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ABSTRACT

The Writing Program Director at Johnson County Community College (Kansas) developed quantitative measures for writing instruction evaluation which can support that institution's growing interest in and support for peer collaboration as a means to improving instructional quality. The first process (Interaction Analysis) has an observer measure verbal activity in the classroom for a specified time. The second process (Classroom Flow Charting) involves an observer writing down the flow of a session and includes comments and reactions to the activity as well as suggestions for changes or alternatives to consider for future sessions. The third process (Peer Collaboration) involves a series of observations taken out of the evaluation context--most often the activity involves a combination of observation, methodology discussions, student interviews, and assignment analysis. The important part of such an evaluation is for the student evaluator to carefully go through the material with the instructor as soon as possible after the observation. By documenting instructional delivery and outcomes, the director has been able to provide specific goals for instructors to work toward, documentation for award portfolios, and specific examples that can be used to foster mentoring relationships. (RS)

# METHODS OF WRITING INSTRUCTION EVALUATION



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**Special Note:** The following paper was adapted from a presentation given at the Conference on College Composition and Communication. (March, 1992)

I first participated in classroom observation as a peer. I watched my colleague; she watched me. We tried to give suggestions or affirm that what we were doing was good and appropriate for our students. When I became the Writing Program Director at Johnson County Community College, classroom observation became a significant part of my job responsibilities: 75 or more visits with full and part-time faculty a year.

Observation, for me, changed drastically at that point. Instead of observing a trusted colleague for mutual benefit, I was observing new, unknown colleagues for purposes of retention, performance review, and so on, working now with the inherent goal to appraise instructional quality. I, however, still wanted to make the observation a formative experience, a means to assist with instructional improvement and development.

Before, what I said to my colleague was accepted blindly because of trust and a shared sense of responsibility to do the best job possible. Now my observations were as a supervisor with instructors new to the institution and colleagues I did not really know well, colleagues who viewed me initially as their "boss" rather than their fellow teacher. Although I continued to strive to build trust throughout the observation procedure, the task was difficult and generally not openly accepted until well after the initial classroom visit.

I realized the need to quantify my observation early in my work at JCCC, if not for any other reason than to provide some credibility for my ability as a teacher and observer. I realized the need to give focus and clear objectives as well as instructional support and recognition for quality instruction--details and examples intended to support my focus as both a "director" and a fellow teacher. This need prompted me to use Interaction Analysis as an observation tool. Shortly after my first semester and some 35 observations, I began to also include a classroom flow chart as a part of the process. For the last three semesters, I have incorporated these two tools as quantitative measures which can support my institution's growing interest in and support for peer collaboration as a means to improving instructional quality.

## 1. Interaction Analysis

In simple terms, Interaction Analysis measures verbal activity in the classroom. There are a number of methods available or you can design your own to meet the needs of your observation system.

## 2. Classroom Flow Charting

Classroom Flow Charting is another method that can take many forms and be easily designed to meet individual department needs. Basically, the observer writes down the flow of the session, often using abbreviations to accommodate the speed or describe the demands of the discussion. Generally these descriptive narrative outlines include comments and/or reactions to the activity as well as suggestions for changes or alternatives to consider for future sessions.

## 3. Peer Collaboration

Peer Collaboration involves a series of observations taken out of the "evaluation" context. With PC, two colleagues not necessarily of the same discipline agree to a mutual plan for instructional improvement. Most often the activity involves a combination of observation, methodology discussions, student interviews, assignment analysis, etc.

Let me address first why it is important to quantify observations.

Obviously, casual comments given during post-visits are easily forgotten unless some real relevance and application is evident. An observation written or recorded has a lasting meaning beyond the spoken word. Additionally, there are three easy common sense justifications.

1. Post Visit discussions can be made more valid if notes and supports are organized and detailed.

2. Subsequent observations can make comparisons. The analysis data provides a means to look for consistency or change.

3. Time comparisons--How much instructional time is spent on specific objectives and does this time comparison meet the instructional plan?

At the beginning of my work in classroom observation, I realized the need for a clear and consistent method for recording instructional delivery. I use a revised Interaction Analysis System developed by

Edmund Amidon and Ned Flanders that measures verbal classroom activity which is both teacher and student centered. Each category represents a particular verbal activity (or the absence of any activity) and is recorded during a ten minute segment of the observation. The categories by number include: 1. ACCEPTS FEELING, 2. PRAISES OR ENCOURAGES, 3. ACCEPTS OR USES IDEAS OF STUDENT, 4. ASKS QUESTIONS, 5. LECTURES, 6. GIVES DIRECTIONS, 7. CRITICIZES OR JUSTIFIES AUTHORITY, 8. STUDENT TALK RESPONSE, 9. STUDENT TALK INITIATION, AND 10. SILENCE OR CONFUSION.

The verbal activity is noted every three seconds during the ten minute observation segment by recording the corresponding number describing the activity (5-4-8=Lecture-Teacher Question-Student Response). I try to vary my starting time each semester to give a different verbal picture over time and also account for the fact that the instructional intent is different at the beginning compared to the middle of a class or the end. So, one semester I may start ten minutes into the beginning; the next semester I will begin thirty minutes after the start and so on. Over several years of observation at different times of the semester, my hope is that instructors can compare their interaction with students at varying points in the class and if possible, improve upon that interaction, or at a minimum, be aware of how that interaction is perceived by the students through the eyes of an experienced observer.

Over the last four years, I have collected several examples that demonstrate everything from teacher-centered lecture to student-centered discussion. Through this collection, I can better assist new teachers or those experiencing delivery problems by supplying a variety of examples.

