

November 10, 2009: English Roundtable Web Chat on “Classroom Observation”

Abstract:

Observation is one of the best tools in our profession for aiding in professional development. However, this tool has been used predominantly as an administrative tool. As a result, many teachers fear being observed. As a professional development tool, there is nothing to fear and much to gain. Peer observations benefit both the observer and the one being observed, as long as there is a respectful and focused dialog following the observation. In this month’s English Roundtable Web Chat we want to discuss how to make peer observation a strong professional development tool for you. We will explore the process from pre-observation tasks to the post-observation discussion.

Damon Anderson: We should talk with the teacher before observing the teacher to let her/him know why we are observing them. We need to ask the teacher if there is anything the teacher would like us to observe or pay special attention to.

Xu Zhiqing: To me, observation of model classes seem to benefit me more.

Wang Hongwei: as ordinary teacher, it;s hard for us to get to know post observation results!! they end up usually in a piece of paper!!

susan: I want to say thank you to Tony, I have observed your class and now I am trying to do some practice that I have learned from your class:)

WendyAshby: Wang Hongwei: Can you request a verbal discussion? That is most helpful

Damon Anderson: Bravo Susan and Tony.

Wang Ping: Tony, well done! Have you learned anything out of Susan's class as well?

Damon Anderson: After the observation, there should be a two-way discussion about what was observed. The observer should not be judgemental.

Wang Hongwei: sometimes we know very clearly that we are not observed in professional ways!!

Tony: Thanks, susan. I have also learned a lot from observing and being observed!

Xu Zhiqing: disscussion after the observation seems to be more important than observation itself

Solongo: after observation both side the observer and the one who is being observed should have discussion about the lesson

Solongo: SO that they both learn i guess

susan: Yes, I agree with Ms.Xu!

Wang Shujuan: Teaching needs variety. By observing we try to find a more suitable way in English teaching.

WendyAshby: Wang Hongwei: I am so sorry to hear that, because it really makes a very useful tool into an unwelcome and unproductive process. I think all observers should take a course in etiquette and procedure for classroom observation.

Xu Zhiqing: before the observation, we had better have a teaching plan. In that way, we will have a better understanding.

Damon Anderson: In the follow-up discussion, the teacher can let the observer know if the students reacted/acted normally and if the teacher felt that the class went according to the lesson plan.

Wang Hongwei: in China, teachers are observed by two groups of people, one is our colleagues, and the other is experts and top professors from other colleges!!

Wang Ping: Xu Zhiqing, I agree. Every teacher may have different approach to a same piece of text. It helps if the observer would discuss the lesson plan or find out the teaching focus of the observed teacher ahead of time. That would also reduce some stress.

WendyAshby: I was wondering what kinds of feedback that you all find the most useful for you? Feedback about your own behavior, feedback about the lesson content, feedback about student behavior, etc.?

Wang Hongwei: actually, i'd rather the first group of people.because it is easy to get the true feedback, which will be helpful for my future teaching!!

Solongo: In mongolia also there are 2 kinds of group to observe the lesson . But before observing they don't let us know that they are going to.

Damon Anderson: I think that the observer should not try to force his/her way of doing things onto the teacher in either the before or post discussion of the lesson. It is the teacher's show. Let the teacher do it his/her way, then discuss the process of teaching.

Xu Zhiqing: Hi, Wendy. In my opinion, feedback about the teaching approach. The observer may contribute constructive ideas.

liu hong: hello everyone, we try to find out their common mistakes

Damon Anderson: Liu Hong, I don't think we should go into an observation thinking that we are going to find mistakes. We should go into an observation with a more positive frame of mind. don't you agree?

Tony: I have found that it is helpful if you first meet with your observer to discuss your goals for the course and any issues you would like the observer to pay particular attention to.

Wang Ping: From an observer's point of view, to appreciate/acknowledge the strength as well as the weaknesses of the teaching is equally important--another way to reduce stress on the observed part.

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Solongo: i said no

liu hong: Yes, I agree

Damon Anderson: Solongo, I get that often when I observe. It depends on the type of class and the reason for your observation.

