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Don't Neglect the Third Column- Environmental Cues

When observing teachers, our natural tendency is to keep our eyes on the action. This "action focus" is a natural function of our brain's attention systems. We are drawn to focus first on what is moving, what is changing, or what is happening. Noticing action is an important element in survival and, of course, survival is the brain's first task. Collecting artifacts, recognizing patterns, and analyzing cause-effect in "classroom action" are important. Two of the three columns in the *LCS Observation Fieldbook* are devoted to teacher and student action.

The action in the classroom tells a compelling story, but an incomplete story. In a novel, the reader must appreciate the setting to fully understand the action of the characters. Likewise, keen observers of instruction must train themselves to look beyond the action and focus also on the classroom environment. The third column of each *LCS Observation Fieldbook* page, labeled Environmental Cues, is devoted to gathering information to describe and understand the effects of classroom environment.

Tips for observing classroom Environmental Cues and collecting artifacts

1. Don't write anything down for the first two or three minutes. Take a moment to let the action and the setting of the classroom "wash over you." Try to get a sense of how the classroom's mood, climate, feel, culture, pace, and space are affecting the teaching and learning.
2. After a time of observation, notice the classroom's social/emotional state. Look for how the teacher and students interact. Are interactions tense or relaxed, formal or informal, collaborative or competitive, forced or natural? Are students mostly interacting with each other, with the teacher, or is there a balance of both? Is there a feeling of inclusiveness for all students or are some clearly more a part of the action than others.
3. Remember to look for the three C's.
 - Culture- the unwritten "ways we do things around here"
 - Climate- the classroom's mood or "local weather"
 - Community- the degree of inclusiveness or "family atmosphere"

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4. Refer to the LCS principle Enriched Environments (See pages 103-110 from the LCS Teacher workbook) for additional social/emotional elements.
 - Unconditional Positive Regard (UPR): The degree to which students believe their teacher genuinely likes them and is glad they are present.
 - Relaxed Alertness: An optimal learning state produced when stress levels are high enough to cause students to be focused, aware, alert and keenly engaged, but not so high as to induce anxiety, threat, or tension.
 - Special Treatment: A strategy for enhancing a student's sense of self-worth and belonging by granting an unexpected or undeserved measure of favor.
 - Positive Rituals: Any regular and repeated action that carries with it a positive message and is seen as a sign of group membership or inclusiveness.
 - More collaboration, less competition: situations that call for teamwork toward a common goal or to overcome an obstacle rather than individual work that pits students against one another.
 - Note-Taking Tip: *In the space provided in the 3rd column, write three descriptive words or phrases that describe the classroom's social/emotional environment.*
5. Do a 360° check of the room's physical characteristics. Notice where things are positioned, what's on the walls, or how the classroom may be divided into zones. Note how students are positioned relative to the teacher and to each other. Is the space clean or cluttered, bright or dim, spacious or cramped?
6. Refer to the LCS principle Enriched Environments (See pages 103-110 from the LCS Teacher workbook) for additional physical elements.
 - Attractive. Classroom elements that grab and hold students' attention. (Not a synonym for "pretty")
 - Engaging. Classroom elements that invite active participation from students. (a button to push, a vote to cast, a question to answer, a flap to look under)
 - Changing. Classroom elements that are temporary since they are matched to a particular activity or curriculum focus. (Here today gone tomorrow)



Imagine you have a camera with a wide angle and a telephoto lens. Look around the room while imagining changing between the two lenses.

• **Note-Taking Tip:** *In the space provided in the 3rd column, make a sketch of the classroom layout.*

• **Note-Taking Tip:** *In the space provided in the 3rd column, write three descriptive words or phrases that describe the classroom's physical environment.*

7. Imagine you have a camera with a wide angle and a telephoto lens. Look around the room while imagining changing between the two lenses. See the background (wide angle) and then see the details (telephoto). Try to see a link between the two views.
How is the background affecting how the details unfold?

• **Note-Taking Tip:** *In the space provided in the 3rd column, labeled Environmental Cause-Effect, detail any significant links you notice between the physical and social/emotional environment and the actions of teachers and/or students.*

Insights in environmental cause-effect can be particularly valuable feedback to teachers since it is difficult for the teacher to both create a particular aspect of the classroom environment and also watch closely for all the effects. An extra set of eyes are needed to see the entire picture.

To be as keen an observer as possible, and as valuable a coach as possible, build your capacity to recognize meaningful patterns of instruction. These patterns reveal themselves not only in the classroom actions of teachers and students but also in the less obvious but powerful realm of the classroom environment.

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