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### **Observing Teaching Practice: Assessing Competence in the Classroom**

*By Ray Mansell*

#### **Abstract**

In this article, I draw on my experiences as a Teaching Practice Observer for various Colleges of Further Education and Adult Education establishments across South West England from 1994-2002. I discuss the essential lesson components that observers need to attend to when evaluating candidates. These include the candidate's diversity of teaching styles, communication skills, and engagement with students, combined with an adequate knowledge of the subject matter. Equally important is an evaluation of the written material given to the observer prior to the lesson. I highlight the importance of an observation protocol and providing opportunities for feedback from both peers and a trained observer.

**Key Words:** teacher candidate observation, evaluation, lesson planning, feedback.

#### **Introduction**

Teacher education programs are found in most universities in the UK, and conducting observations of teaching candidates is a regular component of these programs. Despite the frequency with which teaching observations are carried out, my concern is that many lecturers have never been taught how to conduct these vitally important observations. Lecturers may be assigned teaching observations as part of their teaching load, but more frequently, the university will use adjuncts and postgraduate students to conduct this rather (in their eyes) mundane duty. Because teaching observations are seen in this way and are rarely conducted by qualified personnel, the process often involves both the candidate and observer going through the motions, with teacher candidates getting very little constructive feedback about their embryonic teaching practices.

I was fortunate enough to have entered the University of Plymouth as a student at a time when rigorous protocols for conducting teaching observations were introduced. In the eight years during which I conducted observations as a certified Tutor, I drew on theories of learning, classic educational literature, and the traditions of the theater to perfect my craft. In this paper, I present my approach to conducting teacher candidate observations and describe the essential components of meaningful and engaging lessons. Although I am referring to a period almost two decades ago, I believe the basic principles of observing teachers remain the same.

The majority of my working background (1953–1988) could best be described as theatrical rather than academic. On leaving school, I won a Leverhulme Exhibition to study at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) in London and became a professional actor/singer for several years. I subsequently trained in Theatre Management and Marketing. I moved into television as a writer/script editor/drama producer for over a decade before returning to theatre management in Chichester and several London theatres, including the London Palladium. After 35 years' involvement in theatre and television, I decided to move from London to Plymouth, Devon, and to begin a new career as a teacher, offering adult courses in *Public Speaking*, *Presentation Skills*, and *Creative Writing for TV Radio and Stage*.

In 1990, I was advised to attend a part-time course known as Stage 1 of the City & Guilds 730 to enhance my employment prospects in education. I enjoyed it so much I continued with Stages 2 and 3, to complete what then constituted the Certificate in Education (Further Education) offered by the University of Plymouth. This proved to be not only a great learning experience, but also very enlightening. And so, in my late fifties, I discovered the validity of the apocryphal saying that, "*age in itself is not a barrier to learning.*"

### **City & Guilds and the Workers Educational Authority**

For readers who are unfamiliar with the City & Guilds organization, I think it would be helpful to give a thumbnail sketch of its background and purpose spelled out on its Web site. It states that City & Guilds was founded in 1878 and "...remains committed to improving lives, boosting business performance, and shaping the landscape for education in the UK and worldwide...with over 10,000 centers and training providers in 80 countries...offering more than 500 qualifications across 28 industries... (involving) two million learners working towards one of our qualifications every year..."

Many of these courses were offered by the Workers Educational Authority (WEA) founded in the UK in 1903. The WEA aims to provide educational support for working men and women who otherwise could not afford further or higher education. It is still a major provider of courses of adults and it maintains its special mission to provide educational opportunities for socially and economically challenged.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Certificate of Education Guidelines**

I happened to enroll at the Polytechnic South West at the time when a new 72-page Handbook was being issued to all students. The Handbook provided clear and explicit details of the structure and content of the Certificate known colloquially as the "Cert Ed." The Handbook was a result of a collaboration between three institutions of higher education—the original Polytechnic South West, Cornwall College, and Somerset College of Arts and Technology (SCAT). However, on June 16, 1992, shortly after the Handbook was produced, a combination of the Polytechnic and Colleges in Exeter, Exmouth, and Newton Abbot came together to form the University of

Plymouth, making it clear that it would continue their long association with Cornwall College and SCAT which also offered the Cert Ed and often shared visiting tutors and lecturers.

