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ABSTRACT

The guidelines used by the Bowling Green State University, Ohio, speech communication department to assess graduate assistants' teaching skills are outlined in this paper. Visitations by observers, in conjunction with introductory sessions, weekly staff meetings, and teacher's manuals, can provide follow-up feedback regarding the implementation of activities and ideas, can stimulate the evaluation of teaching skills, can establish standards for improvement, and can let graduate assistants know that effective teaching is important. Criteria for evaluation are grouped in ten categories: preparation, structure, rapport, motivation, interaction, adaptation, poise, facilitation, physical environment, and overall pace of class. A sample visitation response form suggests specific standards for assessing skill levels in these areas and provides a concise method of feedback for the instructor. (KS)

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THE QUEST FOR QUALITY TEACHING: IN-CLASS VISITATIONS

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by

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A Paper Presented at the "Workshop for Directors of Basic Speech Programs"
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Training graduate assistants to teach the basic, speech-communication course may involve intensive, introductory sessions, weekly staff meetings, or the provision of teacher's manuals that instruct the student in how to proceed, what alternatives exist, and what supplementary materials might be used. Whatever the method or approach, it cannot be considered complete unless in-class visitations are conducted for the purpose of 1) follow-up observations regarding the effective implementation of ideas and activities, 2) evaluation of teaching skills, 3) providing guidelines for improvement, and 4) letting graduate assistants know that effective teaching is important. The function of this essay is to further clarify the purposes outlined above, to briefly outline the criteria a visiting observer should evaluate, and, finally, to provide a form (the "Weaver Classroom Visitation Response Form") which has proven successful in implementing a visitation program.

In the training program at Bowling Green State University (Bowling Green, Ohio) introductory sessions, weekly staff meetings, teacher's manuals, and visitations are used. The graduate assistants who instruct in the basic program come from all areas of the School (Theatre, Radio-Television, Pathology and Audiology, and Interpersonal and Public Communication), thus, they have varying degrees of familiarity with the components of the basic-communication course (composed of interpersonal, small-group, and public communication). Most graduate students have recently completed a four-year bachelor-of-arts program and have little or no teaching experience. Most are scared or at least experience an anticipatory anxiety. The function of the introductory sessions is to familiarize graduate students with the director, the philosophy, and the approach, but also to immerse them quickly and directly into the activities they will soon be conducting. Since many of the opening activities are designed to familiarize undergraduate students with

each other, they serve the same function for graduate students.[1] They also relieve anxiety, create a positive communication environment, and facilitate the building of a community among those who instruct in the basic course.

WHAT ARE THE PURPOSES OF VISITATIONS?

Because the activities and exercises used in the course are conducted in the introductory sessions and are continued in the weekly staff meetings, it is appropriate to visit classrooms to make certain that activities and exercises are handled correctly by the graduate students. For the director, of course, it provides a check to help overcome the most common obstacle to clear communication, the myth that "if its clear to me, it must be clear to you, also."[2] Just because an activity has been executed for the graduate students, and just because they have been involved in it, does not mean that they understand it, see the purpose of it, or know how to discuss it. The observer can offer further insights to the teacher if follow-up visitations are conducted.

One may think that if the graduate student has any difficulty with an exercise or activity in the classroom, that he or she will ask questions. In some cases, he or she may not even realize that there is any difficulty. An observer can provide a reference point or an objective opinion regarding effectiveness. It is a mistake to assume that the atmosphere created when conducting exercises or activities for graduate students is necessarily the same as when the same exercises or activities are executed for undergraduates. The experiences, perceptions, and knowledge that students bring to a situation are often more important than the content contained in the situation itself; thus, graduate students may feel more, see more, and gain more from an experience than undergraduates, just because they are more mature or because they are older. Transferring an activity from one context to another

involves far more than "doing it again," and the extent to which graduate students are challenged to see and adapt to the differences often determines the level of success.

