

Observing in Schools

A Guide for Students
in Teacher Education

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Participant Observation Field Notes

Among the most powerful research tools of anthropologists and sociologists is *participant observation*. As a participant observer, you take notes and observe what it is that you are doing. To some extent, participant observation can be thought of as a self-monitoring process in which you carefully observe and collect data on your personal activities.

At some point either in your fieldwork or in your beginning teaching, you will start working with students. This does not mean that you stop doing fieldwork. What you will do is become a participant observer.

The purpose for writing field notes of your participation in teaching and related activities is threefold: First, field notes help beginning teachers to focus their attention on the issues of how children learn, what they learn, and how they use what they already know in the context of school activities. In doing so, you should look for instances of topics, content, events, and issues read about and discussed in your college and university courses that are related to events in the teaching and learning activity in which you participate.

The second purpose for writing field notes as a participant observer is to provide you and the classroom teacher you are working with, and/or your course instructor and classmates in your university or college classes, with information about aspects of an activity that may not leave any other record except by your written summary as an observer. For example, create a record of the peer interactions of a group of first graders in negotiating who gets to read first, answer a question first, or use the computer first, or who seems to get his or her way. This kind of information may only be available if you conduct systematic observations and summaries.

While the classroom record-keeping system of the teacher you are working with or that you are keeping yourself as part of a grade book or evaluation system will probably provide a summary of activities, tasks, and skills children have completed and their level of success, this information will probably be incomplete. Your participant observation notes can provide more complete information about how children respond in the activity and their interactions with other children and interns. For example, did a child only respond in an activity if you prodded, suggested answers, or gave hints during the activity? As beginning teachers working with children in learning activities, you should help children when they need it, but give only as much help as they need. When you do intervene, it is important to

record how, why, what happened, and why you think it helped or did not help the child.

Third, as participant observers, you need to reflect on each activity in which you engage and include your reflections in your field notes. Reviewing, thinking, and writing about experiences helps you as an observer formulate what has been experienced, interpret its meaning, and communicate it to others. Successful teachers do this after lessons and at the end of the school day. At the end of the day they also review and interpret critical events that occurred in their classrooms during the day. Keeping diaries and journals is a requirement of field experiences and student teaching. They are also valuable tools master teachers regularly use as part of their work. Developing the habit of reflection now will make the process even more meaningful for you as you move from taking part in field experiences to student teaching and on to professional teaching.

Journals and Diaries

The tradition of keeping personal journals and diaries is old and honorable. It is one of the best ways to keep information organized about a specific observational setting like a classroom or school. Among the greatest diaries in literature is the one written by Samuel Pepys (1633-1703). Pepys's *Diary* is still read today because of its extraordinary detail, the quality of its language, and the historical interest of its topics. Look at the following excerpt for December 21, 1663, where Pepys describes a cock fight in which roosters with small sharpened knives or "spurs" attached to their feet are allowed to fight one another to the death.

... took Coach, and being directed by sight of bills upon the walls, did goe to Shooe lane to see a Cocke-fighting at a new pit there—a sport I was never at in my life. But Lord, to see the strange variety of people, from Parliament-man . . . to the poorest prentices, bakers, brewers, butchers, draymen, and what not; and all this fellows one with another in swearing, cursing and betting. I soon had enough of it; and yet I would not but have seen it once, it being strange to observe the nature of those poor creatures, how they will fight until they drop down dead upon the table and strike after they are ready to give up the ghost—not offering to run way when they are weary or wounded past doing further. . . . One thing more it is strange to see, how people of this poor rank, that look as if they had not bread to put in their mouths, shall bet 3 or 4l at one bet and lose it, and yet bet as much the next battell, as they call every make of two cocks—so that one of them will lose 10 or 20l at a meeting.

While the language is archaic and difficult to read, it is also vivid and literate. Pepys keeps our interest by describing what he saw in great detail. In doing so, he leaves a record of a world we would otherwise not know about.

Keeping a research journal or diary is essential to doing field observations. You may not create a literary masterpiece like Pepys's diary, but even a fairly modest observation diary can be an interesting and important record of what goes on in a classroom or school.

Your diary is where you take your field notes and keep a record of all you have observed. It allows you to come back and see how things have changed or remained the same in a particular school or setting.

You can note specific quotes or comments. It is a place where you can reflect or speculate on what it is that you are observing.