Looking through this Handbook again after all these years, I remain impressed by the detail of the criteria, structure and sequence of the Modules, the methods of assessment and evaluation, the extent of learner support provided—including the use of mentors, and the comprehensive list of suggested readings available to course members through the university's various library sites. There was also an Appendix spelling out "The Course Agreement" including a Philosophy which was encapsulated in the sentence: "We see the course as an integral part of your teaching career and so we expect you will want to make a commitment to it that reflects the same professional approach you have to your job." (1991, p. 64)

I consider myself very fortunate to have been a student at a time when both the Handbook and the University status were introduced and to be amongst peers who were fully committed to making the most of the opportunities on offer. Several years later, I was talking to the original, charismatic tutor and director of the course, Jim Davies, known to us as the "father" of the new Cert Ed. He fondly remembered our group and recalled that we were the most enthusiastic and united group he had ever had the pleasure of dealing with—a sentiment echoed by several of our tutors from those days, who later became my close friends and colleagues.

### **From Student to Tutor**

Upon graduating from the program, I was asked to serve as a "supportive tutor" to individual students and small groups at the University. As the number of students began to increase rapidly, I became more deeply involved in delivering the first year of the Cert Ed program in three different locations in the South West of England. From 1994 until my retirement in 2002, I not only worked as a tutor on the Cert Ed program at the University, but was also employed by various Colleges of Further Education and other Adult Education establishments across South West England, to teach sessions and observe students undertaking the City & Guilds 730 series of teaching and training skills. Once completed successfully, Stages 1 and 2 were recognized as equivalent to the first year Cert Ed and many of the WEA students moved on to the University to undertake the second year and complete the Cert Ed program.

In common with my University Cert Ed observations, these other teaching practice observations (TPOs) took place in workshops associated with Colleges of Further Education, Agricultural Colleges, Naval establishments, and penal institutions, and involved the teaching of vocational and non-vocational skills. My observations were extremely diverse; for example, I might be observing a candidate teaching a foreign language, adult literacy, technical skills associated with car mechanics, or various martial arts. At other times, I might be observing training on dealing with child abuse, introduction to basic information technology (IT), or simulated fire-fighting in a naval establishment. The students were equally

diverse, from those on a day-release training program from their workplace, skilled workers wishing to attain higher qualifications—for example in electronics, plumbing, or building skills—to job seekers who had recently been made redundant, the long-term unemployed, and individuals with literacy problems or special needs (physical and cognitive).

All of the teacher training courses specified that candidates needed to have access to adults whom they taught for a certain number of hours during the course and thereby be able to arrange opportunities to have their teaching practice observed several times by a qualified tutor, specifically myself, on at least one occasion. In addition to conducting teaching practice observations (TPOs) of my students, I also travelled throughout Devon and Cornwall conducting TPOs of students who were otherwise unknown to me. These observations were required to involve a minimum of 60 minutes teaching followed by 15-20 minutes of direct feedback and discussion between the observer and candidate.

It is important to stress that my presence as an observer on all these courses was to assess the teaching methods and skills being demonstrated within the context of the teacher training course criteria. It was *not* my place to officially assess the content of the subject matter itself, as in most cases I was not qualified to do so. Those assessments were undertaken by specialist observers, such as senior members of staff employing the candidate or an external examiner, with whom I would also have discussions following my observations.

