

Classroom observation

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As with all research methods, most is gained when aims and procedures are clearly defined before implementation.

Here is what Herbert Altrichter, Peter Posch & Bridget Somekh wrote in the 1993 edition of *Teachers Investigate their Work*¹

http://www.cad.unam.mx/programas/actuales/maestrias/maestria_form_cn_ec_SEIEM_2011/00/02_material/02_toluca/mod1/archivos/20_Teachers_investigate_their_work.pdf

Preparing to observe

Observation always involves selecting from a stream of events. So that this does not become a matter of chance, consider the following questions in advance:

- What are you going to observe? Is it the sequence of events, a pupil's behaviour, or one specific aspect of your own behaviour? The more limited the focus of observation, the more precisely it can be observed. However, the more limited the focus of observation, the more likely it is that the outcomes will shed light on only a small, possibly even minor, aspect of the original research question.
- Why are you carrying out the observation? What are the assumptions and expectations on which it is based? Observing is not a mere registering, but also a theoretical reconstruction of a situation. The observer's assumptions and expectations are theoretical tools for this reconstruction. They are her or his 'pre-judices' (pre-judgements), but striving for objectivity in observing does not mean that prejudices can be completely avoided; rather they should be clarified as far as possible, so that the part they play in producing an understanding can be taken into account at the stage of interpretation.
- When will the observation be carried out, and how long will it take? It is particularly important for a teacher-researcher to decide beforehand at which times in the lesson it is likely to be possible to devote attention to observation.

¹ Altrichter, A., Posch, P. & Somekh (1993) *Teachers Investigate their Work*. Routledge: London.

The simple method suggested below is a useful way of preparing to observe, both to increase sensitivity and to focus the observation on a chosen research question.

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GETTING TUNED INTO DOING OBSERVATIONS

1. First of all write down the focus for your observation (e.g. 'the level of pupils' oral participation').
2. Write down what you would like to see in relation to this focus (what kinds of evidence do you hope to get?).
3. Write down what you suspect you will probably observe (e.g. 'Only A—if anybody at all—will ask a question without being asked'). In doing this, try to be as precise as possible (e.g. 'B is going to call out an answer without putting up her hand' instead of 'B is going to behave badly').
4. Choose one of the expectations listed above which relates closely to your research question and which you expect to be able to observe during the lesson you have chosen.
5. Decide what is the best way of writing notes of some or all of your observations (during the lesson or afterwards).

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Equally, during the observation situation it is important to work on the basis of an established action plan in order to gather objective information

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NOTES ON LESSON OBSERVATIONS

What is important in writing good lesson notes? Here are some suggestions, modified after Grell and Grell 1979:297.

1. Describe what happens as precisely as possible:
 - what teacher and pupils say—use quotations;
 - what teacher and pupils do—be as precise as possible ('pupil A is in tears' instead of 'pupil A is sad'); What exactly is the task set? What page of the book the pupils are working on, etc.
2. Use abbreviations for words that occur frequently (e.g. we use T=teacher, P=pupil not identified by name, PP=several pupils, initials for identified pupils, B=blackboard, HW=homework). Draw a seating scheme with the pupils' abbreviated names on it, or a number for each pupil so that you can easily identify him or her.
3. Check your notes after the observation in order to correct mistakes, make things clearer, and add additional remarks. Possible additions are:
 - your feelings about specific events (friendly/unfriendly, encouraging/discouraging);
 - ideas which came into your mind, e.g. things which might have been done differently.

4. Intensive observation throughout a whole lesson is very exhausting, so it's a good idea to alternate intensive phases with phases that demand less attention (e.g. 5 minutes trying to note as much as possible followed by 5 minutes taking brief, summarising notes). One way of changing the demands on your concentration is to change the focus (e.g. observing one group in depth and the rest of the class more cursorily).
5. There is a need to distinguish between descriptive and interpretative reporting. Descriptive reporting describes the behaviour 'as it is' (what has been said and done) with as little explanation, judgement and evaluation as possible. This kind of reporting refers to the lowest step of the 'ladder of inference' (see M12). Interpretative reporting clarifies the effect of an event or a piece of behaviour on the observer (the feelings which were evoked, how she or he understood it, etc.).
6. A helpful way of ensuring that you record both descriptions and interpretations is to fold your paper down the middle and use the left-hand side for descriptions and the right-hand side for interpretations and personal responses.

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In times of multiple and multi-sensory impulses objective focus is more important than ever. An updated overview is provided in the latest edition of "Lehrerinnen und Lehrer erforschen ihren Unterricht²".

² Altrichter, A., Posch, P., & Spann, H. (2018) *LehrerInnen und Lehrer erforschen ihren Unterricht*. Heilbrunn: Klinkhardt