WendyAshby: Has anybody ever tried to form an informal observation group of a few trusted peers - just to conduct informal observations and have a chat about teaching in a social context? Forming your own community of practice?

Wang Hongwei: for the 2nd group of people, it's hard to get the true feedback!!but sometimes their feedbacks are of vital importance in case that ordinary teachers want to get a promotion!!

Solongo: because every lesson should go on without me

WendyAshby: Solongo- good job. Correct answer!!!

Solongo: There i was just to see how she is teaching not trying to get better points by asking me to that

Tony: Wendy, I am trying to do that now.

Damon Anderson: I once was observing a class because I wanted to see how the students were reacting to a particular exercise and set of materials. By participating in a group, I was able to get a better sense of that. I was not there to observe the teacher.,

WendyAshby: When i got my observation training we were told to be a fly on the wall and as invisible as possible

Wang Hongwei: these group of experts are in the position to determine an ordinary teachers' future!!but their observation are not always valuable enough!!

Solongo: good saying Wendy

WendyAshby: To Damon: I think that was a good idea for that particular question

Damon Anderson: There are different reasons for us to observe a class. Sometimes it is to observe the teacher, sometimes to see how certain materials or exercises work, sometimes to see how students are.

susan: For the informal observation group, I have a few trusted peers, sometimes we just talk about the teaching content or some other ways to arouse students' interest. Is this a good start?

WendyAshby: Wang Hongwei: What do you mean that they are not valuable enough? Do you mean that they don't give you any useful information?

Solongo: yeah it depends

WendyAshby: Susan - EXCELLENT start!!! Keep it up

Xu Zhiqing: I have a question in mind, we want to make observation beneficial to us. However, will observation affect students in class and teaching effects.

susan: Thank you!

Wang Hongwei: in China we need to establish a mechanism of observing and judging and assessing teachers in a fairer and just way!!

susan: Yes, absolutely!

Tony: Do you think it is important to let the students know that there will be a visitor who is observing the class?

WendyAshby: Wang Hongwei - I'm sorry if this is inappropriate - I am still learning. Can you explain what you perceive to be unjust? It would help me understand the context in which I observe better if you can do that without it causing trouble for you :-)

Damon Anderson: Xu Zhiqing, that is one of the best questions. Anytime there is an observer, the students will most likely not react as normal. Unless of course they are used to having observers.

Wang Hongwei: I am trying to explain!

Solongo: I think students should know that they will have a visitor

Damon Anderson: I agree, Solongo.

WendyAshby: Xu Zhiqing: Unfortunately, observers will always change the class dynamic. That is why I think we were told to be as unobtrusive as possible even though we know that the class would probably have gone a bit differently without us there. One thing I can tell though, is if the activities the teachers are conducting are normal activities for the class or if they are new to the students (ie just for the observer to see). I can tell by how students react to certain activities whether this is a regular part of their learning or not.

Damon Anderson: My problem here in China is that when I go to observe a class there is a large group: me, the principal, the FAO, and at least one or two other people. So the dynamics of the class are never normal. It is unfortunate.

Wang Hongwei: I guess that is because even if for the group of experts, they are only the expert in a specific area, not in all areas!

Wang Ping: When we observe a peer's class, how do we take down notes? I know many schools have a standard form to fill out. Other than that? and Who will read the notes afterwards?

susan: I think, at the beginning of class some students may feel uncomfortable. Then if the teacher acts normally, not nervous, the students may forget that they are under observation. It's up to the teacher.

WendyAshby: Damon: I have also noted that in addition to this crowd of people, the class is often being videotaped. Talk about nervous!!!!

Damon Anderson: In spite of the big crowd, I have seen some very excellent teaching here!! I have learned a few things to incorporate in my teaching.

Solongo: you know there are some students who can change their behaviour, act differently

Solongo: when they see new person

WendyAshby: Wang Ping: I use a form with three columns. Time, observation, comment. This separates fact from opinion and makes clear to the teacher the difference between what I saw and how I interpreted it. It allows the teacher more opportunity to explain the observation based on his/her knowledge of the class. For formative observations, I always give the form to the teacher to keep. If I need it for some reason, I ask for permission to keep a photocopy.