### **The Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC)**

In 1994, it was becoming obvious that my services as an observer were to be considerably extended in number and diversity. I was advised by the then Program Director of the Cert Ed, Paul Brunsch, that it would raise my credibility—and employability—if I undertook qualifications known as the BTEC “Assessing Candidates” and “Assessing Candidates using Diverse Evidence,” and proved my competence and practice as an “Internal Verifier.” A comprehensive portfolio had to be completed, providing written evidence from a variety of sources, including students, of my understanding and competence in those areas of assessment and ability to provide effective feedback. As Paul Brunsch had been instrumental in my move from student to tutor on the Cert Ed, I felt it would be in my best interest to comply with this suggestion. To be frank, when I began the process, I rather resented the portfolio task central to gaining these qualifications, which seemed to be little more than a tedious paper-chase. However, the one outcome for which I was to be continually grateful was the need to devise a Protocol for Teaching Practice Observations. This exercise required me to analyze my step-by-step approach to being an observer in accordance with the accepted BTEC guidelines. Below is a reproduction of the actual Protocol approved and accepted by BTEC.

### **My Protocol for Teaching Observations**

(1) Prior to any Teaching Practice Observation, I make it clear to the teacher/trainer that I am there in the role of a supportive colleague. An “observer” should always remember that even the most experienced teacher/trainer will be (naturally) “nervous” about being the subject of an observation.

(2) Because I “observe” such a wide-range of subjects—from the Martial Arts to lathe operation; Business Studies to Adult Basic Education and Special Needs—in workshops, gymnasiums, 6th form classrooms, adult educational establishments, and penal institutions (e.g. Channings Wood and Dartmoor), I have to be flexible in my approach.

(3) The actual “hours and days” of an observation can be very important to a teacher/trainer; therefore, as far as possible, I negotiate an appointment which they feel will prove most beneficial and least disruptive to their normal teaching practice.

(4) If teachers/trainers wish me to take an appropriate active role in the session—be it physical or academic—I am more than happy to do so and can be used as a “resource” if and when appropriate. However, the most important people in the process are the students being taught and, therefore, if my inclusion in the session would prove intimidating or a distraction to them, I will remain silent and “detached” from the group.

(5) I always stress to the teacher/trainer the importance of explaining the reason for my presence to students—i.e., that I am observing teaching practice, *not* the educational behavior of the students themselves.

(6) I consider teaching observations an ideal time to provide an informal “tutorial.” Seeing the teacher/trainer on their home ground gives a greater insight into their capabilities: their teaching strategies, their interaction with a student/trainee group, and their general strengths and weaknesses in appropriate language and behavior, diversity of techniques, and communication.

(7) Some of my observations are on the Competence-Based City & Guilds 7306 and I look for areas of “competence” that the teacher/trainer may not have identified in writing, or have simply taken for granted.

(8) Micro-Teaching offers another chance to see a candidate’s techniques, but from a different angle. Although it imposes constraints of time and the initial lack of group subject knowledge, it provides an excellent discipline as well as a creative challenge in the choice of content, construction (beginning, middle, and end), use of resources, and general presentation skills.

## **Conclusion**

It is my contention and strong belief that Teaching Practice Observations are a valuable cornerstone in both the City & Guilds 730 series and the Cert Ed.

Observations provide candidates with, amongst other things:

- i. objective feedback on their practice
- ii. reassurance
- iii. advice as to how they (student, client, or experienced presenter) can extend their skills
- iv. a measure of their development in the diversity of their teaching methods
- v. a record of their proven ability to apply educational theories to practice (*praxis*)

(Mansell, 1994)

It is important to stress that our candidates, whether they entered via a City & Guilds certificate or Module 1 at the University, came from very diverse academic and professional backgrounds. Our aim was to encourage professionalism in teaching methods, whether candidates were involved in the paid or voluntary sectors. We would always suggest to our candidates to arrange for an observation within the first few weeks of commencing Stage 1 or Module 1. These observations provided both a formal and informal method of assessment: a chance to know our students better and establish rapport. This was one of the reasons why a defined “protocol” was so important—to ensure a “supportive” attitude on the part of observers and to (hopefully) make every candidate feel appreciated as an individual voice within the group.

