

Observing Lessons

As others (Berendt, 1985 and Dillard, 1985) have noted, *good observation includes all the physical senses* (particularly hearing and seeing, but also touch, smell, and taste), *empathic human sensitivities, mastery of the language, and spiritual awareness* you are capable of using. Observation is a whole person activity. We listen and watch for signals we can relate to our experiences, words, thoughts, and feelings. Anything we cannot relate to will probably be ignored. Do not discount any of your abilities to perceive or be attuned to the experiences you are having and the experiences of the people you are trying to understand (such as students, parents, other educators, etc.). Whatever you can do to develop and strengthen your sensitivities, observation, and listening skills in all these dimensions will enhance your abilities to take in valuable information quickly. Judy's first theme about the vulnerability of the educators on the inquiry team and their responsiveness to the plight of the children they were studying is evidence that she and they used their humanity to develop an empathic understanding of the children. They were able to see more deeply into the experience of the children as they listened to them and their parents, watched them with a desire to understand, and reviewed the children's records with a desire to hear messages that were written between the lines of those records.

Observing as a participant-observer is different than observing as a participant only. Spradley (1980) notes several differences between an ordinary participant (like a teacher) and a

participant observer (like a teacher-as-researcher). For instance, he claims that participant observers not only participate in the appropriate activities for the scene they are in, they also observe themselves and others engaging in activities and note the context of the setting in which these activities take place. The participant observer works carefully to overcome habits of inattention, bias, and simplification so their awareness is greater than a regular participant. The participant observer is also more introspective and thoughtful about the experience and goes to the trouble of writing about what he or she is thinking.

Bogdan and Biklen (1982) discuss a continuum from total observer to total participant and note that each inquiry requires the inquirer to find an appropriate role to play along that continuum. Most educators who see themselves as inquirers begin from the “total participant” end of the spectrum. But taking the inquiry seriously means you will have to change your role and associated relationships with others somewhat. You are not only a teacher or administrator in the school, you are someone who wants to stand back from that experience in various ways and at different times to take stock of what is going on and to comment on what you observe. The people you work with may resist. You may find that this takes a lot of extra work. It is so easy to stay in our patterns of behavior.

Judy found that as an assistant principal, she and others in the school agreed that her participant role included lots of observation activity. She didn’t look much different from a regular “participant” assistant principal who walks around and watches and listens. But Judy added several of the participant observer habits to her style. She used that base to include

teachers as part of her research team and built on their natural opportunities to observe. She invited them to join her to do a lot more writing than they normally would have done as full participants, moving them more and more toward the observer end of the participant-observer continuum.



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