An important caution, however, that I need to emphasize is that interaction analysis focuses on <u>verbal</u> factors only and excludes non-verbal delivery. Much interaction can occur during a classroom observation that is highly effective and directly impacts the classroom content without being verbally delivered. This fact is what prompted me to also seek additional methods that can quantify classroom activities, methods such as flowcharting.

Narrative/outline recording of instructional classroom activity probably dates back to the beginning of classroom visits. More than likely, the second time a classroom observation occurred, the observer realized he needed something to be actively involved and keep track of the instructional activity. I have encountered many variations for form and procedure, but generally I have identified two specific goals: 1. To record the instructional flow as I perceive it; 2. To make suggestions or comments that the instructor might find useful.

Depending on the type of class (writing or literature) and the amount of time left in the session, I will normally try to record fifteen minutes. I have gone as little as five and as long as twenty-five, but long periods of time are difficult to record because of the mental demand and required concentration.

In general, I make three columns on a piece of narrow lined paper with the smallest column first, the largest column second, and what's left becomes the third. The first column records the time, next is the activity, and last is the comment/suggestion. When the discussion is rapid, I will use capitol letters such as TQ for teacher question and SR for student response. This allows me to better record the verbal flow while also describing the movement and tone, non-verbal factors that may influence the interpretation of the instructional analysis.

Regardless of the method selected by the observer, the important part of any record is to carefully go through the material with the instructor as soon as possible after the observation. The flowchart provides an outline, but the perceptions about the recorded activity can only be explained with careful dialogue between the two people involved. With the combination of interaction analysis and a flowchart, I can specifically discuss all phases of instructional delivery, student interaction, and classroom activity. During the post observation interview, the instructor and I can seek ways to improve this described quality or brainstorm methods that might serve as alternatives for future similar sessions. Through this discussion, the instructor and I can together formulate goals for the future. One of the real advantages that I believe Peer Collaboration offers as a means to improve instructional quality is that the above described process may occur several times throughout the semester. This is the real benefit and advantage peer collaboration offers to the improvement of instructional quality.

Although there is not enough time to completely discuss the concept of organized Peer Collaboration, I want to briefly describe the model as it is being adopted at my institution. Our model offers a structured peer evaluation method that is outside the realm of the performance review. Similar to what has already been described, peer collaboration can take on many forms from the formal, structured models described in many publications to the less structured model we use at JCCC. In general, colleagues meet to discuss instructional plans, observe each other in the classroom several times during the course of the semester, and interview students to assist with instructional improvement designs.

From my own experience, I find the student input to be valuable and quite appropriate. I am impressed by their openness to another instructor, one who in my situation came from outside the department. The students openly describe their needs which unfortunately are often outside the realm of classroom instruction: too many hours at work, too many family responsibilities, etc. However, often their input to the instructional quality and classroom practice is direct and informative. The fact that it is not their instructor leading the discussion seems to open the process and reduce their anxiety about participating in the process.

As a practiced observer, I find a real advantage in discussing my observations with the students and then reporting our joint feedback to the instructor. The model we follow includes (but is not limited to):

1. Meet to evaluate course syllabus information, sample assignments and examinations. (I worked personally with colleagues in Humanities.)

2. After a review of the materials, we talked about the class I would observe. Our focus was on the objectives as well as the perception of the students as seen by the instructor.

3. During the observation I used both interaction analysis and flowcharting as previously described.

4. During our post observation discussion, I made recommendations based on my observation.

5. During the next class, I met with the students and without the instructor. I explained who I was and why I was there. We

-did a writing activity listing both our good observations and areas where we felt the instructor could improve learning for the students
-met in small groups to brainstorm from the writing activity
-discussed specific recommendations for the teacher
-answered as a group questions given me by the instructor
-decided what both the instructor and students could do to improve learning, now and in future classes
-agreed as a group what I should suggest to the instructor

6. I met again with the instructor and discussed the recommendations given to me. We brainstormed ways to meet the student need without destroying the integrity or objectives of the course.

7. I returned to class approximately 4-5 weeks after my meeting. I observed the class until the instructor left, approximately 20 minutes before the end. The students and I discussed the class and changes that had occurred for their benefit. They were unanimous in their feeling that the classroom instruction had improved since my visit and were more than willing to make additional suggestions.

8. The instructor and I met again to brainstorm ideas, plan for future semesters, and put closure on the process.

This series is only one way to approach instructional improvement through peer collaboration. The key is the activity and the mutual, open minded desire to improve instructional quality and promote student learning.

At first, I think my program faculty seriously wondered about my sanity. Who would want to pay that much attention to their instructional delivery and classroom management? They had been quite comfortable with the "good ole' boy" observation that often lasted for

as long as 15 minutes, occurred maybe once every year or so, and provided no stress (and no real focus for improvement nor recognition of effective classroom behaviors). Now, we get together to talk about what should be happening, what the instructor is concerned about not doing effectively, and what can be done to better meet the needs of the students while effectively accomplishing the challenging and demanding objectives of the curriculum. Now, we also see change and innovation without fear of failure.

By also documenting instructional delivery and outcomes, I have been able to provide specific goals for instructors to work toward, documentation for award portfolios (in fact, my program has won more than any other program on campus), and specific examples that can be used to foster mentoring relationships throughout my division.

Although my purpose for classroom observation changed when I moved to JCCC, my philosophy about the value of classroom observation has remained consistent, and through my efforts and the cooperation of a wonderful faculty, we have continued to insure instructional quality while seeking new methods for improvement in classroom delivery, instructional interaction, and student learning.