Many of the problems with implementing exercises and activities[3] may have to do with inadequate or weak teaching skills. Some of these problems may be minor and easily rectified; some may be major and affect all other in-class projects. For example, a graduate student may give directions too rapidly, not allow time for student questions, or allow no time for follow-up discussion. These are minor problems that can be overcome once an awareness, or need, is created. On the other hand, a graduate student may not be assuming the reins of leadership in a class, or may be exhibiting a strongly autocratic or authoritarian role, or may be doing things that inhibit the establishment of rapport. These problems, if not corrected or improved, may soon become habitual modes of dealing with students. Many of these "problems" are not revealed when the graduate student is a participant in an activity; to provide time, however, for all graduate students to lead activities is impossible. Also, leadership of peers and leadership of one's students may evoke different personality characteristics; thus, especially in circumstances where graduate students are teaching for the first time, observations are important simply to view the teacher in relationship to his or her students.

Observations are useful, too, for providing guidelines for improvement. The extent to which an "ah-h-h ha!" experience can be given heuristic value--encouraging the graduate student to discover for him- or herself--is the extent to which a classroom visitation is made practical. Confronting a weakness, it is best to offer graduate students suggestions, alternatives, and avenues for experimentation as opposed to "the method" or "the approach"

considered most appropriate. If they feel that the observer is trying to "make them over" in the observer's own image, they will become defensive, hostile, and bitter, and visitations are likely to become meaningless. Graduate students who view the observer as one who will be helpful in increasing teaching effectiveness, as opposed to a critical adjudicator, will tend to be more accepting and less nervous about in-class visitations. The practical benefits, for those wishing to improve, then, will help offset any preconceived negative notions.

Too often in the educational experience, teaching effectiveness is alluded to as being important. It is given "lip-service" and flaunted as one area of primary responsibility for those in higher education. But how often is proof provided that it is of paramount importance? --how often are weak skills pointed out and strong skills praised? --how often are concrete guidelines suggested for teacher improvement? In-class visitations provide evidence that teaching is important. Even for teachers of superior quality, an in-class visitation by a person of some higher authority or rank says, in effect, "somebody gives a damn about what I am doing." What greater purpose is needed?

In this same context, an in-class visitation by a superior may also lend dignity and importance to what is going on in the classroom. One should not overlook the value of the visitation to the undergraduates. When they see an observer joining the class, even for a day, it means that the spotlight has been turned on their classroom. It means that somebody cares about the teaching job being performed in that class. Such a spark may be just enough to re-kindle their enthusiasm for the tasks at hand. It may say to them, "Some-body else cares, maybe I should too!"

WHAT ARE THE ESSENTIAL CRITERIA?

Graduate students at Bowling Green State University are faced with a tightly structured syllabus composed, primarily, of exercises and activities. "Content" is provided through a basic textbook and reader[4] and through ten weekly lectures at which mandatory attendance by graduates and undergraduates is required. The foremost job of graduate students is to facilitate the execution of the exercises and activities and, further, to relate them to the "content" of the course; thus, there is an overriding assumption that graduate students have not only attended all the lectures and read all the material, but that they understand it and can apply it in their classroom.

The criteria used to evaluate graduate students falls into ten categories (see the form included at the end of this essay). Each one is essential, and seldom is it necessary to overlook a category when a visitation is conducted. Sometimes an additional category covering the "content" of what is being conveyed to the students is added on the blank, reverse side of the form. The blank spaces on the front (and at the bottom), allow for complete flexibility in responding. There is no need to restrict oneself to checks or x-marks. To do this would limit one's ability to respond completely and would limit one's ability to suggest alternatives or mention suggestions.

"Preparation" for class may be revealed in the existence of notes, handouts, or other material. These are obvious manifestations of preparedness. Not so obvious, sometimes, is the feeling that a graduate student knows what he or she is talking about, knows what he or she wants from the class, or knows how to defend an assignment, an approach, or an idea without having to rely on notes, books, or other authorities. A teacher can outline the essential criteria, be ready with supplementary material, and efficiently use class time, and still come across as unprepared if he or she cannot

adequately answer a student question on the readings, on the purpose of an exercise, or on the reason for a lecture. Hopefully, outside preparation is pursued concurrently with, and above and beyond, learning the simple, sometimes mechanical process of implementing activities.

