

Planning

How to Observe a Class

Before the Class

Assuming there has not been an opportunity for a pre-conference, do the following before the class:

1. See if you can get the book, the problems, the story, or whatever materials the student will be working on so you can look them over before the class.
2. Arrive a few minutes early if it's a secondary class and stand near the teacher as the students are coming in.
3. Make a map of the room (sometimes made during the class):
 - Desk set-up
 - Visuals (easel, Smartboard, etc.)
4. Set up notes using the RBT template as a guide. Your notes should:
 - Distinguish teacher talk from student talk
 - Distinguish notes about action and artifacts from talk
5. Scan the room, read the walls/boards, e.g.:
 - Is there a posted objective?
 - What is the homework?
 - Is there an essential question?
 - Which things are there for student use and which are just for show?
 - Are materials relevant to the content posted (e.g., vocabulary and word analysis lists in an English classroom)?



During the Class

When you have a chance, take a few minutes to do a quick-read of the story or do part of the exercises the students are doing or some items in the problem set yourself to see what's in it.

Where to position yourself during class and what kinds of interactions to have:

- Sit among the students so you can:
 - Look to your left and right and see exactly what they are doing
 - Hear what they are saying
 - See what they are writing
- Join groups of students who are doing group work so you can see:
 - Their interaction
 - Who is doing the talking or doing the work
 - Whether they are able to do the task
 - What the confusions seem to be
- Move to different places in the room so you can collect data from more students.
- Follow the teacher unobtrusively when he/she goes around to talk to individuals and groups so you can get the dialogue in your notes.

What kind of data to collect:

- Ask a selection of students:
 - What they are doing and why
 - About the content they are working on (e.g., *What are the main ideas or meaning of certain vocabulary words that are key to the content?*)
 - How they are doing with the tasks they are assigned
- Write down literal quotes of what the teacher says and what students say both to the teacher and each other:
 - Be literal
 - Get keywords
 - Use abbreviations and other personal conventions to be able to keep up
- Put time stamps in the margins at least once a page, and whenever the activity changes.
- Write down without comment the literal description of physical artifacts (*“notebook on the radiator with notes and assignment for returning absent students”*) or events (*“students move to carousel charts” “head down” “goal-setting chart” “on chart students are making of words associated with jocks: cool, athletic, stupid, popular, good students...”*).
- Note on your map who speaks, is called upon, or is doing other actions you want to record.
- When you leave the class, take a sample of the student materials with you (book, problems, lab manual, novel, etc.).



After the Class

Find a place where you will not be disturbed for 10-15 minutes.

Clean up notes:

- Make handwriting legible.
- Fill in things you remember but didn't get down during the class.

Analyze the notes:

- Replay the class in your head like a movie.
- Note important moments/events.
- Note why these salient moments/events are important, that is, what was accomplished (what the impact on students' learning was).
- Note how long various chunks of the class took.
- Label behaviors and write questions you have in the margins (or wherever your conventions indicate).

Analyze content and objectives:

- Look at the materials you have brought back from the class (book, problems, lab manual, novel, etc.).
- Figure out what the lived, stated, and worthy objectives are. Do they align?

Plan for the Conference

Choose a focus:

From what you have identified in your notes, decide what to focus on in the conference that will be most important for the teacher and most beneficial to the students.

Decide how you'll structure and sequence your conference:

1. Replay with highlights (*"Let's go through the class."*).
2. Pick a focus from the beginning (*"There are some patterns that will show up as we go through the class that I want to alert you to in advance."*).
3. Start with the teacher's focus (*"Here's the data you were curious about."*).
4. Launch an inquiry (*"Here's something I was wondering..."* or *"Any questions you'd like to pose as we begin to go over the class?"*).
5. Identify a concern (*"I'm concerned about the level of student confusion, and I'd like to come up some new ways for you to approach this concept/some of your students..."*).



Identify the materials you and the teacher should look at and let the teacher know, e.g.:

- Student work
- Ticket to leave
- Learning log
- Quiz results
- Sample essays

Think about useful resources for the teacher:

- Curriculum documents
- Videos
- Articles

Think about next, high-leverage steps:

- Who hasn't gotten it yet and what do they need?
- How might we address the confusions we discovered?
- What gaps need to be filled?
- What interesting possibilities did we find?
- What would we change?

What does it take to do this well?

Practice.

Deep and continuous study of the knowledge and skills of professional teaching so you can notice where important teaching and learning behaviors:

- Are present (*"There was a clear pattern of making students thinking visible."*)
- Are absent (*"Students needed to stop the discussion here and summarize main points."*)
- Might have been missed (*"This would have been a good time to use Modeling Thinking Aloud."*)

