

Observation

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Why observation is important

Observation is commonly used in education as a tool to support understanding and development. It is one of two common ways of getting information which can help us make sense of educational situations, gauge the effectiveness of educational practices, and plan attempts for improvements. The other way is by asking people. The shortcomings of one way can be offset somewhat by using the other, and they are therefore often used together.

Daily, practitioners use their ability to observe—to notice even very subtle clues to what might be happening inside learners' heads—as a tool in managing the learning/teaching process. Some also use it more consciously to manage their own development of this responsive expertise.

What is meant by observation

Observation does not just mean 'seeing'. It is most often used to include 'hearing', as well as using other senses to collect information (for example, on temperature or smell). In real life the acts of perceiving, interpreting, assessing, and reacting, for example, can often seem simultaneous (think, for instance, about those processes in our decisions to cross a busy road). So for some, observation can mean all of these things together.

Furthermore, in phrases such as 'doing an observation', the meaning of the term 'observation' extends beyond the central activity to the events that surround it, such as pre- and post-observation discussions of one type or another.

However, in education observation is used for many reasons. Most of these see observation as obtaining, and often recording, what we notice, in order to support the elaboration of starting points for further work. These starting points are most usefully *descriptive* accounts ('the boy yawned') rather than *interpretative* (the boy was bored), or *evaluative* (that was boring), whatever the eventual use of the observation.

Types of observation

There are four main purposes for observation: for professional development, for training, for evaluation, and for research. The different purposes of observations will have an impact on who observes and how often, who the other participants (or observees) are, who learns or benefits from the information collected, the nature of the learning, the

breadth of focus, where observations occur, and what happens before and after observations.

Observation for development

This category includes observations where an observee makes (perhaps with support) their own decisions about how to use the observer and their observations. This person is most often the teacher of an observed class or classes. In working with the observer's perspective, a teacher can develop not only their ability to notice but also their pedagogic reasoning, so that student learning will be more effectively supported. Peer-observation, all in-service, and most pre-service mentoring, as well as various forms of practitioner research (such as 'Action', 'Exploratory', or 'Classroom') most often fall into this category. Pre-observation discussions will centre on what the observee wishes the observer to notice (Williams 1989). This may be more or less specific, depending on stages in development spirals. In post-observation meetings, the discussion is led by the observee (Malderez 2002). The observer only offers information when invited. The main learner decides whether or not to publicize in any way the information or learning gained from the experience. The observer respects this right.

Observation for training

This category includes observations where the focus of learning is on 'skilled practitioner behaviour'. Typically decisions about what should be learnt are made by people other than the trainees. Trainees may be the observers of experts at work, or be observed making attempts at skilled behaviours. Most often, observation for training is used in pre-service situations, although it may also feature in in-service development work, when identified as a need by the learner. There will almost always be a pre-determined focus for observation, and often a designed observation schedule to go with it. Post-observation discussions will be led by the trainer-as-expert and 'feedback' (as descriptions, interpretations, or evaluations) given by the trainer and/or other observers.

Observation for evaluation

This category groups observations where the main purpose is for the observer to make a judgement. Trainers may need to use observation for this purpose as part of a decision-making process about whether trainees can pass courses. People with managerial responsibilities may use it within staff appraisal systems, and to guide strategic staff development planning. These 'managers' may be from within institutions or from an external cross-institutional inspectorate. Project-related researchers may use observation for evaluation to assess impact and guide further planning. Typically, observations for evaluation will be multi-focused, and use quite complex checklists or schedules. In contrast to the previous categories, the main 'learner' here is the observer, and the paymasters to whom they report. Pre-observation meetings, if they occur, tend to focus on procedures and the schedule being used, and in post-observation the results of the assessment are given either in face-to-face 'feedback' sessions or written reports.

Observation for research

This category includes any observations which are carried out for the main purpose of creating public theories. The researcher is the main learner, and although ultimately most researchers would like their

theorizing to make a positive difference to practices, the focus is initially on generating descriptions and plausible explanations of educational phenomena. Data are gathered using carefully designed and focused observation schedules. Consenting observees will often be given general information about the observation beforehand, but will generally have to wait some considerable time before being informed about the outcomes, which are almost always made public.

Conclusion

Observation is a much more complex area than might at first appear. This is partly because any individual observer's perception is naturally selective and different from any other's. In addition, the historically widespread use of observation for evaluation only, (even when supposedly as part of 'training' or even 'development'), has led to an understandable reluctance of many to being observed. This is perhaps because of the threat to self-esteem, and/or because being told about others' judgements has been minimally helpful. (There is no direct link between public theories and an individual teacher's practice.)

Finally, the same person can wear different observer 'hats'. Many of us are called upon to use different kinds of observation in our work. It seems therefore very important to be clear about the purpose of each observation, and the related issues as discussed above, every time we observe or are observed.

References

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Further reading

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