

LEARNING TO SEE UNLEARNING TO JUDGE



A Professional Development Tool

For Classroom Observations

**Extracts from: *Instructional Rounds in Education*,
City, E.A., Elmore, R.F., Fiarman, S.E. & Teitel, L**

Most often when we observe in classrooms we make judgements. We come away with statements such as: “The teacher was well prepared”, “The students were highly engaged”, “The tasks were challenging.” It is difficult to use such observation statements as evidence of what is actually happening as we all take different meanings from them.

A different way to carry out classroom observations is to make notes describing what you actually see. This is the process used in *Instructional Rounds* – a book written by a team of educators at Harvard University led by Professor Richard Elmore.

Instructional Rounds: What is it about?

Instructional Rounds is based on a construct called the “instructional core”. Around this construct come several key ideas.

The first is:

Increases in student learning occur as a consequence of improvements in the level of content, teachers’ knowledge and skill, and student engagement.

The main idea behind Instructional Rounds is that there are just three important ways to improve student learning. The first is to increase the level of knowledge and skill that the teacher brings to the instructional process. The second is to increase the level and complexity of the content that students are asked to learn. And the third is to change the role of the student in the instructional process.

The second main idea is that:

If you change any single element in the instructional core, you have to change the other two to affect student learning.

For instance, we can’t simply change the level of content of the task without giving our teachers the skill to deliver the changed content and also giving our students new skills to interact with the changed content.

Observation as a Way of Gathering Evidence

Instructional Rounds is also based on the idea that the best way to understand what is happening in instruction is to observe it and describe it. If we discuss observations of classrooms in statements heavily laden with jargon, we end up debating our preconceived ideas of what constitutes good instruction. This is a bit like doctors discussing whether a patient is healthy without identifying vital signs, or like a carpenter discussing whether a house looks sturdy without describing the construction materials and joints. Such discussions generate a lot of heat without much light.

To talk with each other productively about what we see in classrooms we have to back up a step or two from where we usually start and simply try to observe what we see at the most basic descriptive level.



WHERE DO WE START

A good place to start describing classroom practice is in three questions:

1. What are the students doing and saying?
2. What are the teachers doing and saying?
3. What is the task?

As you go into each classroom use Post-It notes to write down the observations that you think best describe what's happening in the classroom in relation to a focus area or problem of practice. Be as specific as you can.

Examples of descriptive observations

- The teacher asked students to write a paragraph describing themselves, the circle all the adjectives.
- One student asked a group of others: "What connections do you make?"
- Students worked individually even though they were in groups. Each worked on own paper and didn't work with others.
- The teacher asked: "How are volcanoes and earthquakes similar and different?"

Note that descriptive observations are free of inference and judgement.

Classroom observation in the instructional rounds model is a discipline – a practice in the sense that it is a pattern of ways of observing and talking and is designed to create a common understanding among practitioners about the nature of their work (p85).

Examples of Judgmental and Nonjudgmental Description (p85)

Description Includes Observer's Judgement

- Fast-paced lesson
- Too much time spent on discussion and not enough time on individual work
- Excellent classroom management
- Teacher used effective questioning techniques with a range of students
- Teacher had good rapport with students
- Students conducted a very sophisticated lab experiment
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Description without Judgment

- Teacher asks , “How did you figure out this problem?” Student explains.
- Student followed directions in the text to make circuit boards.
- Teacher said, “ Write the words that I spell in the blank spaces. S-P-O-T, D-O-T, P-O-T
- Student 1 asks student 2: “What are we supposed to write down?”

Student 2: “I don't know”

Task: Find different ways to create a total of 31.

Student 1 wrote in maths journal:

$$5+5+5+5+5+5+1 = 31$$

$$10+10+10+1=31$$

WHY BE DESCRIPTIVE?

The basic reason is that we are searching for cause-and-effect relationships between what we observe teachers and students are doing and what students actually know and are able to observe as a consequence.

