increase in time needed for analysis.
Audio cassette	Good sound record can be replayed several times for discussion, analysis, or corroboration of written account; radio microphone can be used to obtain high quality record of what the teacher says; observer's comments can be recorded simultaneously on twin-track tape; allows lesson to be transcribed by audio typist.	Loss of important visual cues such as facial expression, gestures, body language, movement; sound quality can be poor without radio microphone, especially if acoustics are poor; difficult to identify individual children who speak; analysis time substantially increased.
Transcript	Enables really detailed analysis at leisure; permits analysis by several people not necessarily in the same place as text can be distributed easily; person being observed can work on specific aspects of language, such as choosing good examples of analogies, using appropriate vocabulary.	Loss of important visual and sound cues such as tone of voice, volume of noise, emphasis; high cost in time and money to have lessons transcribed (one lesson might fill twenty or thirty pages); difficulty of deciding what to focus on if numerous transcripts are collected.

Many observers find a mixture of description and evaluation to be a natural way of presenting their thoughts. Whatever method is chosen the main purpose(s) of the observation needs to be clear in the observer's mind. This allows targets to be set, progress to be monitored and a more systematic approach to 'learning to teach' to take place. Observers can comment using a number of predetermined headings such as preparation, pace and timing, or they can focus on one or two aspects of the lesson, as agreed previously with the novice teachers.

Most of the observations described here are recorded through a written account. Sound and video recordings with or without a transcript may be more thorough and give more detail, particularly for research purposes. Figure 2, adapted from Wragg (1999), summarises the advantages and disadvantages of each type.

The observation debrief

Whether observers are debriefing a novice teacher, a member of their department or a deputy head, the debrief must be handled professionally and with sensitivity. Teachers live constantly with the notion of 'failure' as well as 'success'. Because of the unpredictability, fragility and multi-dimensional nature of classrooms the actual outcomes of many lessons often do not meet the planned outcomes. Classroom 'failures' are public, particularly when an observer is present.

Some immediate feedback should be given even if brief. The quality of discussion is important. Many teachers' opening remarks after an observation begin with statements such as 'Was that OK?' or 'Sorry, that didn't go quite to plan' or 'That was a bit boring wasn't it?' Observers frequently begin with 'That was fine' or 'Well done, that went well.' Such comments must be followed up further.

Detailed discussion of the lesson findings with the teacher is a matter of courtesy but should also provide further information to add to the observation notes. The conversation may take place later that day or the next, since the observer or observed may need to rush off to another part of the school to teach. This pressure on time can lead to an observer simply handing over the written notes to the teacher with a comment about arranging a discussion later. Such notes rarely tell the whole story and to be most effective they do need to be explained and elaborated upon. This debrief is also a useful way to help less experienced teachers develop their ability to reflect and evaluate their lessons. Figure 3 offers guidance for effective debriefs. Some observers shrink from raising issues while others attack with judgements that may be over hasty and achieve little. Achieving a balanced feedback is crucial.

Some able novice and newly-qualified teachers are insufficiently challenged towards the end of their teaching practice or during the first year of teaching and should be encouraged to reflect on alternative teaching techniques and strategies. Although many teachers are preoccupied with the 'performance' and delivery of the lesson, the main focus of most observation work should be 'what are the students learning?' and 'how effectively are they learning?'

Figure 3: The effective debrief. Adapted from: Institute of Education, 1999; Smyth, 1991; University of Birmingham, 1998b.

Timing and environment

Debriefs are best done on the same day as the lesson or the next day if this cannot be arranged.

An informal and friendly atmosphere should be created, away from interruptions and eavesdroppers.

Observers should be aware of body language and show sensitivity to the observed. They should bring in their own weaknesses and anecdotes to avoid appearing to be the model teacher.

Describe	What did you do during the lesson? The observer can also describe what has been seen or experienced in the lesson from his or her perspective.
Inform	What pleased you about the lesson? What did it mean – to the students, to you? What do you think the students learnt in that lesson? How do you know? The observer can also offer his or her perspective on this.
Confront	How did you come to do it (plan it) like that?
Reconstruct	How could you do things differently? Are there alternative ways?

Structuring the debrief

Observers should focus on:
- the teacher's successes or achievements in the classroom
- the action taken by the teacher to achieve those things
- the teacher's reasons for taking the action he or she did.

Observers should generally avoid:
- a generalised question such as 'Do you always introduce the topic in that way?'
- closed questions, in which you attempt to test your own ideas, e.g. ' Did you cut short the question and answer session because you thought you were getting confused?'; 'Can you tell me why you cut short the question and answer session?' is likely to produce a more illuminating response.
- moving on to the next question too quickly. Don't be afraid of saying 'Could you tell me a little more about that?'
- asking 'Why didn't you ...?'as this puts teachers on the defensive and leads them to justify their teaching rather than to reveal their thinking.

At some point, time should be spent in analysing the debrief and feedback. The following questions should be considered:

- Who does the talking? Mainly you? Mainly the student? Shared?
- What are the benefits of doing most of the talking yourself? What are the disadvantages?
- What are the advantages of verbal compared with written feedback?
- What are the advantages of written feedback?
- Is the discussion focused on targets and target settings?

Adapted from: University of Birmingham, 1998a, p. 37.

Ethical implications

Davies (1985) argues that the consent of students (and their parents) should be sought before an observer gathers data in a classroom. This, he believes, is an ethical issue rarely considered by classroom observers. Some schools are now writing and issuing policy documents including statements to parents that cover the purpose of observation work and the circumstances under which observations are likely to take place.

School **managers** involved in observation processes need to consider the following points:

- Class disruption should be minimised during observations.
- Care must be taken that one group of students is not over-observed.
- Teachers should not be overloaded with observations at inappropriate times.
- The way external observers are perceived; whether they are seen as valued consultants, welcome guests or tiresome gatecrashers.
- Teachers and management should also gain advantage from any external observers' work.

Classroom **observers** need to be:

- very well briefed about the purpose and management of their observation work;
- clear about their involvement with students, participant or non-participant; and
- aware that their chosen methods of recording e.g. stop watch or video camera, may have an abnormal effect on the behaviour of the students.

Finally, **teachers** and **learners** should be:

- clearly informed about the purpose of the visitor;
- aware that the visitor may alter the normal character of the classroom; and
- active in deriving any benefit from the observation debrief.