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USING OBSERVATION
TO IMPROVE YOUR TEACHING

Jere E. Brophy

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Abstract

The authors found that teaching could be improved by providing teachers with feedback about their behavior and information about effective teacher behaviors. Guidelines for using classroom observation to obtain and share useful information are given. When used in this way, classroom observation becomes a valuable tool for professional development, not just a research strategy.

Using Observation to Improve Your Teaching¹

Jere E. Brophy²

Philip Jackson (1968), in Life in Classrooms, pointed out that classrooms are very busy places, especially for teachers, who share hundreds of interactions with their students each day. Most teachers are too busy coping with the demanding pace of classrooms to have much time to monitor or reflect upon their behavior, so much of their behavior is habitual and not deliberate. It consists of *automatic responses* developed to handle recurring classroom situations. Such teacher behavior can persist indefinitely without evaluation or revision even where it is inappropriate, because teachers are not aware of it and their students do not provide feedback about it (especially preschool and primary grade students who cannot analyze and articulate the basis for a problem even when they recognize that something is wrong).

Tom Good and I became impressed with the pervasiveness of this problem while studying the relationships among teacher expectations and attitudes, teacher-student relationships, and student attitudes and learning progress (summarized in Brophy & Good, 1974, and Good & Brophy, 1977, 1978). Study after study yielded similar results: Certain teachers were consistently more effective than others, not because they pursued different goals or used opposing methods, but because they were more thorough and systematic in their teaching. They planned and prepared carefully, and thus were able to structure their classrooms to

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²Jere E. Brophy is a senior researcher in the Institute for Research on Teaching and a professor of educational psychology and teacher education.

initiate the kinds of activities and interactions they desired. Also, because these teachers were aware of what they were trying to accomplish and how they were intending to do it, they were able to monitor their own progress more or less continuously. This helped them to concentrate on activities that fostered major objectives, and to promote these objectives even when responding to unanticipated events. We called these teachers *proactive* to indicate that they assumed and maintained the initiative in structuring classroom events.

Less effective teachers, we found, were mostly *reactive*. Lacking clarity about objectives and methods for reaching them, these teachers seemed less "in charge" in their classrooms. Much of their time was spent unsystematically reacting to unanticipated situations and student initiatives, seemingly without much conscious awareness of their behavior or its implications. Interviews with such teachers typically revealed little awareness of how they responded when a student failed to recite or volunteered an incorrect answer, for example, or how they decided it was time to move from one part of the lesson to the next. Yet, most such teachers had predictable habits that were clear to classroom observers.

We found that feedback based on our classroom observations could make teachers aware of problems and help bring about change.

Sometimes, feedback alone is sufficient. For example, perhaps 10% of teachers working in the early elementary grades use an inappropriate physical arrangement for their reading groups. They place students in the reading group with their backs to a wall or the corner, so that these students are facing the rest of the class, and vice versa, which makes for frequent distractions. Furthermore, the teachers themselves

must face the students in the reading groups, which means that their backs are turned to the rest of the class. This leaves them in a very poor position for monitoring the rest of the class, which violates basic principles of classroom management (Kounin, 1970). Recent experimental work suggests that this kind of reading group arrangement interferes not only with classroom management but also with student learning (Anderson, Evertson, & Brophy, 1979). Most teachers do not require such documentation, however, because the problem is intuitively obvious to them as soon as it is called to their attention. (At least, this has been my experience in mentioning it to many teachers over the last 10 years.) In each case, the teacher (1) had never thought about the matter and had never had it called to his or her attention; (2) recognized the problem immediately; and (3) made appropriate changes at once.

Not all bad habits are this easy to spot, nor are the needed changes always so clear. Sometimes, systematic feedback from classroom observation is needed to enable the teacher to see the problem more clearly and develop ideas about how to cope with it. Good and Brophy (1974) used this approach successfully in a treatment study that focused on teachers' patterns of calling on students and involving them in classroom discussions, and on their methods of dealing with students who failed to answer questions when they were called on.

During the baseline or data collection phase of the study, classroom observers noted the degree to which various students participated in classroom discussions. They also noted how the teachers responded when students who were called on to answer a question failed to respond or did not answer correctly. Between semesters, information from these observations was related to the teachers. They were shown that certain students rarely volunteered to participate and rarely were called on

as non-volunteers. The teachers also were shown that they easily gave up on certain students who failed to respond to questions correctly (they would give them the answer or call on someone else), whereas, with other students, they would rephrase the question, provide a clue, or in some other way stick with the student and try to elicit an improved response.

This feedback led to changes in teacher behavior toward both groups. The teachers began to call on the low-participation students much more frequently, and these students themselves began to initiate interactions with the teachers more often. The teachers began to ask more frequent and more difficult questions of the students they formerly gave up on easily, and to stay with these students to try to elicit an improved response when the question was not answered initially. In addition to these changes that were specific to the treatment, teacher behavior toward the treatment students (and in some ways toward the class in general) showed side effects (mostly positive) on other measures (more praise for good performance, less criticism and punishment for misbehavior, improvements in the consistency and quality of feedback given to students following their responses).

Other studies also suggest that teaching can be improved by providing teachers with feedback about their behavior (Moore, Schaut, & Fritzges, 1978; Tuckman, McCall, & Hyman, 1969; Withall, 1956). Some of these studies demonstrated that successful feedback does not always have to be based on fine-grained measurement of teacher behavior. For example, Gage, Runkel, and Chatterjee (Note 1) presented teachers with feedback from student ratings of such teacher actions as "acts disappointed when a pupil gets something wrong," or "explains arithmetic so pupils can understand it." Teachers examined their profiles individually to determine strengths and weaknesses and decide for themselves what needed

to be done. Data from a readministration of the student rating instrument later revealed significant improvement on 10 of the 12 behaviors rated. Most other reports on the use of student evaluation feedback to teachers also suggest that such evaluation is helpful in pinpointing problems for teachers.

