

Reflections from a Teacher on Being Observed

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I'd like to share my reflections about two teaching observations that have been instrumental in my professional development in hopes of sparking ideas and self-analysis in Teacher Educators. I write not from the point of view of a supervisor, but only from that of teacher.

I was observed a number of times while I was doing practicum teaching for my undergraduate degree in Secondary Ed. The supervisor who stands out from this time taught me much about teaching and, I realize as I look back, a lot about observing other teachers. Before my observations, I had the opportunity to observe Dan's (my supervisor's) teaching. Before his class he spoke about what he hoped to accomplish that day in terms of the observable and affective changes he hoped would occur in the learners. After the class he shared his thoughts and feelings about how the class had gone and what he had observed the learners doing (demonstrating their learning). He described the principles he felt were important in teaching and discussed the techniques he had used in trying to support them. He also asked me specific questions about what I had observed, and asked me to comment on whatever had been most striking for me. In my observations of his classes, he set the style for his observations of my teaching. He modeled careful self-analysis that I would strive for in our later discussions, and though he was very much the "knower" in our relationship, I felt respected, listened to and validated.

When it came time for Dan to observe me, I was not fully aware of what I was doing as a teacher, or even what I might want to do, but I was relaxed and excited about learning. Before the classes, Dan would ask me what I was thinking about the lesson I was about to teach. I shared my objectives, plans and rationales for what I would do. At times I told him what I was worried about in the lesson, or with some of the learners. Sometimes I asked for his advice, but it was my call. I spoke about what was important to me.

After the lesson Dan had me speak first about what had happened, again asking me to discuss what I thought or felt about the class. If I was positive about something, he supported me and challenged me to look for why it had worked. He asked me to make connections between what I did and what kind of learning came about, and to look for agreement between what I believed in principle and what I did in practice. If I was being particularly self-critical or negative, Dan would not question so much as he would listen. He also focused a great deal on the learners. What they did that showed learning, or affective growth, or that they were struggling, tired, feeling competent, or overwhelmed. He kept a focus of our discussions on the result that teaching had on the learners and their learning, and at the same time allowed my feelings to be a valid addition.

It was many years until I had such a positive observation experience again. The powerful effect a supervising teacher can have was highlighted for me by the contrast of two supervisors who observed me during the teaching internship of my MA program. The Director of the institution I worked for came to the observation with a checklist and proceeded to mark off my strengths and weaknesses. Lauren, my internship supervisor, recognized me as an individual, and worked with me to discover and expand my understanding and skill at teaching.

Lauren held strongly to humanistic principles in teaching and supervising. Principles based on respecting the learner as a whole person rather than as an identity programmed to learn the required material. She created a personal relationship with me before observing my classes, discussing teaching and non-teaching related issues, and my situation at the institution. We also talked about my general teaching concerns several times before she visited my classroom. During these talks, Lauren concentrated on understanding what I was saying and experiencing, giving listening responses that both clarified what I was thinking and that challenged me to delve deeper. I felt that she was truly there for my learning and development.

Lauren had supervised teachers in the past and had worked with them to develop a process for the sessions dealing with the pre, during, and post observation stages. She shared this process with me and I thought it sounded helpful, so we didn't alter it for my sessions. She did, however, check with me several times

throughout my period of observation to see how the process was working for me. I felt that options for change were possible.

According to this agreed upon style, we would meet briefly before the lesson to be observed and I would share my lesson plan, thoughts and feelings about it. I would also identify at least one area that I wanted to work on, and wanted her to specifically observe for my professional growth (three areas or issues were the maximum). During the lesson, Lauren sat where I thought she would be least distracting, wore light colored clothes and carried few personal things. She tried to be invisible and was very successful at it. She took copious notes, and I recall catching her watching me only a few times. At those times, she had a neutral half-smile on her face. All of this made me feel comfortable and not only willing, but inspired to explore my teaching. I found myself asking Lauren to observe when I had a particularly difficult problem, or when I wanted to try something new. I knew that her evaluation of me as a teacher would show up on my transcripts, but I didn't care whether she saw my teaching at its best or not. I wanted her there to aid me in learning.

After the lesson, we had a very long debriefing, or discussion. I started by talking about the experience and sharing my reactions. Lauren would give listening responses guiding me toward an understanding of the major themes and principles I was focusing on. After much time at this, she would offer comments from her experience. She related things that she had tried or believed or she shared what others had done or believed. These were offered to me "adult to adult" without pressure on me to subscribe to them. I felt that they were meant as stimuli for my own thoughts. The goal was for me to discover what my own principles were and to expand my repertoire of practices to support them.

