



Principles for Successful Classroom Observations

Based on the discussion in the previous chapter, it would be relatively easy to make a case that classroom observations simply cannot work as valid sources of evidence with which to make decisions about teachers. If observers and evaluators keep doing what they have done in the past, this conclusion would be accurate. However, if educators make substantive changes in observation and scoring for teachers, they can create a system that works quite well, even with relatively few observations. To this end, we have constructed six principles that, if followed, will render teacher observation more efficient, more valid, and more useful to teachers and those who supervise and evaluate them.

Principle 1: Focus classroom observation on a set of observational categories that are few enough to be viable but numerous enough to provide a comprehensive view of a teacher.

Principle 2: Use a conjunctive approach to summarize a teacher's competence within each of the ten design areas.

Principle 3: Systematically invite teachers to provide nonobservational evidence that can be used to increase their previous scores.

Principle 4: Continually update each teacher's current status based on observational and non-observational evidence.

Principle 5: For comparative purposes, compute overall scores for each of the ten design areas using teacher self-ratings.

Principle 6: Interpret teacher scores from observational and nonobservational classroom data as teacher capacity indices.

Taken together, these principles make the task of observation more manageable through the use of observational categories, provide a more complete picture of a teacher's practice through nonobservational evidence and continually updated scores, and provide a fair way of scoring teachers while acknowledging that occasional observations cannot capture everything. The following sections provide detail on each of the six principles.

Focus Classroom Observation on a Viable Set of Observational Categories

Our first principle for improving classroom observations is to focus classroom observation on a set of observational categories that are few enough to be viable but numerous enough to provide a comprehensive view of a teacher. One of the major problems for observers is that effective teaching involves many types of strategies, but observers do not view enough lessons per teacher to see them all. Using

the NASOT model as an example, trying to observe all forty-three elements in the model over the course of two or three observations in a year is an exercise in futility. While such a detailed model is appropriate and necessary for teacher development and conceptualizing effective instruction, there are simply too many elements for observational purposes. Additionally, we believe that greatly increasing the number of observations that are made of teachers in a year will probably not occur in the near future.

To help solve this problem, we recommend the use of observational categories.

To create observational categories for the instructional model, combine elements that are redundant (in the sense that they have the same basic purpose). Specifically, the forty-three elements of the NASOT model can be organized into thirty-one observational categories as depicted in table 5.1.

Table 5.1: Forty-Three Elements and Thirty-One Observational Categories

Design Area	Element	Observational Category
I. Providing and Communicating Clear Learning Goals	1. Providing scales and rubrics	i. Scales and Rubrics
	2. Tracking student progress	ii. Progress Tracking
	3. Celebrating success	iii. Celebrating
II. Using Assessments	4. Using informal assessments of the whole class	iv. Informal Assessments of the Whole Class
	5. Using formal assessments of individual students	v. Formal Assessments of Individual Students
III. Conducting Direct Instruction Lessons	6. Chunking content	vi. Chunking
	7. Processing content	vii. Processing
	8. Recording and representing content	viii. Recording and Representing
IV. Conducting Practicing and Deepening Lessons	9. Using structured practice sessions	ix. Structured Practice
	10. Examining similarities and differences	x. Similarities and Differences
	11. Examining errors in reasoning	xi. Errors in Reasoning
V. Conducting Knowledge Application Lessons	12. Engaging students in cognitively complex tasks	xii. Complex Tasks
	13. Providing resources and guidance	xiii. Resources and Guidance
	14. Generating and defending claims	xiv. Claims
VI. Using Strategies That Appear in All Types of Lessons	15. Previewing strategies	xv. Highlighting
	16. Highlighting critical information	
	17. Reviewing content	xvi. Reviewing and Revising
	18. Revising knowledge	
	19. Reflecting on learning	
	20. Assigning purposeful homework	xvii. Extending
	21. Elaborating on information	
	22. Organizing students to interact	xviii. Organizing