Damon Anderson: This is why the post-observation discussion is so important. The teacher can tell us how the dynamics normally are.

Wang Hongwei: first it's hard to get the true results of the observation from the expert group!!

Xu Zhiqing: I agree with Solongo. Sometimes, with an observer, the teacher will make less face-threatening acts

Tony: Everyone: This is a great web-page for an observation checklist.
<http://teaching.berkeley.edu/observe.html>

Wang Ping: Thank you Wendy.

WendyAshby: Tony - thanks!!! Very helpful :-)

Damon Anderson: Thank you, Tony.

Xu Zhiqing: many thanks to Tony

Wang Hongwei: anyway, I still hold that observation is needed, but the establishment of a just and reasonable observation mechanism is also needed!

Damon Anderson: Wang Hongwei, I agree. Perhaps if a school is encouraging teachers to observe each other, they can develop a good rubric to use and to talk from.

Xu Zhiqing: There is a difference between peer observation and observation by some professionals.

Damon Anderson: We could help you develop such a rubric if you like.

Damon Anderson: Xu Zhiqing, you are absolutely correct!

Damon Anderson: Tony, how were you able to develop a good observation program at Jilin?

Xu Zhiqing: for both of the observer those being observed, I think we need a training

WendyAshby: I think though that sometimes in using a rubric, it is still dependent on the underlying philosophy of the observers (though it should not be). If I am looking for certain things, I'll use a certain rubric and so on. Even though there is a pretty standard list of teacher behaviors that lead to student proficiency, I think administrators often hold those behaviors to be signs of poor teaching because of their own methodological viewpoints

Wang Hongwei: to tell the truth, we don't like observing others and being observed, maybe this can be explained as what is called "national psycho"!!

Solongo: you know in the lesson students learn best when they have peer tutoring that conversation with teacher. So I think that we also learn the best from peer observation

Wang Shujuan: The process is benefit for observer, post- observation commuication is good for the one being observed.

WendyAshby: Wang Hogmei: You made me laugh. Good observation :-)

Damon Anderson: Observation for administrative reasons is what most teachers fear or dislike. However, when I have worked with teachers on developing observation for professional development, many really like it and benefit from it.

Wang Ping: If teachers start to develop a professional community with their peers, benefit from discussing about teaching practices, lesson plans and from later on from giving feedback to each other after the observation, the other observing group, the admin group, may start to adopt your approach.

Xu Zhiqing: I agree with Ms. Wang but teachers in China need a change in attitude about observation

Wang Hongwei: teaching contest are usually held in many colleges and universities, this is a good way that some teachers perfered being observed!!

Damon Anderson: Kathleen Bailey says that we are products of our apprenticeship of observation: we teach the way we were taught. So, in order to learn a new way or method or technique, maybe we need a new apprenticeship of observation. We need to observe people doing what we would like to do or learn to do.

WendyAshby: Xu Zhiqing: How would you describe their current attitude?

Tony: Damon: I met with many teachers individually to "break the ice" and then offered my class for observation, stressing the mutual benefits of observation. I found many teachers were not only afraid to be observed, but also afraid to observe.

Damon Anderson: How did you work through the emotional barriers?

WendyAshby: Damon: I agree. Most of what I know about good language teaching was learned between the ages of 12-15 from my jr high school German teacher

Xu Zhiqing: yes, the contest allows a lot of observers, but we receive very little peer feedback. In most cases, praising words.

Wang Hongwei: i agree!! i can possibly learn a lot from the teachers in other disciplines!!

Wang Ping: I'd say it takes more than just a few times' observation for peers to work out a way that's beneficiary to both sides. It takes patience, understanding, and motivation to want to improve oneself and to learn.

Damon Anderson: We need to separate administrative observation from peer observation for professional development.

Tony: Damon: If you focus on the main goals for the lesson and have a checklist for them, it can help prevent focus on their emotions.

Damon Anderson: Excellent, Tony. That is why the pre-observation discussion is just as important as the post discussion.