### **The Value of Micro-teaching**

Every module of the Cert Ed and City & Guilds 730 included a session devoted to micro-teaching. A handout with guidelines was given to each student some weeks ahead of the event, detailing what was involved. As the title suggests, our micro-teaching sessions were deliberately brief and strictly timed by a stop-watch, starting with a 5 minute example on Stage 1 and extending to 20-30 minutes nearing the end of the Cert Ed course. Each candidate was offered a free choice of subject and was encouraged to select something other than their “normal” teaching subject; for example, an IT teacher might select an art or craft subject, while an Art teacher might decide to share his or her interest in genealogy. Interaction was encouraged, particularly in the longer sessions, and would often involve the “audience” group members undertaking a specific task, individually or collectively. Each member of the group would write a brief report expressing their reaction to the content, teaching methods, and delivery of the subject. These feedback sheets were then handed to the teacher at the end of their session to be read later and entered into their portfolios. Following the initial micro-teaching in Stage 1, all micro-teaching was video recorded and later viewed and assessed at home by the candidate (this was in the days before DVD was universal). In the last Module, each candidate was required to “take a declared risk.” This might be using a teaching technique or audio/visual device they had never used before. This would be specifically assessed by their peers.

In spite of initial apprehension on the part of most course members, micro-teaching sessions quickly became amongst the most popular sessions on the teacher training courses. When we convened for collective analysis and feedback, the atmosphere was relaxed and supportive. I made it a habit to keep both my written and vocalized comments to a minimum. I was more concerned with encouraging the group members to benefit from the learning experience of “observing” and providing meaningful, positive, creative feedback beyond trite phrases such as “jolly good”—or more negative versions of this!

The majority of teachers/trainers agreed micro-teaching had been a very positive and enlightening experience and considered it to be invaluable training, not only for devising and delivering a well-structured lesson in miniature, but also for developing the technique of *observing* the methods and knowledge of their peers. Peer evaluations and feedback provide an interesting corollary to that of an “official” view and more formal evaluation. On the whole, peer evaluations were in line with my own reactions, but occasionally they provided an insight or measure of encouragement and support overlooked by me or other members of staff, who might occasionally be guilty of being biased by the student’s work and attitude elsewhere on the Cert Ed. Without exception, micro-teaching helped to bond the group and led to a mutual respect for the knowledge and abilities within the group. I would thoroughly recommend the practice of micro-teaching with peer observation and feedback for inclusion in any teacher training course.

### **TPO Guidelines to Candidates**

In accordance with the 1991 Handbook, it was our habit and practice at the University, various Colleges, and the WEA to supply all our students with specific, printed guidelines as to what was involved in TPOs and what was expected of them. All the criteria were clearly stated, including the fact that candidates must provide a file containing, amongst other things, the TPO form plus any examples of previous observations, a lesson plan, a scheme of work—or course syllabus—illustrating the context in which the lesson was contained.

In addition, the candidate was given specific guidelines on what the observer would be looking for in their appraisal of effective performance, which included preparation, appropriate content, organization, presentation techniques, audio-visual aids, student engagement, and student responses.

For my part, I would assess the candidate’s practice by looking for the following evidence and standards:

- confidence in their own ability and subject knowledge—leavened with a suitable amount of humility and consideration for their students
- a willingness to listen to students and respond with an open mind, even when a student might be voicing an opposing view

- an appreciation of their students' abilities and demonstration of understanding
- a candidate's "listening and observational skills"—an awareness of the group's engagement with the subject or lack of it
- an appropriate diversity of teaching and presentation styles
- a student-centered approach throughout

When the above are present in a candidate's practice, there will be a sense of self-discipline in the candidate and the general classroom atmosphere will reflect students' engagement and responsiveness throughout the session.

