



7 Principles of Active Observation

Great teacher developers are first great observers. They enjoy being in and around classrooms and know their way around once inside. They see more, understand more, probe more, focus more, and move around more. They pose more questions, test more hypotheses, and collect more artifacts. In essence, they gain more useful information per minute of observation than other observers.

Based on observations of thousands of classrooms and observers, here is a set of principles that can guide toward more active and skillful observation. Principles are not laws and therefore should sometimes be ignored. They are stronger than suggestions, however, and are offered as a set of guidelines for making the most of every minute of classroom observation time.

Principles of active observation:

- 1. Stay on your feet.** Except for occasionally sitting next to students to see their work more clearly, observers strike a better vantage point by standing up. There are many advantages to standing. The line of sight is better to see more student work. Once standing, moving is easier and less obtrusive. Moving around the classroom provides the observer with different angles and observation opportunities. Standing is a more active body position than sitting, so there is more energy available for observing. Observations are typically shorter and more productive when the observer remains standing.
- 2. Don't worry too much about interrupting the action.** As soon as an observer enters a classroom environment, it has been interrupted. Observing anything alters, if only slightly, the thing that is being observed. Too often, I think, observers attempt to be a fly on the wall or say "just pretend I'm not here." Of course, one should avoid affecting the teacher's intentions or distracting students while they are engaging in important work. Beyond this, however, observers do well to embrace the fact that they are now a part of the action and not an inert observer behind a one-way glass.
- 3. Delay the focus on details.** An observer's first instinct is to follow the action and immediately begin noticing details about what the teacher or students are doing. It is beneficial to resist this urge and, instead, take some time to orient oneself to the classroom's physical and social environment. An observer who first notices the contextual field of the classroom will be able to make more meaningful and insightful observations of the actions and details that follow.

To this end, allow two or three minutes at the beginning of an observation to let the classroom climate and environment become more apparent. If taking notes, don't write anything down for a few moments. Walk around the classroom and try to take



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it all in—what is on the walls, on the board, on posters, on the screen? Get a sense of the energy flow in the classroom. How engaged are students? How energetic is the teacher? How are people interacting with one another? How are students interacting with learning materials? How is the seating arranged? Mentally generate a few descriptive words that illustrate the gestalt of the classroom... active, self-directed, high-energy, organized, intentional, warm, safe, etc.

- 4. Enter as a visitor, not an owner.** Administrators certainly have the authority to enter into and out of classrooms at anytime, with or without permission or warning. However, it is best not to overtly claim this right. The most skillful observers treat each teacher's classroom as sacred ground. They understand that the classroom space is a home away from home for students and their teacher. They enter with respect, courtesy, and humility.

It is a nice touch to make eye contact with the teacher upon entering the classroom and, at an appropriate time, say something like "Thanks for having me in for a few moments." It is also important to make contact with the teacher as one leaves the classroom. A simple "thank you," thumbs up, or "I enjoyed watching you and your students work today." sends a message of professional respect. Even as one observes students at work, it is a kind gesture to ask "May I listen in for a moment? Or, "Do you mind if I watch you work that problem?" Most teachers create a personal space on and around their desk area where they may display family photos, keep their plan book, and store other personal items. The best observational etiquette is to stay away from this area, except to quickly leave a note of thanks or a bit of positive feedback.



- 5. Maintain focus and intensity.** Observing skillfully is not watching someone else work. It is work! Even ten or fifteen minutes of active observation can be exhausting, as observers look, listen, move, question, jot notes, draw sketches, search for clues, and gather artifacts to enhance feedback. It is affirming to teachers to have someone engage intensely and substantially in the observation process. When observers are seen to be working intensely on the teacher's behalf, and have substantial notes, artifacts, and insights ready to share it adds credibility to the feedback or coaching session that may follow.

Some practical suggestions: Don't multi-task. Teachers are great at sneaking a peek at the observer. It sends the wrong message if the observer is caught daydreaming, or checking phone messages or e-mail. Also, be intentional concerning non-verbal behavior. Communication experts say that as much as 70% of the content of a message is communicated non-verbally. An observer's posture, facial expression, eye contact, gestures, movement, and position communicate the observer's internal state to the teacher. Since observers usually can't converse with teachers during an observation, non-verbal communication becomes more important. Observers do well to stand upright, look alive, smile, laugh, appear curious, and be seen enjoying the process.



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- 6. Observe both field and ground.** Human attention is analogous to a camera with two lenses. The wide angle lens observes the field, the big picture, the macro events, and the gestalt of the classroom. The telephoto lens captures the ground, the details, the fleeting looks and expressions, and the individual responses. Most novice observers focus their attention somewhere in the middle, neither wide enough to capture the big picture nor narrow enough to appreciate the details.

An accomplished photographer often cycles between wide angle—to survey the field, and telephoto—to emphasize the interesting detail. This cycling between field and ground is an effective way to capture the action of a classroom. During a fifteen minute observation, a skilled observer might scan the field three or four times, each time choosing a different element of the ground on which to focus intently to capture the small details that often lead to valuable insights. In this type of observation, where the observer is searching for meaningful insights to share back with the teacher, it is important to take the time to drill down for a while into a single student's actions, reactions, or non-verbal cues, to look carefully at students' work, not fleetingly. It is important to look expectantly for insights revealed as fine details, subtle patterns, or hidden clues. An often productive technique is to look away from the action and past the obvious. For example, one might watch a single student while the teacher is talking to find clues to indicate the level of engagement and understanding. Or, as the teacher circulates throughout the classroom, one might observe the group of students the teacher just left, instead of always following the teacher's direct action. This might uncover valuable insights to share with the teacher on the residual effects of her circulation.



- 7. Practice frequent, short duration observations.** Unless required by law or policy, keep most observations relatively short. Ten to twenty minutes is plenty of time to collect many more artifacts and insights than one could possibly share with the teacher. Remember that, in an observation, duration and intensity are inversely related. So, observers are able to keep a higher energy level and greater observational focus throughout a shorter session than a longer one. Shorter observations also create the possibility for more frequent observations. Schools whose teachers report more frequent observations tend to have a more positive, professional culture and administrators in these schools are seen as more credible instructional leaders.



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