Teachers profit not only from feedback about their own teaching behavior, but also from information about teacher behaviors that are effective for maximizing student learning of basic skills in the primary grades. In recent years, process-product studies -- in which measures of teacher and student behavior (classroom processes) were correlated with measures of student achievement (a major product or outcome of instruction) -- have revealed many replicated relationships between teacher behavior and student learning. Follow-up studies have produced significant positive results by integrating several teacher behaviors correlated with student achievement gains into a coherent experimental treatment to be tried by new groups of teachers. These have included teacher behaviors related to organizing and conducting reading groups in the first grade (Anderson et al., 1979), math instruction in fourth grade (Good & Grouws, in press), and behavioral management, instructional methods, questioning, and feedback in grade three (Program on Teaching Effectiveness, Note 2). Thus, in general, systematic observation of teacher behavior can produce valuable information, and sharing this information with teachers can help them improve their teaching.

Not all efforts to provide teachers with feedback from observation will necessarily produce good results, however. Sometimes, a teacher will need inservice education or training in addition to feedback,

because the teaching skills involved are complex.

Even where complex skills are not a problem, the value of feedback to a particular teacher will depend on its quality and presentation. Tuckman (1976) suggests the following principles: feedback should (1) involve specific, concrete behaviors or characteristics; (2) be credible and presented with good intentions and in understandable terms; (3) include specific guidelines for change; and (4) lead to a commitment to initiate specific changes.

Brophy and Good (1974) suggest several guidelines for using classroom observation to obtain information and for sharing this information in ways useful to teachers:

1. Collect behavioral data from the classroom.
2. Identify problems or possible focal areas for teacher development suggested by these data.
3. If possible, identify group or situational differences indicating that the teacher is more effective in one place than another, so that calls for change will involve extending existing behavior to new situations (or being more consistent) rather than switching to entirely new behaviors.
4. Describe the problem as you see it, but allow teachers to give explanations before suggesting changes (maybe there is a good reason for behavior that seems ineffective).
5. Pinpoint the differences in teacher behavior in contrasting situations more specifically and suggest specific changes.

6. If the teacher is agreeable, engage in mutual problem solving until explicit changes are agreed upon.
7. Specify exactly what the changes will be.
8. Arrange to get additional data to evaluate the degree to which the teacher has changed and to identify any possible effects, direct or indirect.
9. Hold a debriefing session to review the results of the study and reevaluate the suggested behavior.

Note the emphasis here on tailoring classroom observation to collect data on matters of interest to the teacher being observed. Many teachers immediately think of the observation approach developed by Flanders (1970) when they hear the term "classroom observation," but this is only one of more than 100 systems that have been developed (Simon & Boyer, Note 3). Furthermore, there is no need to rely on existing formal systems. Many resources are available for teachers who would like to collect systematic feedback from the classroom, but want to define their own areas of concentration and develop their own methods. Brandt (1972) provides a readable survey of naturalistic approaches to data collection, especially in schools. Boehm and Weinberg (1977) provide information and exercises designed to develop classroom observation skills in teachers. Rowen (1973) discusses the observational approach to child study, concentrating on case studies of individuals with learning or personality problems. Fuller and Baker (Note 4) discuss methods of using video tape to record teacher behavior and provide feedback and suggestions.

Detailed suggestions about classroom behaviors that can be measured and about methods of measuring them can be found in Good and Brophy's (1978) Looking in Classrooms. Topics include teacher and student behavior relevant to the communication of teacher expectations and attitudes (including possible self-fulfilling prophecy effects), teacher modeling of desirable behavior as a method of influencing student behavior, classroom organization and management, methods of coping with inattentiveness and disruption, grouping and individualized instruction, and a variety of topics derived from recent studies linking teacher behavior to student learning gains. A great many sample observation instruments are included, some that involve the counting of very discrete behaviors, others that involve integrating specific observations and drawing inferences in order

to use rating scales, and still others that involve free responses to specific questions about behaviors of interest. In addition, guidelines are given about how teachers, working individually or in collaboration with fellow teachers or their principal, can organize their own inservice education experiences by arranging for the collection of classroom data that relate to their particular interests or concerns.

When used in this way, classroom observation becomes a valuable tool for professional development, not just a research strategy. It has been used with considerable success and satisfaction by a great many individual teachers, but is perhaps most valuable when used cooperatively by groups of teachers (c.f. Martin, Note 5). Working as a group, teachers not only get useful feedback relevant to their individual interests, but begin to work together, sharing expertise and observations and breaking down the isolation that so often is a barrier to professional development, especially in the primary grades. Also, even teachers who differ considerably in experience and expertise can both make important contributions and get important assistance from this kind of an effort. Each teacher determines the focus of classroom observation when he or she is being observed, thus maximizing the value of the feedback, and by providing feedback to others, each teacher contributes to the professional development of colleagues and to the morale and effectiveness of the faculty group.

If teachers are willing to take seriously the notion that everyone's teaching can be improved, if the notion of designing their own inservice education program appeals to them, and, especially, if they have access to one or more likeminded colleagues, further investigation of ideas about using classroom observation data to provide feedback may be well worth their while.

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