In the same way that I felt I was not expected to adopt new thinking or practices that appealed to Lauren, I felt that I did not need to impress her or gain her favor by teaching a certain way. She didn't judge my performance as either "good" or "bad," and the only expectation I felt I needed to live up to was that I sincerely analyze and evaluate my own work. It was not uncommon for me to feel exhilarated after working with her, and to feel that I had done well, but I realize in writing about these experiences that Lauren rarely, if ever, praised me. There were times she would describe an

aspect of my teaching that had resulted in a positive learning experience for the students. She was specific in detailing what she had observed me do, and in describing the students resulting behavior. So I did not associate the pleasure of doing something effective with gaining her approval, but rather felt pleased that it had been effective for the students. As with Dan, I was able to keep my mind on the students and how I could best serve them, and not be concerned with how I might best impress my supervisor.

Lauren followed my lead in the discussion. She stopped often and checked how the discussion was going for me. She would give a summary of what we had covered and mention where we might continue to explore. I was then given the choice of continuing, and a say in what areas we would continue. Though she took notes on many issues, Lauren did not discuss everything she observed. She focused on me and what I knew, and through listening responses provided security for me in feeling understood, and respected.



She was particularly sensitive to the balance in our relationship between her role as the knower and my role as the learner. At times, I as the learner needed to be able to assert my own knowledge and strike out beyond what I knew in order to test and discover more. At times, Lauren, as the more experienced teacher, had insights or techniques that I needed in order to feel supported. Looking back, I believe she evaluated each issue separately to determine where the balance lay, and how her actions might best suit my learning. I was not a totally new teacher, so I was not so highly dependent on her knowledge for everything.

But there were definitely times when I needed her input. At these times she gave me very digestible comments. The ideas were just one logical step beyond my own, so they were an accessible extension or expansion of my own thinking.

I think that Lauren operated from the belief that learning cannot take place unless the learner is ready for it. She focused on where I was and what I was ready for and wanting, though the issues I brought up may not have been the most striking issues she observed in my lessons. I think because of this I always felt that I could succeed in the goals I set and the areas we discussed. I wanted to try because the issues came from me and were directed at my level of development. I was relaxed, challenged and incredibly motivated. Much of what I discovered during those sessions has become part of the core of who I am as a teacher, and has shaped how I think of what I want to become.

I have shared a number of beliefs and behaviors of two supervisors, Dan and Lauren, who's influence on my teaching and way of viewing classroom observation has been remarkable. In summarizing, I would like to review these behaviors and the principles that I believe stand behind them.

Behaviors

- Supervisor creates time for discussion of various issues before the observation.
- The focus is on understanding where the teacher is.
- The supervisor shares some personal information.
- The teacher has a chance to observe the supervisor's teaching, and the process of observation is modeled to some degree.
- The teacher shares plans and goals before lessons and poses questions or concerns as well.
- The supervisor gives comments one logical step beyond where the teacher has demonstrated awareness.
- The supervisor asks teacher to look for connections between their beliefs and practices.
- The supervisor models a focus on the learning happening in the classroom, a focus on the students.

- The teacher sets goals and/or areas to work on, but with a realistic do-able number like three.
- The supervisor gives listening responses, or practices reflective listening for much of the time with the teacher.
- The process for the supervising session is shared with the teacher before the observation and is negotiable.
- The supervisor describes aspects of teaching and their results objectively without judging them as "good" or "bad".
- The supervisor focuses on the teacher's awareness in order to know when to give space for the teacher to assert herself, or when to offer support.

Principles or beliefs

- A relationship based on mutual respect as people allows for the most honest, helpful and least defensive discussion, which aids learning.
- Knowing what to expect in the observation reduces anxiety and enhances learning.
- Learners (teachers in this case) communicate what they are ready and able to learn consciously or unconsciously. They will only truly learn what they are ready for.
- Only the learner (in this case the teacher) can do the learning.
- The point of all our teaching practices and principles is to aid learning.
- Learning is aided by realistic goals or areas of focus that are attainable.
- The goal of observation is for the teacher to discover her own best, not to be molded into a particular style, or to adopt the style of the supervising teacher.
- Teachers' thoughts are to be respected as they are the true experts on their teaching and the learners in their classes.
- Learners (teachers in this case) best understand their own needs.
- Praise from a supervisor can breed the desire for more praise so that the teacher may strive for the supervisor's approval and lose her focus on teaching to effect learning.
- A flexible balance exists between supervisors and teachers in relation to their awareness. Roles shift at times depending on the teacher's awareness of different issues.