

Classroom Observations
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When you observe a colleague's teaching, here are a number of mechanical things you might discuss. Please note that what follows has to do with the presentation of a lesson, more or less regardless of the type. The questions listed below have been divided into four categories: Organization of the Lesson, Instructional Methods, Substantive Concerns, and Classroom Management.

Organization of the Lesson:

- ***Is there a written lesson plan that clearly and logically outlines what the instructor is going to do, how she plans to do it, and what her students are expected to learn?***
How formal or informal, how lengthy, and how detailed this is will vary but this is not the same thing as simply having lecture notes written out.
- ***Is there a clear beginning to the lesson that captures students' interest and lets them know what they should have learned by the end of the class or activity?***
There are two aspects to consider. First, research on learning indicates that students learn best if their instructor follows the advice often given to public speakers: tell them what you are going to say, say it, then tell them what you said. Here is a really uninspired example: "I want to examine the U.S. government's decision to drop the atom bomb on Hiroshima; by the end of our discussion you should be able to explain and critique the reasoning behind that decision." (This allows the instructor at the end of the class to do a quick review by asking one or more students to state the reasoning behind that policy decision or another student or two to summarize the critique.) Second, there is also research that indicates students are more likely to attend to the lesson if their interest is grabbed at the beginning of the class with a provocative question, an illustrative story or example, a puzzle to be solved, a demonstration of some sort, etc. Using the atom bomb example, an obvious beginning might consist of a film clip of the bomb blast and after effects.
- ***When, and if, directions are given, are they sufficiently detailed and understandable so students know exactly what is expected of them? (Does the instructor check for understanding?)***
Lawrence students have had a lot of experience in school and are a pretty bright lot, so they are usually really quick to figure out what you want. Nevertheless, research on teaching suggests that giving unclear directions almost always interferes with learning and is one of the things that students often comment on when asked to evaluate teachers (including college professors!).
- ***Are transitions between activities smooth and easily followed?***
This is sometimes referred to as the flow of the class. I encourage our student teachers to plan and even write out transitions since they can have such a strong effect on learning. The idea is to bring one activity (discussion, subject, etc.) to a clear conclusion, perhaps with a quick summary statement or question, connect it to what is to follow in some manner, and then introduce what you are going to do next (etc.).
- ***Is there an ending to the class (or activity) that brings closure and sums up or reviews what students have learned or done?***
Instructors should ask themselves, in planning the class, how will they know whether their students have learned what they were supposed to have learned? There are countless ways to accomplish this, ranging from asking a few concluding questions, having students give summaries, or simply reviewing

key points, to having students write down on a card to hand in, the two or three most important things they learned that day. (A variation of the latter method is to have students write down what they think is the key point or idea periodically throughout the class.) The end of the class might also be the time when the instructor gives students an idea of what they will be doing during the next class, drawing a connection between what they've just covered and what they will be covering.

Instructional Methods:

- ***Is the instructional method(s) appropriate for the lesson's objective(s)?***
For example, if it seems essential that the students produce knowledge, discourse or artifacts (which is one of the aspects of what researchers refer to as authentic learning), then lecturing generally is not an appropriate method. If, on the other hand, the purpose of the class is to deliver factual information (with which they might later do something else) then working in small groups might not be the most efficient means to accomplish this task.
- ***Does the lesson move quickly enough to hold pupils' interest but not so fast as to lose all but the most able ones?***
Learning to read a classroom is a skill, enhanced by experience, but it is surprising how often instructors fail to recognize they are going too fast or too slowly, which leads to frustration or boredom (sometimes both) and, as a consequence, affects students' learning. Good teachers develop a feel for the correct "pace" for any given lesson but I've also seen exemplary teachers who periodically checked with the class to see whether they need more or less time.
- ***Are there at least two different kinds of learning activities in each class period?***
This may sound too prescriptive for college classes, but asking students to do the same thing for 70 minutes or 110 minutes risks losing their attention or, at least, their enthusiasm (and remember that motivating students to learn what we have to teach is key). Variety is the spice of teaching, as well as of life. Certainly there are days when an instructor needs to focus on one thing for the entire class period and there is no way to vary the method. That is absolutely fine when and as necessary but whenever possible giving students different things to do is likely to increase engagement (and hence, learning).
- ***Was the classroom a supportive, friendly, and purposeful learning environment?***
If the instructor is sarcastic, aloof, condescending, overly critical, unorganized, scattered, etc. (I can put faces to each of these as I think back over all of the college profs. I had in my career), then students are less likely to learn easily or well. Many times we aren't aware of how we come across to our students and it is therefore helpful to have an outside observer point such things out. This might include, for example, noting when an instructor has verbal tics, physical mannerisms, or manner of speaking (i.e., monotone) that are off-putting or distracting.
- ***Do students have the opportunity to work collaboratively and cooperatively? Does "teacher talk" dominate the room or are pupils given the opportunity to engage in discourse with each other and with the teacher?***
Clearly this isn't possible or even desirable for every lesson but, again, research on teaching and learning has linked collaborative work in general and also cooperative work, if orchestrated appropriately, with increased understanding and retention. There is also evidence that working together increases students' engagement and can have positive social effects as well (if the latter matters

to you). It is worth pointing out, however, that simply putting students in small groups does not necessarily lead to any of these positive outcomes – which is probably why there are slews of books out there that offer guidance on how to get students to work collaboratively and/or cooperatively. Similarly, there is ample evidence that when students are able to engage in discussion with one another, learning is usually enhanced. Getting students to talk with each other, let alone in a focused manner, is not always easy to do but it contributes to understanding, retention, and, not surprisingly, engagement.