Just as preparation may be revealed in some obvious ways, so is "structure." Alerting classes to forthcoming assignments, exams, and readings, or outlining daily classroom procedures or agendas can be easily accomplished. The organized graduate student, however, will not only view the forest but will explain the relationships between the trees of the forest and, perhaps, will even take the time to look specifically at the detail of some of the trees. If a basic course is well constructed, activities should build on each other, concepts should interrelate, and ideas developed in the readings and in lectures should be meaningful to understanding exercises and activities. The well-organized graduate student sees the interrelationships, ties material together, and provides a unifying and synthesizing force for students. Teachers must come to realize that relationships that are not made in the classroom are, generally, connections that undergraduates will probably never make.

"Rapport" is a concept that cannot be superficially developed. Graduate students must recognize that undergraduates <u>are</u> essential and significant. This is a feeling or an impression that cannot be fabricated. If an undergraduate student perceives that the teacher does not care about his or her needs, the credibility (and, thus, the effectiveness) of that teacher is quickly diminished. Some students will go so far as to "test" the teacher on his or her level of concern. To show that a graduate student recognizes the needs of students means three things: 1) he or she <u>must</u> believe that students <u>are</u> important. If truly internalized, the feeling will be conveyed. 2) A

graduate student must notice students. He or she must "turn the spotlight" on the class and must see them as individuals. Finally, 3) he or she must not dominate students. To dictate to, to manipulate, to command, or to otherwise "control" students is often viewed negatively. One approach for the graduate student is to let undergraduates know that they are important. The extent to which undergraduates feel that the graduate student is impressed by them, is the extent to which they will feel that he or she is one of the most intelligent, personable individuals they have met.

There is no real way to test whether or not a graduate student has internalized an attitude that students are important; however, it is this author's assumption that one who has internalized such an attitude will probably demonstrate more of the following kind of behavior than one who has not: He or she will know the names of class members and will use them, will show genuine concern for students' needs and maybe even anticipate some of them, will pick up nonverbal cues that indicate the need to react, comment, or question, will reward responses through paraphrasing or building upon comments with additional thoughts, will listen to class members and will share ideas with them. It is not difficult for an observer to perceive an atmosphere of acceptance, trust, and mutuality (mutual regard for the other person) even as a result of a single visitation, if these values truly exist and have been successfully developed.

"Motivation" is another easily perceivable characteristic of quality graduate-student teaching, although in some cases true motivation may exist but not be revealed because of personality characteristics. A shy person, for example, may be "motivated," but may not be able to reveal enthusiasm and energy in the classroom to the same extent as an extroverted person. A reserved person may have to exert more energy or simply do more to reveal to

students that he or she is enthusiastic. An in-class visitation, however, is one way that an observer is able to know if a graduate student can maintain the attention of the class. Is he or she dynamic and strong, excited about the situation, forthright and direct with students? Variety can sometimes be revealed by the graduate student if he or she does things a little differently: setting up chairs in a new way, utilizing a slightly different format, taking a position that is different, moving around the room rather than standing or sitting still, relating the activity to new information, or tying an activity to a newly found frame of reference. Variety will often serve as a new source of energy for undergraduates. Willingness to change, to become, to perceive, and to grow, on the part of the graduate student, is a function of motivation for without motivation, there is no strength, excitement, or energy.

Enthusiasm and energy is also conveyed through effective oral communication. Whether or not one believes in or supports the value of "imitation"--the idea that students will tend to imitate the behavior presented to them by the instructor in a classroom--imitation does occur, and it is important. Students view as hypocritical the instructor who demands effective oral communication habits from them and yet does not use notes well, speaks at an uncomfortable rate, or volume, or uses ineffectual physical movement. A positive spirit is provided when what students see is similar to what is expected of them. This aspect is one of the easiest to observe, and it does not require an expert technician to point out strengths and weaknesses. It should not be overlooked in visitation responses, however, because it is neither trivial, unimportant, nor meaningless.