If we start by arguing about our assessments of what we see, then we seldom get to actually describing and predicting the causal relationship between teaching and learning. We end up debating our preconceptions about what constitutes good instruction, rather than analysing what we see going on in classrooms (p86).



COMMENTS THAT INCLUDE JUDGEMENT OR INFERENCE IMPEDE CONVERSATION

The discipline of description is helpful when you're operating on your own, because it slows you down and helps identify what your conclusion is based on, allowing you to check your assumptions before and after taking action. Sometimes, your assumptions are so strong that you look for what you expect and your assumptions subtly alter what you see.

When you stay in the descriptive mode, you are likely to notice more accurately what is happening in the classroom and your inferences will be on a firmer evidentiary foundation. Whilst description is helpful when you're on your own, it's imperative when you're engaging with others. At the heart of rounds is dialogue. (p87)

IT'S DESCRIPTIVE, BUT IS IT USEFUL?

Not all descriptions are equally useful. The descriptions we want are those that shed light on our problem of practice. Would: "Students are sitting on the rug" be evidence? Even if the conversation stays in the descriptive mode, some kinds of evidence are more helpful than others (p92).

EVIDENCE SHOULD BE "FINE GRAINED"

The term grain size comes from photography. When the camera is set incorrectly, the resulting photo may be fuzzy – it's hard to distinguish the elements in the photo. We say the grain size is large. When the grain size in a photo is fine, the image is clear and the edges are sharp.

The more general the description, the more room there is for fuzziness or interpretation and the more general our predictions and thinking will be. Finer-grained descriptions make it easier for us to discuss classrooms and build a common picture of what is happening. The table shows examples.

Large-Grained and Fine-Grained Evidence

Large-Grained Evidence

- Teacher questions students about a passage they had just read
- Students applied the concept of fractions in a hands-on activity
- Teacher made connections between the topic and students' lives

Fine-Grained Evidence

- Teacher: "How are volcanoes and earthquakes similar and different?"
- Students worked individually even though they were in groups. Each worked on own paper and didn't talk with others
- The task for students was to group the mini-beasts as either insects or non-insects



WHAT SHOULD WE FOCUS ON?

Everyone will focus on different things when they observe in a classroom. Here is the list developed by City and her colleagues. This list is not prescriptive, but rather describes what the writers see as important as a result of their experience:

- *First we get ourselves oriented. What grade is it? What is the content area? How many students are there? How many adults?*
- *Then we look at the task. What are the students being asked to do? What are they actually doing?*
- *We look at the patterns of interaction. Is it teacher-student-teacher? Do students talk to each other? Do students initiate conversation, or are they always responding to the teacher?*
- *We listen to questions. What questions are being asked? Who is asking them? What are the responses to the questions?*
- *We consider time. How much time is spent on what activity? We also note time periodically throughout the observation as part of mapping what we see. (p95)*

What do we do then?

When we have finished our observations we try to categorise or find patterns in the things we saw. As a group discuss as to whether or not your observation fits under any of the headings. Talk about why you think it fits or why you think it doesn't.

The benefit is in having professional conversations and in ensuring that they involve discussing differing points of view. Remember to go "beyond the land of nice" and to have conversations that involve both respect and challenge.

Finally, look at the overall patterns that you have found. What aspects of best practice were evident in your observations and what were not? In what area should the school be congratulated? As a group of leaders what areas might you choose to look at to further enhance the teaching and learning in the area that is our focus?



Remember that the purpose of this activity is to strengthen our understandings of teaching and learning. It is not to judge students, teachers or schools.



This flip-book was created by Barbara Reynolds for the Creating a Path Instructional Rounds Network – the first instructional rounds network established in NSW, Australia. Credit goes to the foundation principals for their courage, trust and foresight.

Reference:

Instructional Rounds in Education: A Network Approach to Improving Teaching and Learning, City, E.A., Elmore, R.F., Fiarman, S.E. and Teitel, L., Harvard Education Press, 2009