Some suggestions that you may find helpful in keeping an effective observational journal:

- Use a bound notebook. Do not pull pages out of it to do other things. Field notes taken on scraps of paper get lost or misfiled.
- Date every one of your entries. You may even want to include the time of day.
- Write in pen, not in pencil. Do not erase materials or entries; simply cross them through if you want to delete something.
- Always carry your journal with you. Do not leave it somewhere that it can be found or stolen.
- Do not share the content of your journal with individuals at your observation site. Your journal is a personal document. Think of it as being like a private diary. Its content could be potentially damaging to others. Do you really want to have a teacher you have been observing read a comment like: "The teacher seems poorly prepared and short tempered with most of the children. She clearly has favorites and tends to work with selected boys, while ignoring both the boys and the girls who are ethnically and racially different from herself." While the teacher may need to hear this, it is not your place as a visitor to the school to criticize her. Your job is to observe, collect data, and understand how schools work and function.

You can share your observations and the content of your journal with other people for professional purposes (fellow students, your professors, and so on), but you should be discreet and professional in doing so—most important, NEVER identify the teacher or children by name.

Be as detailed as possible. Describe the setting and atmosphere, as well as what actually occurs there. You can never provide enough detail.

*Note: Although we provide observation forms for you throughout this book, we would like to suggest that keeping all of your notes in a journal will help you keep your work organized. You may want to copy the forms by hand into your journal, or copy them and paste them in appropriate sections.

Creating a Journal or Diary

The following section is intended to provide you with general guidelines for keeping a journal or diary of your field experiences for your university or college courses, community settings, school activities, classroom activities, and your participation as tutor, teacher assistant, and other field experiences.

Begin your journal or diary by identifying the date, place, time, and kind of activity, followed by both the purpose of the assigned activity and your own purpose. Then enter the events that make an impression on you, along with your comments about the events.

KINDS OF COMMENTS TO PUT IN YOUR JOURNAL OR DIARY

1. Comments relating your experiences to previous educational experiences.
 - K-12 experiences
 - College or university
 - Informal teaching experience in community institutions
2. Comments relating your experiences to college or university courses.
 - Class discussions
 - Textbook content
 - Content of assigned readings
 - Content of videos observed
 - Observation performed in schools and other field experiences
3. Comments about planning.
 - Plans based on observations of pupils
 - Reflections about your confidences or uneasiness
 - Reflections about what and how you are learning
4. Comments about tutoring and teaching small groups.
 - What changes would you make in your teaching plan if you were teaching the lesson again?
 - What revisions would solve the problems you encountered?
5. Comments about critical incidents.
 - What was unexpected?
 - What intrigued you?

- What questions did you ponder?
6. Comments about successful experiences.
 - What pleased you?
 - What worked well?
 - What evidence was there of success?
 7. Comments about problems you encountered.
 - What do you find to be frustrating?
 - What do you find to be persistent problems?
 - Describe your disappointments
 8. Comments about professional relationships.
 - With whom and why do you share your success?
 - Comments about parents
 - What do parents want to know about the school and their children?
 - Problems you have communicating with parents
 - How do parents communicate with you?
 - Do parents understand the classroom curriculum?
 - Do parents understand classroom rules?
 9. Comments and reflection on critical incidents. If you are observing or participating in a classroom, you may observe or be part of a critical incident. A critical incident is an event or disruption in the classroom during your classroom teaching or during other professional interactions that has a significant effect on your instruction, or your feelings toward teaching, colleagues, or administrators.
 - What was the critical incident?
 - What was happening when the event occurred?
 - What action did you or others take as a result of the incident that you found to be helpful to your understanding of professional practice?
 - What action taken by you or others as a result the incident did you think was confusing or in contradiction with what you believed was appropriate practice?
 - What were the most important questions you asked yourself about the critical incident? Have your beliefs or values remained the same or are they changing?
 - How can you connect this experience to a specific undergraduate course or another field experience?

10. Comments and reflection on teaching practices and certification standards. Take a moment to think about the teaching practices or certification standards you have to meet to become a teacher. You might be wondering how you are going to master and understand all of them at this time in your career. Why don't you sort them into categories such as "easy," "difficult but doable," and "definitely need help."
- Which of the practices or standards is affected by this observation or participation activity? Why?
 - Which of the practices or standards do you think you need to give more attention and study to? How do you know? How did your observation or participation activity influence you?
 - Which of the practices do think you are performing fairly well as a result of your observation or participation activity? How do you know? How did your observation or participation activity influence you?
 - As a result of you observation or participation activity, what plans do you have for improving those that you identified as "easy," "difficult but doable," "definitely need help"?
 - If your teacher education program requires that you develop and present a professional folio to demonstrate the attainment of practices and standards, what material from this observation or participation experience can you include?
 - Comments about future professional development plans.

As a result of this observation or participation activity, what knowledge, concept, or skill have you identified that you need to learn more about? What learning materials and activities might be helpful? How will you know you are learning what you need to learn?