A positive communication environment is also created by developing and fostering interaction. There is no "communication" class where interaction

is inappropriate, and most could use considerably more. It is "safe" to protect oneself from students by not allowing time for it, by not asking for it, or by not opening oneself to it (and thus encouraging it) when it occurs. Interaction is risky because it is impromptu and spontaneous and requires flexibility and responsiveness on the part of the graduate student. Some graduate students may try to "put on a show" for the observer by asking questions and probing students only when the visitation occurs. A spontaneous, open climate, however, is usually established over a period of time. Willingness to respond and the feeling of involvement by undergraduates becomes a pattern of behavior. A pattern that is not well established or that is not accepted as commonplace, will appear artificial if staged just for the observer. Active oral and written criticism, involvement by all class members, spontaneity, and eagerness to participate are symptoms of a healthy classroom atmosphere--an atmosphere that requires more than a simple response like "are there any questions?" and more, too, than a "one-shot" salutatory gesture in the correct direction. Asking individual students specific questions such as, "can you cite an example of that?" or "what do you mean by 'good'?" draws students out and makes them conscious of the need to support and defend observations. If the students do not see the process of support and defense in the classroom, why should they come to understand the need for it in other kinds of communication?

In a basic speech-communication course where readings are required, lectures are delivered by other people, and section meetings are handled by graduate students, it is easy for students to see three separate parts rather than one unified whole. Some of this is inevitable because all that is covered in the readings and in the lectures cannot be applied in the classroom. Some of this, however, can be controlled if graduate students are reminded to

relate (adapt) what they are doing specifically to readings and lectures. The visitation provides the observer an opportunity for suggesting means for doing this.

"Adaptation" also means the graduate student's ability to be flexible and spontaneous in relating to student needs: holding a class on the lawn or in another place more conducive to the exercise, supplying materials needed by a student, or allowing changes or alterations in schedules if needed and if appropriate. To adapt to a specific class attitude may require dropping an exercise or using an alternative; it may mean discussing frustrations, hostilities, or concerns; it may mean changing the pattern of conducting a class by beginning with a discussion rather than ending with it. "Adaptation" may also mean bringing current events into the classroom, relating to what may be occurring on campus, or talking about the feature story in that day's college newspaper. It means relating one day's assignment or exercise to the last one and to the next one as well. It means self-disclosing when appropriate--letting students come to know the teacher a bit better. "Adaptation" also means being ready for the unexpected. The more rigid and inflexible, the less a graduate student can adapt; but with suggestions, comments, and alternatives provided by an observer, the teacher can more effectively see what it means and, thus, become more spontaneous. "Adaptation" is something that cannot be taught and, too, it is not always observed; however, when it occurs, it often separates the "quality" teacher from the insecure one.

Easy to observe, but no less important than adaptation, is the graduate student's poise. Ability to be calm, confident, alert, relaxed, and comfortable is reflective of strong graduate teaching. Sometimes a graduate student may become so anxious over a prospective visit that all calm and composure that may have been exhibited vanishes. This does not happen as often when a

visitation program is instituted and followed on a regular basis; the more regular the visits, the less anxiety and the better the perspective provided for the observer. Despite a touch of nervousness because of a visitor, however, a teacher's poise can often be observed through the way he or she commands the situation (takes charge), his or her interaction with the students, and, perhaps, the sense of humor revealed. These graduate students most often rated highest by students maintain a friendly disposition that is responsive to the humor that grows naturally from the normal interaction occurring in the classroom. They are not necessarily the "gifted" storytellers, the ones that come to class with a new joke for each class period, nor the teacher who plans anecdotes and "witty" comments in advance. The best humor, they have discovered, is that which includes both the students and the teacher and is immediate and not pre-planned.

Closely alligned with poise is the graduate student's ability to guide and lead the class. Do they assume the role of the teacher? Is their leadership (whether it be laissez-faire, democratic, or authoritarian) appropriate for the situation or for the exercise? Guidance is sometimes reflected in the respect students have for the teacher; it is sometimes conveyed in the students' understanding of what is going on and in their willingness to take over as a result of carefully-laid previous plans; and it is sometimes conveyed through subtle, "mysterious," nonverbal cues that offer insight into student-teacher relationships and feelings. Facilitation--assisting in the progress of the class--is often a feeling rather than an action or a directive.

The final two categories are also easy to observe; however, success in these areas can often separate a productive and useful class period from one that is frought with difficulties and distractions. To let graduate students know that they are being observed as they relate to the physical environment

and arrangement of the class, and the way they affect the pace of the class is to cause them to be concerned about two essential ingredients that often distinguish the alert teacher from the unprepared or neglectful teacher. Their response to these items, too, may separate a successful class period from one that is unsuccessful.