### **Preparation – The Key to Success**

"Preparation avoids desperation" is a phrase I devised to preface all my presentation sessions and was included in my handouts given to students. Improvisation may be a skill worth developing in moderation, but an excess of constantly thinking and working "outside the box," a.k.a. "shooting from the hip," can all too often lead to a teacher becoming disorganized, muddled, and repetitive. Teachers using a series of improvised thoughts and pronouncements, rather than being guided by a progressive and appropriate outline based on clearly stated aims and objectives, will almost certainly end up bewildering their students...and themselves.

It may seem reassuring for an inexperienced, ill-prepared tutor to consider that "it will be all right on the night" (to use a hackneyed theatrical expression), but to attempt to ad lib a formal teaching session is to court disaster. It leads to the danger of providing slovenly misinformation and to students becoming justifiably aware that they have been excluded from the validated curriculum on the whim of an egocentric and inefficient teacher.

Thorough planning is essential to ensure valid and consistent teaching practice and needs to be evidenced in a written, formal Lesson Plan.

### **Lesson Plans**

Some may declare that written lesson plans are a constraint to "creative" teaching. Personally, I believe they are a spring board by which teachers (experienced or beginners) can achieve greater heights. They should not be viewed as dogmatic straight-jackets, but as a *liberating* process and a basis that allows for *reflexive* improvisation when and where appropriate.

As mentioned earlier, it is extremely likely that the candidate will be required to give the observer a scheme of work detailing the syllabus and a synopsis of sessions providing a guide as to the *context* in which the observed session is placed. Not only are these, together with examples of Lesson Plans, required by observers, but they constitute an essential form of evidence of professionalism when candidates apply for and/or are being interviewed for work in education.



The TPO Handout given to all our Cert Ed students made it clear that a copy of the candidate's Lesson Plan must be handed to the observer *prior* to the start of all lessons. There are several Lesson Plan components that are typically considered essential, and of these I insisted that all students should include the following in their written plan:

**Aims** = what the candidate aims to achieve in that session.

**Objectives** = how the students will demonstrate their learning

**Methods** = typically, these would include the use of audio-visual aids, possible small group work and discussion. A student-centered style of teaching/learning should be evident throughout.

**Assessment** = formative (ongoing) and summative methods should be evidenced.

**Evaluation** = informal/formal.

I would stress that for candidates to fully benefit from the observation process and subsequent feedback, it is essential that the observed session should be a "genuine example," not a carefully rehearsed collusion between teacher and students with rehearsed questions and answer sessions aimed merely to "impress" an observer.

Once candidates had had an opportunity to reflect on the observation, I suggested that in the written evaluation process on their TPO forms, they include noteworthy feedback from the class of students or peers (including constructive criticism/creative ideas and appreciative comments) along with their own summary of the session, addressing the following questions as objectively as possible:

- How did the session go?
- Did I achieve my stated aim(s)?
- Did the students demonstrate their learning objectives?
- Were my timing and content appropriate?
- In the light of feedback, would I make any changes?

#### **Initial Assessment: Entry Behavior**

The manner in which a candidate enters a classroom and begins a lesson is vital. The candidate must be fully aware of entering a space that may just have been vacated by another teacher and that the group may have been unsettled by previous events. A few minutes spent assessing the mood and what we might call the "temperature" of the group is vital.

Candidates must never *assume* students' existing knowledge—or lack of it; they should constantly assess students informally or formally by questioning them and encouraging a meaningful response. It is not unknown for a candidate to discover they are repeating information (including a whole lesson) that students have already covered with another member of staff. This is a common enough occurrence for candidates to be made aware of the possibility of such repetition during their teacher training. One needs to formulate strategies to deal with it, "on the hoof," without

losing credibility. Again, this illustrates the *vital* necessity for always employing an initial assessment, at the *start* of a session, especially when the candidate is unused to the group and/or the exact nature and content of the course to date. In such circumstances, a candidate needs to take the time to introduce themselves and their background, and both the candidate and observer need to be clear as to what the group has covered already *and* what they were anticipating hearing about and/or doing in the current session with their “regular teacher.”