- ***Does the instructor frequently ask questions that require pupils to think critically and creatively, that require analysis, evaluation and synthesis?***

Teachers have a tendency to ask close-ended or convergent questions that require students know the “right” answer and simply repeat it. It is worthwhile to observe whether many, if not most, questions are what we call “higher level” in terms of the cognitive skills they tap.

- ***Are questions from students encouraged?***

Giving students the opportunity, and encouraging them, to ask questions is obviously important. Consider how the faculty member responds when students ask questions, and whether he/she has created an environment in which students feel comfortable asking and responding to questions.

- ***Does the instructor call upon all pupils equally, including those who don't volunteer or who do not seem as able as their classmates?***

I've observed in college and high school classrooms in which a minority of the students answer all the questions (or try to) and are always the first to speak up – unfortunately, sometimes when they have little to say. Faculty should be encouraged to call on students, including students who are not waving their hands in the air, to invite silent students to speak during discussions, and to pay attention to whether they, as the teacher, fall into patterns of recognizing certain students over others, playing to one side of the room over another, etc. (This is also related to whether and how well the teacher “sees” the whole classroom and notices who is and isn't talking or participating.)

Substantive Concerns:

- ***Is the content of the lesson worthwhile (meaningful, challenging, etc.)?***

This probably seems a terribly obvious question, but it may be worth asking if, out of the myriad things that could be included in any given lesson, did the instructor lead students to progressively deeper understanding of the material? A related, and equally critical, question is whether the instructor has linked new learning to what students already know about, or have experienced in, that discipline or subject. (Extra credit if he/she can link new knowledge, as well, to students' lives outside of the classroom!) Linking prior (or existing) knowledge to new knowledge is, according to cognitive science, essential for learning.

- ***Are students frequently engaged in the production of knowledge or are they always expected to acquire knowledge created by others (via textbooks, teacher lectures, etc.)?***

Certainly there are times when lecturing is essential and absolutely the most effective means of getting important information across. Nevertheless, research on how people learn suggests that if deep understanding is the goal (and we assume that it is) then students need the opportunity to use knowledge in the production of discourse or artifacts that demonstrate what they have learned and their mastery of it.

Classroom Management: *This is almost never a problem for college professors at selective institutions such as Lawrence. Nevertheless, keeping in mind that there is no silver bullet, see if the instructor does the following:*

- Does she wait to begin (class, a specific activity, etc.) until she has everyone's attention and the room is quiet?
- When students are working in small groups or independently, is she walking around the classroom, checking to make sure everyone is working, whether anyone has questions, etc.?
- Does he use body language and other forms of non-verbal communication to signal if students are engaged in inappropriate behavior? Better yet, does he signal students when they are doing well (for example, when a discussion went well, with most students participating, listening to others, and staying focused)?
- Does she project a sense of calmness, confidence, and authority and act as though she expects her directions to be followed, requests responded to, expectations met, etc.?
- Does he seem to like his students, treat them fairly and with respect, and respond to them with good humor?
- If, by chance, he has rules or policies (e.g., habitually coming to class late, turning in papers or projects on time, sleeping in class, etc.) are they clearly stated (ideally in the syllabus) and consistently applied?
- Finally, if there is inappropriate behavior, does she respond firmly and immediately (but without anger or sarcasm)?

Final Thoughts:

Historically, there has been a debate over whether teaching is primarily art or a science and much dispute over whether one or another method or technology is “best”. (There has been somewhat less disagreement over how most teachers learn to teach: by and large, they teach as they were taught, though the prevailing norms in a given institution have a great deal of influence, particularly with new teachers). In the last decade, however, research into how people learn, particularly research from cognitive psychology, developmental psychology, social psychology and anthropology has given us a better understanding of how we should structure learning experiences so that students acquire, retain, and can use new knowledge – knowledge that leads to deep understanding of the sort typically possessed by “experts” in a field or discipline. Nothing that I suggest observers look out for above is contradicted by this research and most of it is supported quite explicitly by this emerging research. That being said, there is a case to be made for hanging on, within limits, to the “teaching as art” perspective, and I trust that none of the above will prevent that from happening.

Last of all, a caution. As I have learned from 20+ years of observing student teachers, teaching can be ego-threatening (much like acting on a stage). It is not unusual for teachers, novices and veterans alike, to be defensive when someone criticizes their teaching, often regardless of how positively and supportively it might be done. I don't think there is a magic feather for getting someone to change their practice but I have found that most of us sincerely want to become better at teaching and the opportunity to have outside observers give us feedback is essential to the end.