Exercises and activities often require certain physical arrangements.[5] A teacher insensitive to such requirements can jeopardize their success. How the teacher seats the class, uses the blackboard, or moves among the class may make a difference in how students respond. Some classrooms do not lend themselves to conducting several small-group discussions at the same time. Some are arranged so that everyone is not facing the blackboard. Some may not have enough chairs so that an extra one can be placed in each group for visits from the teacher. The physical arrangements of the classroom--especially its limitations--must be thought about, planned for, and, in some cases, compensated for, in advance, to assure success.

The graduate student is also responsible for maintaining the pace of the class. Sloppy habits in beginning or ending the class on time may reveal to students lack of concern for them. It may show that the students do not feel the graduate student thinks the class is important, or that "time" itself is a non-essential element in communication activities. Again, "model" behavior here means that the teacher can expect the same from students, that other standards or norms are more likely to be observed, and that students will more likely consider the graduate student to be a credibile source. Since there is often a closeness in age between the undergraduate students and the graduate-student teacher, credibility is a desirable commodity that should not be sacrificed by deficiencies in areas where control is easily (or can easily be) maintained. "Content," and "organization" are sometimes more

difficult areas in which to maintain control, but if the graduate student is alert, conscientious, and responsible, this need not be true of "time."

Another aspect of "pace" concerns whether material should be treated slowly or quickly. Although this may depend upon the exercise, the situation, or the students, it depends to a great degree, too, on the development of a warm sensitivity to the procedures of the class and whether or not understanding or agreement has been achieved. Such sensitivity necessitates some objectivity. A graduate student, even when involved in what is going on, must remain detached enough to control the pace. A positive, communicating, responsive class period often results from a balanced and appropriate handling of time.

HOW ARE IN-CLASS VISITATIONS CONDUCTED?

Several factors have contributed to the success of implementing a regular in-class visitation program. The first is that it is best if graduate students receive blank copies of the form and, also, some explanation of each factor to be evaluated. An essay such as this might serve this purpose.

Secondly, all visitations are unscheduled. No graduate student is given any warning as to when they will occur; thus, they are not trying to "psyche out" the observer's timing to make a special presentation. Some follow-up visitations are conducted at once; sometimes a second visitation is run at a later time. Graduate students never know how many times they might be visited, and even the best may be visited several times.

Thirdly, a non-threatening, supportive atmosphere is created. Graduate students are encouraged to request a visitation at any time; thus, the motivation for conducting one does not lie in the hands of the director alone. Sometimes, a problem, a new exercise, the need for additional sugges-

tions, or the desire for an objective critique on speeches (to compare standards), may be the stimulus. Whatever the cause, the fact that the decision to carry-out a visitation can originate by either the teacher or the observer is significant in fostering a positive visitation climate.

Fourthly, the categories on the form are suggestive. There is no assumption made that the form covers all that can be said of graduate-student teaching. Often there will be more writing in the margins and on the back than what is printed on the form. An observer need not limit responses to checks nor x-marks, nor to the categories contained. The form guides the observer to some of the important areas and categories and provides enough material so that important observations or factors are not overlooked.

Fifthly, all forms are returned to the director of the program. This means that a file can be maintained on graduate students and their progress can be followed. If forms were not returned, comments would be "hit or miss," and it would not appear that progress was a concern. Also, maintaining a file contributes to the high level of importance given to teaching. Student evaluations are placed into the same file as additional evidence of teaching competence and ability.

Finally, when problems arise or the need for further explanation occurs, the observer must also consider it his or her responsibility to engage in discussions with the graduate students. Sometimes, patterns of weakness occur and such concerns or explanations can be handled in staff meetings. Otherwise, some individual meetings may also be necessary. Again, theneed for such a meeting can be responded to by either the observer or the teacher, and such meetings should take place as soon after the visitation as possible.

WHAT DOES THE FORM LOOK LIKE?