If we aim to be truly student-centered as teachers, then we need to ensure we respond to the needs of our students. This may require us to “depart” from our original text, but at the same time we must avoid the danger of “losing our way.” Once we have responded to the “impromptu,” we need to reconnect with our original route—this is where the strength of our Lesson Plan is put to the test. Have we allowed for this contingency? Did our plan, subject knowledge, and understanding prove “flexible” enough to include such a detour? Should we—in retrospect—make changes to our Lesson Plan to accommodate for such a diversion and thereby welcome it in future? Herein lies the purpose and worth of honest reflection and evaluation.

### **Diversity in Classroom Methods and Approach**

Diversity in teaching styles and techniques, and a change in classroom activities, are all keys to retaining students’ interest and concentration. Candidates should be constantly assessing the group’s attention span. As mentioned above, if candidates are truly aware of their students, really *studying* them individually and collectively, the body language will reveal when students are losing attention. An experienced observer will notice this and appreciate a candidate who is prepared and capable of changing their approach spontaneously. It is worth reminding candidates that “vigilance” is another key skill in teaching—to ensure that we are constantly aware of how our lesson is being received.

We all need to be aware of the dangers of ennui: of inwardly sighing, “Here we go again.” Students will pick up on it immediately, by our tone of voice and body language. In another essay (“*Enhancing Performance in the Classroom*”), I used the phrase “inhabiting the moment”—meaning to constantly keep our teaching fresh and alive, no matter how often we repeat the subject matter. Each phrase needs to be re-colored, reenergized, and textured anew upon delivery.

### **Communication Skills**

The very word “communication” opens the door to a wide variety of topics and therefore deserves some detailed analysis.

An observer obviously hopes and expects that candidates possess a clear voice, supported and reinforced by positive body language. Candidates are advised to avoid bumbling along in the hope that students can hear and follow their explanations. When making handwritten comments on a whiteboard, electronic device, or flip chart, candidates

should always check that students can actually *see and read* what has been written and/or illustrated. I recall that these points were amongst the most common complaints voiced by students about some of their lecturers at university.

I would also stress that eye contact should be shared freely amongst the group. Candidates must make every attempt to avoid becoming transfixed by any single person. This is a trap awaiting all teachers and I recall it happened to me during an observed session, early on in my Cert Ed training, when I spent far too long dealing with a very extroverted and querulous student. Not only was this mentioned later by my very experienced observer, but I also received a handwritten note from one of the group during the session saying “We came to listen to YOU, not that chap over there.” I guess that’s an example of a backhanded compliment!

When teaching, we need to constantly remind ourselves that *every* member of the group requires and deserves our attention.

### **Engaging Students**

“Engagement” has become something of a buzz word. What does it mean in the reality of the classroom? To me, it suggests the need to excite and hold the interest of others; to truly involve students and make them feel a part of the process; to allow students to be active, not simply passive recipients of facts that must be learnt dutifully by rote.

Whatever the subject matter, any trained observer will be looking for “interaction” between the candidate and their students. To achieve this, the candidate needs to be truly “reflexive”: alert to their group’s existing knowledge and capacity to learn. They must also demonstrate enthusiasm, energy, commitment and an ability to diversify their approach. To quote one of my own tutors, “a teacher needs more than one arrow in their quiver”—if they are missing the target, they need to have the ability to change their strategy.

One of the simplest methods to engage students is for a candidate to employ the technique I think of as “an *active* pause:” allow students to absorb information and then periodically pause expectantly, look around the group, and encourage them by your body language to question, make comments, and thereby initiate a useful discussion. It is important for the candidate to remain in control of the situation and not allow members of the group to subvert the main purpose of the lesson by constantly side-tracking with inappropriate questions or comments. Observers need to pay attention as to whether the candidate is vigilantly watching the group’s individual and collective body language and adapting accordingly. If the group is evidently becoming bored or looking completely lost, candidates need to have the courage to change tactics—it could be *their* fault rather than that of the students. Maybe a brief activity is needed, or even a break.