VII. Using Engagement Strategies	23. Noticing and reacting when students are not engaged	xix. Attention
	24. Increasing response rates	
	25. Using physical movement	xx. Energy
	26. Maintaining a lively pace	
	27. Demonstrating intensity and enthusiasm	
	28. Presenting unusual information	xxi. Interest and Intrigue
	29. Using friendly controversy	
	30. Using academic games	
	31. Providing opportunities for students to talk about themselves	xxii. Personal Motivation
	32. Motivating and inspiring students	
VIII. Implementing Rules and Procedures	33. Establishing rules and procedures	xxiii. Rules and Procedures
	34. Organizing the physical layout of the classroom	xxiv. Physical Layout
	35. Demonstrating withitness	xxv. Withitness
	36. Acknowledging adherence to rules and procedures	xxvi. Behavioral Feedback
	37. Acknowledging lack of adherence to rules and procedures	
IX. Building Relationships	38. Using verbal and nonverbal behaviors that indicate affection for students	xxvii. Verbal and Nonverbal Cues
	39. Understanding students' backgrounds and interests	xxviii. Understanding
	40. Displaying objectivity and control	xxix. Objectivity
X. Communicating High Expectations	41. Demonstrating value and respect for reluctant learners	xxx. Value and Respect
	42. Asking in-depth questions of reluctant learners	xxxi. Reluctant Learner Interactions
	43. Probing incorrect answers with reluctant learners	

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Table 5.1 depicts the ten design areas within the NASOT model along with the forty-three elements embedded in them. In addition, it organizes the elements into thirty-one observational categories. As mentioned previously, an observational category groups elements with similar purposes. To illustrate, consider design area VII, using engagement strategies, which includes ten elements.

23. Noticing and reacting when students are not engaged

24. Increasing response rates
 25. Using physical movement
 26. Maintaining a lively pace
 27. Demonstrating intensity and enthusiasm
 28. Presenting unusual information
 29. Using friendly controversy
 30. Using academic games

- 31. Providing opportunities for students to talk about themselves
- 32. Motivating and inspiring students

These ten elements are organized into four observational categories:

- xix. Attention
 - 23. Noticing and reacting when students are not engaged
 - 24. Increasing response rates
- xx. Energy
 - 25. Using physical movement
 - 26. Maintaining a lively pace
 - 27. Demonstrating intensity and enthusiasm
- xxi. Interest and Intrigue
 - 28. Presenting unusual information
 - 29. Using friendly controversy
 - 30. Using academic games
- xxii. Personal Motivation
 - 31. Providing opportunities for students to talk about themselves
 - 32. Motivating and inspiring students

The elements within each observational category produce similar outcomes. For example, element 25 (using physical movement), element 26 (maintaining a lively pace), and element 27 (demonstrating intensity and enthusiasm) all share the common purpose of ensuring that students are energized. This is not to say that all of the elements in an observational category manifest in the same way in terms of teacher behavior or student responses. For example, physical movement (element 25) manifests as students engaging in activities that require them to move. Maintaining a lively pace (element 26) is something a teacher does, and students respond by mirroring the teacher's pace. Demonstrating intensity and enthusiasm (element 27) is also something the teacher does, and students respond by reacting

positively to the teacher's enthusiasm. For the strategies within each of these three elements, the common general outcome is that students acquire and exhibit relatively high levels of energy.

Some observational categories have only one element. For example, observational category xxiii, rules and procedures, has only one component—element 33, establishing rules and procedures. The fact that some observational categories have more than one element has an impact on scoring. This is explained in depth in the section on principle 2.

Observational categories decrease the number of elements for which teachers are held accountable in the observational process. There are forty-three elements in the NASOT model and thirty-one observational categories that collectively include all those elements. While a decrease from forty-three to thirty-one might not seem like much of a savings on the surface, it makes the observational process much more manageable, particularly in combination with the other principles described in this chapter.

With the introduction of observational categories, the NASOT model can now be thought of as involving five levels as opposed to the four depicted in figure 2.1 (page 16). These five levels are depicted in figure 5.1.

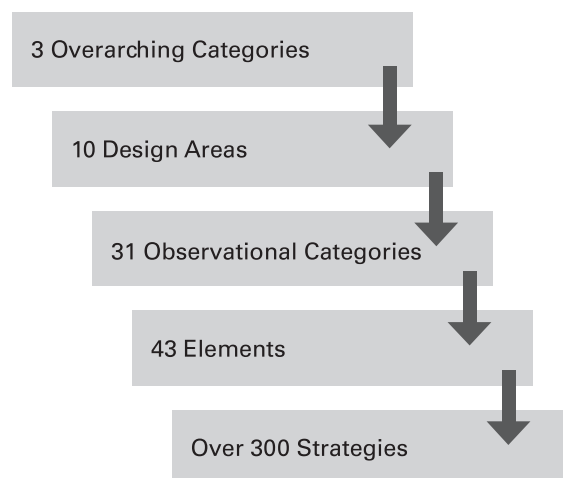


Figure 5.1: Five levels of the NASOT model.