The form is placed on one long, legal-size sheet of paper; thus, it is convenient and easy to handle. The form follows:

WEAVER CLASSROOM VISITATION RESPONSE FORM

NAME _____ SECTION NUMBER _____ BUILDING AND ROOM _____

DATE _____ TIME _____ QUARTER AND YEAR _____

Key: ✓ = good X = needs work Blank = irrelevant (or not responded to)

1. ___ Preparation (Readiness)
   - ___ Looked prepared
   - ___ Knew material well
   - ___ Efficient use of class time
   - ___ Knew what you wanted from the class
   - ___ Outlined essential criteria for them
   - ___ Ready with supplementary information

2. ___ Sturcture (Organization)
   - ___ Clear
   - ___ Conveyed to class
   - ___ Reviewed important concepts
   - ___ Tied ideas together
   - ___ Covered essential points (material)
   - ___ Easy to take notes from you
   - ___ Alerted class to forthcoming assignments, exams, readings, etc.

3. ___ Rapport (Warmth and Sensitivity)
   - ___ Knew class well (called them by name)
   - ___ Concern for class demonstrated
   - ___ Awareness of class needs
   - ___ Picked up nonverbal cues
   - ___ Rewarded responses
   - ___ Listened to class members
   - ___ Shared ideas with class
   - ___ Built on and added to comments from class
   - ___ Received strong responses from class (well liked by class)

4. ___ Motivation (Enthusiasm and Energy)
   - ___ Maintained attention of class
   - ___ Dynamic and strong
   - ___ Offers variety
   - ___ Excited about the situation
   - ___ Forthright and direct
   - ___ Effective use of notes
   - ___ Effective physical movement
   - ___ Effective rate (speed) of presentation
   - ___ Effective volume
   - ___ Positive spirit reflected

5. ___ Interaction (Encouraging questions and comments from the class)
   - ___ Oral
   - ___ Written
   - ___ Asked probing questions (pursued students)
   - ___ Had everyone participating
   - ___ Filled silences
   - ___ Encouraged class responsiveness
   - ___ Involved with class

6. ___ Adaptation (Flexibility and Spontaneity)
   - ___ To readings
   - ___ To lectures
   - ___ To individual student needs
   - ___ To current class attitude
   - ___ To current events
   - ___ To past or future assignments
   - ___ To your own experience
   - ___ To unexpected occurrences

7. ___ Poise (Composure)
   - ___ Calm
   - ___ Confident
   - ___ Alert
   - ___ Relaxed and Comfortable
   - ___ Commanded situation (took charge)
   - ___ Sense of humor revealed
   - ___ Presented a model of an effective communicator

8. ___ Facilitation (Guidance and Leadership)
   - ___ Assumed role of teacher
   - ___ Guided class
   - ___ Laissez-faire
   - ___ Democratic
   - ___ Authoritarian

9. ___ Physical Environment and Arrangement of Class
   - ___ Seating appropriate
   - ___ Use of blackboard
   - ___ Awareness of distractions
   - ___ Appropriate lighting
   - ___ Your relation to the class appropriate (sitting, standing, moving, etc.)

10. ___ Overall Pace of Class (Rate or speed by which class time passed by)
   - ___ Began class on time
   - ___ Moved through material quickly
   - ___ Moved through material slowly
   - ___ Balanced and appropriate
   - ___ Ended class on time
   - ___ A healthy class environment (positive, communicating, responsive)

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

Footnotes

[1]For an example of one such "early" activity see, Richard L. Weaver, II "Reflections: An Introduction to the Transactionist Perspective," Today's Speech, XXIII (Summer 1975), 25-28.

[2]See J. William Pfeiffer and John E. Jones, The 1974 Annual Handbook for Group Facilitators (La Jolla, Calif.: University Associates Publishers, Inc., 1974), p. 126.

[3]See Richard L. Weaver, II, "The Use of Exercises and Games," Speech Teacher, XXIII (November 1974), 302-311.

[4]The basic textbock is Saundra Hybels and Richard L. Weaver, II, Speech/ Communication (N.Y.: D. Van Nostrand, 1974), and the reader is Richard L. Weaver, II, Speech Communication: A Reader (Columbus, Ohio: Collegiate Publishing Incorporated, 1975).

[5]Weaver, "The Use of Exercises and Games," 302-311.