I recall one intense day when I was a student on the Cert Ed, our tutor, Jim Davies, suddenly stopped mid-lesson and said to us, “OK stand up: have a good stretch. Just relax for a couple of minutes—walk around—it’s

been a long session.”After a few minutes, we continued, refreshed and alert. Jim had picked up the vibes correctly and had the sensitivity and self-confidence to react accordingly.

### **Constructive Feedback**

My credo was always that the observer should be guided by the candidate. It is *their* territory, not the observer’s. I believe this approach also provides a useful way of informally assessing the candidate’s rapport with the group and how they see their role: are they truly democratic and student-centered in their thinking and approach?

Arguably, my theatrical and media background enabled me to readily identify significant points to discuss with candidates and include in my written reports. Giving notes to actors, discussing script changes with writers, and calling for retakes with TV directors, requires a certain amount of tact and diplomacy. Few of us enjoy being the subject of a “critique,” but I recognize that it lessens the natural defensiveness of the recipient if one delivers comments in a respectful manner, as one professional speaking to another. I would always begin by asking the candidate for *his or her* opinion as to how the session had gone. This helps to relieve the natural tension of the candidate and allows them to voice any of their concerns.

Having listened carefully to the candidate, I would begin my own feedback by employing the simple method of starting with a positive comment before voicing any specific criticisms. Equally important, I would always endeavor to end on a positive note. This “+ - + method of feedback” inevitably proved effective. Naturally, these remarks should reflect the general tone of the written report. The candidate would then be given the TPO form to complete in their own time with their frank and honest reactions to the observation and feedback.

### **Conclusion**

Many people are fond of saying “we can’t turn back the clock.” Fortunately, the post-modernist era has embraced the ethos of “life-long learning”—the chance to try again, to transform previous “failure” into potential success. In many ways, the Cert Ed did just that for me. Aged 52, it had a profound effect on me and completely transformed my understanding of the theories and practice of education. Although, as a child, I was fortunate enough to pass an exam to be accepted into a “good” school (in the UK this was referred to as a “public school”—in the USA and Canada, as a “private school”),albeit in those early post-war, non-fee-paying years. However, “...I could never have been accused of being an academically-minded student” (Mansell, 2012, p. 27). To put it bluntly, I became easily bored and did the minimum amount of work required to scrape through to the end—and then make good my escape!

Despite an initial reluctance to undertake teacher training, once I began what was to become the Cert Ed, I devoured information “as if increase of appetite had grown by what it fed on...” (Hamlet Act 1, Sc. 2). It was, in the true sense of the expression, “a life changing experience.” This was

enhanced by being surrounded by such a highly motivated group of peers and later, when I became a tutor, to be working with colleagues who were far more experienced and academically knowledgeable than I was, but who nevertheless were always willing to support me by sharing their expertise and guiding me along the way. The teaching/learning process became an adventure, a creative voyage of discovery, one I wished to share with my students. In my early days as a student on the Cert Ed, I made a note of a saying by Joseph Joubert (1754-1824) that I discovered to be profoundly true: "To teach is to learn twice."

As an observer, I found the same aphorism applied, which prompted me to write

Hardly a day passed undertaking...observations in which I didn't learn something new about teaching and how to initiate learning amongst students...To me (observations) appeared as pure theatre and I felt myself to be a privileged guest at each performance. (Mansell, 2011, p. 28)

I am well aware that many consider teaching observations to be a chore and something to delegate to others whenever possible. However, I can honestly say that I rarely, if ever, found them less than interesting.

It was these thoughts that led me to reflect upon my experiences and prompted this article. Being an observer often made me re-evaluate my own approach to classroom practice and to consider introducing new or diverse styles of teaching. We all need to constantly reappraise our professionalism; therefore, if you are offered the opportunity to "observe" others, consider it a gift and embrace it wholeheartedly—it's an opportunity to learn again.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Based on information from WEA website: <http://www.wea.org.uk>

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