Watch Listen, and Record

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The observation of student behavior may be a better method of assessing learning than the use of standardized tests. Helpful observational techniques include student commentaries, shadow studies, checklists, and anecdotal records.

Trust your eyes and ears, not tests to tell you what to teach. Watch your students, listen to them, record what you see and hear. Let them lead and you follow.

New assessment measures must be found to diagnose and prescribe for the needs of individual children. The National Association of Elementary School Principals and the North Dakota Study Group on Evaluation agree that a high priority should be set on "developing and putting into wide use new processes of assessment that are more fair and effective than those currently in use." For example, standardized tests tell the range of reading ability in a classroom, and the reading achievement of a school population, but normative data are usually based on national norms rather than local school-district norms. In addition, a student's specific strengths and weaknesses are not adequately assessed by such tests. As a result, information from these tests is often not used at all or is used inappropriately.

One possible solution is the use of observational techniques such as those utilized in child study. Systematically applied observational techniques can aid teachers in understanding a student's growth, and in establishing effective teaching-learning situations. Accurate records of individual student behavior and growth can be kept by teachers who develop skill in watching, listening, and recording what is seen and heard in the classroom. As a result, teachers are able to develop more precise instructional planning and grouping for skill development. These techniques can also serve as a measure of teacher accountability. They clearly indicate a teacher's understanding of each student's strengths and weaknesses, as well as a knowledge of which methods and materials to use with each student.

Observational techniques vary from the very simple to the very complex, depending upon a teacher's objectives. Sometimes it is important to keep track of each student's attitude and behavior, skill development over a period of time,

response to methods and materials used, response to a total school situation, and so on.

Skill in observing is not acquired quickly or easily. Constant practice in keeping records is needed in order to become more aware of and more knowledgeable about each student in the classroom. If records are kept for several years by each teacher for each child, they will give a better longitudinal picture of a student's growth and development than will standardized tests. It is important, however, to remember that records must measure progress, not just failure. If success is sought, it will be found, likewise with failure.

The following observational techniques have been found to be beneficial to preservice and in-service classroom teachers.

Ten-Minute Running Commentary

A good place to begin learning how to watch, listen, and record is the running commentary. This is an observational technique that requires watching, listening, and recording what one student does during a ten-minute interval. Keeping a running commentary involves recording what the student does, what is said, what others say to the student, and what the teacher and students do together.

Good observation means recording a complete and accurate account of actual behavior. It should do what a sound movie does, but it should also include interactions between the student and others. A running commentary must include:

1. Time, setting (not acceptable is a classroom where seatwork is taking place), activity, and persons involved;

2. Writing down everything that is seen or heard concerning student behavior without giving anyone the feeling of being watched;

3. Recording *verbatim* what the student says or what anyone else says or does to the student;

4. Writing down everything in the behavior of adults or peers which the student can see or hear;

5. Avoiding labeling, opinions, or interpretive comments (for example, "lazy," "introvert," "trouble-maker" while recording). However, if inferences are included, make this very clear.

Choosing specific information to record is another way to use this method. Examples of such information include: (a) student interaction, (b) particular skill development, (c) use of activity centers, or (d) discipline. Specificity can also be achieved by observing only one child on a particular day, and/or each child in a classroom once a week (five on each day of the week in a class of 25).

In conclusion, a running commentary is an actual description of a person's behavior, not a literary masterpiece—which means it may be dull, monotonous, and undramatic. Students and teachers using this technique for the first time often become discouraged. Sometimes, few tangible results are seen; sometimes, important discoveries are made. The following are examples gleaned from graduate students' commentaries.

"New assessment measures must be found to diagnose and prescribe for the needs of individual children. . . . Systematically applied observational techniques can aid teachers in understanding a student's growth, and in establishing effective teaching-learning situations."

"The running commentary gave me a whole new insight into the child's attitude toward learning."

"I discovered that the child stutters when new people are in the classroom or when she's excited."

"The student influences others around him to a greater extent than I believed. Also he is capable of doing better work than I gave him credit for—in language and reading."

Shadow Study

The shadow study, an observational technique suggested by Fleming (1973), is useful in determining the impact of a day's program on a student. A particular student is shadowed all day. Two kinds of records are noted every 15 minutes. On one side of a page the setting is noted and on the other the student's response. Summaries of shadow studies for a number of students on the same day in a particular school can indicate

what learning opportunities are being provided for students in each classroom. It is possible to discover that some students in an entire day have little opportuity to participate in classrooms, to raise questions, to experiment, to do anything but sit passively and listen.