Damon Anderson: Any time any of you are in Beijing, please come to the RELO Center in the Jing Guang Center (28th floor). We have a great resource library here for your professional development. Some of our books have some excellent comments and suggestions regarding observation.

Wang Hongwei: as it is good , as we have an old saying that a person can have a greater professional achievement if he can pose a right attitude towards the assessment of his peers, always be modest and prudent to face any praise or even criticisms!!

Wang Shujuan: That's right. Peer observation and communication is a very effective way to improve teaching

Wang Hongwei: i agree!!

Xu Zhiqing: we need to develop a mechanism for observation

Damon Anderson: In your country (we have people here from different countries) do teachers have a specific professional development plan? If so, is observation part of that plan?

Wang Ping: When an expert comes to observe, it may help for the teacher to communicate to the expert in advance the teaching goals, primary focus of the class, as well as points that s/he would like to

be observed and commented on later. It'll encourage self needs analysis and may help generate more construsive feedback.

Xu Zhiqing: and also a training about how to oberse

Wang Hongwei: the problem observation has been used too much as an administrative tool here in China!!

Xu Zhiqing: Yes, I agree

Damon Anderson: Perhaps we can organize an observation training workshop that can be done by our Fellows in the different parts of China and also take it to Mongolia. Would teachers be interested in that?

Solongo: Damon: Not exactly development program, but the first year I became a teacher, the head of our department told to observe other teachers who have been teaching for 3 or more years.

Xu Zhiqing: some people mistake observation as cheking, which is conducted by someone superior in position. That maybe the reason why a lot of teachers feel uneasy about peer observation.

Xu Zhiqing: I woul dbe very much interested in it, hehe

Wang Shujuan: Yes.Good.

Tony: Do you think the main purpose of observation formative (to improve teaching) or summative (to provide data to be used in personnel decisions)?

Solongo: Damon: Which really encouraged me to be a good teacher.

Damon Anderson: We are almost out of time for this chat. I have enjoyed it and learned much from you all today. Our next web chat will follow in the area of professional development and look at reflective teaching. Unless you want another session on observation. What do you think?

Wang Hongwei: fortunely, China is on it way to formalize and standardize its operation in a more academic way, so there is a lot to be done, in obseving and judging its faculty!!

Wang Ping: If several teachers really think they would benefit from a professional community, such as from peer observation, these teachers can take the initiative to start observing each other's classes. Please take advantage of the resources at the RELO center, and also feel free to call on us with your question and inquiries.

Peng Xuemei: How to encourage other teachers to be a peer observer?

WendyAshby: Could we use DVC technology to create a professional community across different countries?

Damon Anderson: Peng Xuemei, invite them to observe your class.

WendyAshby: Duh - w'ere doing that now - but I mean to talk about our own teaching and get ideas from others

Tony: I would like to invite anyone who is in Changchun to come to my class anytime. My class schedule is on the Jilin University website.

Damon Anderson: Wendy, we could use DVC, which is differen from this chat forum. But that would require people to go to somewhere where there is the equipment available. We could use video and mic in this forum, but in the past, not everyone has the bandwidth to support those.

WendyAshby: I am also wondering if DVC could be used to broadcast model classes? Though it is true that this puts people at a disadvantage who don't have the technology.

Damon Anderson: Well, I want to thank you all for participating today in this web chat. It has been great. Unfortunately, our time is up. We will post the transcript of this so you can read it all again later. Thank you everyone!!!

Wang Hongwei: i've lerned a lot from today's chats with all od you !!i'm expecting for the next chat!!

Tony: Excellent!

WendyAshby: Thanks to you too. I like the webchats!! See you all next time!!

Xu Zhiqing: I enjoyed this chat.

Peng Xuemei: Thanks a lot , Demon!

Wang Ping: Thank you all! If you want a copy of this chat's transcript, let me know and I'll send you one. See you all soon!

Wang Shujuan: Bye.

Wang Hongwei: we have an old saying like this : taliking to wise people once can save you 10-year's time of schooling, a poor translation!!

Wang Hongwei: i really really enjoy talking to all of you !!!

Damon Anderson: Thank you Wang Hongwei. Thank you all!!!