Checklist for a Particular Area of Development

It may be necessary to use a more definitive type of recording such as a checklist to observe and assess an individual student's growth in a particular area of skill development, for example, in reading. This enables teachers to record the student's learning experiences over a long period of time and prescribe work on an individual basis. Analysis of a checklist helps in making decisions for appropriate changes in teaching strategies. (See Figure 1.)

Anecdotal Records

One of the most worthwhile observational techniques is anecdotal record-keeping. It is a way of learning how to think about children by observing, recording, and reflecting. It is a documentation, "living record," or system of external checks used to gain knowledge about children. At the same time, by recording the continuity of a student's learning, anecdotal record-keeping causes teachers to question methods, materials, and procedures used with students. Anecdotal records are important for four reasons:

1. To remember precisely the content and process of what happens to a particular student or what happens to students in a classroom.

2. To note progress or lack of it in different subject or skill areas. This can be compared with a student's entry level, and an overview of a student's yearly progress can be seen.

3. To make appropriate instructional decisions. Knowing what has been accomplished helps teachers to evaluate and plan for the next day or week.

4. To use for parent conferences. This form of record-keeping prepares teachers for the conference. It tells what the student has accomplished and serves as an accountability device.

What each teacher records may depend upon what is being sought—what is critical to the teacher. Even in the same classroom, no two teachers will record the same information about the same event. Teachers and children occupy particular spaces in the classroom. Sometimes neither group sees much beyond that particular space. One way for a teacher to determine his/her "circle of space" in a classroom is to note what information is recorded and whether the information is always written in the same manner. If so, this should alert the teacher to the narrowness and constriction of that "circle of space." Then new observational priorities must be set, perhaps with the aid of a colleague.

The following examples illustrate a weekly summary of a seven-year-old student's reading progress, and a summary for that month.

October 7-11: Johnny has learned the short "a" and "o" sounds, and can use them to decode words. He can identify the sounds when he hears them and can make words by himself from alphabet letters. Is also learning to speli! Is now

Figure 1. A Portion of a Specific Skills Checklist

E = exposure, readiness
T = taught systematically
RT = reviewed, retaught if necessary, and related skills
I = can work independently

	Grade Level					
Structural Analysis	1	2	3	4	5	6
Recognizing and reading plural forms of nouns	T	T	RT	I		
Recognizing verbs with "s," "ed," "ing" endings	T	T	RT	I		
Reading known root words with added prefixes and suffixes	E	E	T	RT	RT	I
Knowledge of the meanings of frequently used prefixes and suffixes	E	E	E	T	T	RT
Finding base words in derivatives and variants			E	T	T	RT
Identifying and understanding contractions	E	T	T	RT	RT	I







Photos clockwise from top: From different viewpoints, students can appear to be doing different things; Individual activities are recorded as well as teacher-initiated activities; and, The teacher makes comments on 3" x 5" cards about individual student behavior. Photos: Robert Heller.

reading a "linguistic" preprimer to his partner. Must make some bingo games using the new words for reinforcement.

October 14-18: Has learned the short "i" sound by himself from the Indian picture on the wall. He made up his own word cards using this sound. Can make sentences of his own now using his own word cards. Is asking his partner to help him make word cards for new words that he wants to use in stories. Took home preprimer book to read to his mother. Is still doing very well discussing the stories he reads. Does it very critically.

Summary for October: Johnny has made good progress in reading this month. He has learned all the short and long vowel sounds. Is retaining words that he's learning. His printing has improved because he is making his own word cards. Discusses pictures and the stories in the "linguistic" preprimer from a critical viewpoint. He does not like animals representing people in the stories. Must work on summarizing what he reads more often. Should also give him more practice going back in the story to find the answer to questions. He really is determined to learn how to read. Doesn't give up easily.

Good anecdotal record-keeping involves efficient use of time, careful watching, and listening. From this information, the teacher can effectively plan appropriate teaching methods for individual students. Anecdotes also help prevent what often happens to some students: being passed from grade to grade with little attention given to what is or is not learned, and to teachers' dependence on test measurement devices as the only means of assessing student growth and knowledge.

Summary

The usual assessment measures such as standardized tests would not have revealed the information compiled from these suggested observational techniques and forms of record-keeping. Therefore, as a way of finding out about individual students, day-to-day or weekly observations by a sensitive teacher are alternatives to formal testing.

These records can tell *what* the student is doing as well as *how* he is doing. The teacher knows when tasks are too difficult, when teaching methods or materials must be changed or modified, and when skills need to be retaught. Through observing and reflecting, the teacher becomes more aware of individual strengths and weaknesses. As a consequence, teachers instinctively become more accountable to whom it counts—the student.

When a teacher hones the technique of observation to a fine degree, it becomes extremely rewarding. At this point, the teacher is no longer a mechanic or programmer of materials; teaching has become an art.

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