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Illustrated throughout with practical examples from a range of education settings, it considers observation as a means of assessing teaching and learning and also as a way of developing teachers’ skills and knowledge. Key topics include:

- the purposes and uses of lesson observation
- the socio-political and historical context in which lesson observation has developed
- practical guidance on a range of observation models and methods
- teacher autonomy and professional identity
- performance management, professional standards and accountability
- peer observation, self-observation and critical reflection
- using video in lesson observation.

Written for all student and practising teachers as well as teacher educators and those engaged in educational research, Classroom Observation is an essential introduction to how we observe, why we observe and how it can be best used to improve teaching and learning.

Matt O’Leary is Principal Lecturer and Research Fellow in Post-Compulsory Education at the Centre for Research and Development in Lifelong Education, University of Wolverhampton, UK.
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Classroom Observation

A guide to the effective observation of teaching and learning

Matt O’Leary
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Foreword

Denis Gleeson

Quality in education is high on the policy agenda, but what constitutes quality and how it is achieved and understood in practice is hotly contested. In addressing these questions, classroom observation has become an integral part of the way in which the quality of teaching and learning is assessed and measured. In an increasingly audit and inspection driven education system, classroom observation has become something of an omnipresent mechanism that permeates the working lives of teachers and lecturers throughout their careers. It is both a form of surveillance, which constitutes a technology of control, as well as an enhancement of teachers’ professional learning and development. Given its dual purpose and central role in education improvement, it is somewhat surprising that classroom observation remains a largely under-researched field, until now.

This timely book explores the rich cultures of teaching and learning practice, which classroom observation visits and inhabits. It draws on a multi-method approach to educational research that makes evidence and data readily accessible to the reader, without pulling back on criticality. This is achieved through ‘live’ case studies and vignettes located in the contexts and cultures of teachers’ work, which challenge market measures. A unique feature of the book is its ability to draw on a range of theories that intersect key areas of education, policy and practice. This is best exemplified in various sections that transcend conventional classroom observation models, entering realms of digital technology, lesson study and unseen observation, as ways of introducing more formative approaches of teacher development. Running through the book is the author’s desire to develop a critical awareness and understanding among readers of the ideologies that underpin observation, as well as understanding its limits and possibilities in the current climate of educational positivism. Classroom Observation: A Guide to the Effective Observation of Teaching and Learning goes beyond its title in addressing both imposters. This is an authoritative and illuminative account of how democratic professionalism can unify the interests of students, tutors and institutions, in bringing education back in.

Denis Gleeson
University of Warwick and University of Wolverhampton
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February 2013
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Part I

Exploring the role of classroom observation in teaching and learning
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Chapter 1

Introducing the book
Focus, content and structure

Introduction

This book explores the phenomenon of classroom observation and its role in the training, evaluation and continuing professional development (CPD) of pre-service and in-service teachers in the English education system. Whether it is in the context of an initial teacher training (ITT) course, a collaborative CPD programme, appraisal or an external inspection, classroom observation is a ubiquitous mechanism that permeates the working lives of all teachers from the beginning to the end of their careers. This book covers how observation is used in each of these contexts and discusses the associated purposes and processes involved.

Classroom observation has occupied a long-standing role in ITT and CPD, where it has commonly been used as a method of assessment and an important tool for nurturing key pedagogic skills and teacher learning. In recent years the use of observation has increased as governmental agencies such as the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) and colleges and schools, in particular, have come to rely on it as an important means of collecting evidence about what goes on in classrooms. Such evidence has invariably been used to inform current conceptualizations of what makes for effective teaching and learning along with providing the basis on which judgements about the performance and competence of teachers are made. This elevated profile makes it all the more surprising that it remains such an under-researched area of empirical inquiry with very few specialist books available. In drawing on data recently collected in a range of educational institutions in England, this book presents a detailed picture of the role(s) of observation and in so doing examines it through a critically informed lens that situates its use(s) in the varying contexts and cultures in which they appear.

Who is this book for?

The book is targeted at readers who require a broad and yet specialist coverage of the topic of classroom observation. It is designed to interest and serve the needs of all those involved in the observation process, i.e. those being observed (observees), those carrying out observations (observers) and those responsible for managing observation schemes on an institutional level. This far-reaching appeal means that it is likely to interest and be relevant to the following readers:

- Undergraduate and postgraduate students on ITT, in-service teacher training (INSET) and CPD courses in the compulsory schools’ sector and post-compulsory sector
Role of classroom observation

- Teacher educators and trainers involved in the field of professional learning/development in schools, colleges and universities
- Middle and senior managers responsible for assessing and improving the quality of teaching and learning in schools, colleges and universities
- Academics and students engaged in educational research with a focus on the use of classroom observation.

What are the aims of this book?
This book is underpinned by two overarching aims. The first seeks to enable the reader to acquire a comprehensive and situated insight into the role(s) of classroom observation in the educational arena, leading to a greater understanding of how observation is used, in what contexts and for what purposes. The second aims to promote a critically informed awareness among readers of the underpinning ideologies and conceptual frameworks associated with the uses of observation, as well as its potential value as a tool for enhancing teacher learning and development.

How is this book different from others?
Previous publications have tended to take the form of textbooks whose focus has been on the practice or pedagogy of classroom observation with limited discussion of the wider socio-political contexts and cultures in which it is situated. In my opinion, such books have lacked a theoretical underpinning to them, which has resulted in a narrow and often apolitical conceptualization of observation. One of the unique strengths of this book is its ability to draw on a range of theories to synthesize elements of policy, practice and context when discussing observation. It argues that developing a critical awareness of the ideologies that underpin observation as a form of intervention in teaching and learning is fundamental to the reader acquiring a thorough understanding of it and its place in the educational arena. The notion of critical reflection therefore undergirds the analysis throughout the book. In short, at the centre of the book’s original contribution is a critical approach to examining the ideologies that underpin extant models of observation, informed by a rich and recent set of empirical data collected from a range of educational institutions (colleges) in England.

This is not a toolkit or a ‘how to’ book but more of a ‘why?’ and ‘how about?’ book. All too often when practitioners are tasked with mediating and operationalizing government policies and initiatives, there is a pressure to come up with a ‘quick fix’. This book is not interested in or designed to offer quick fixes but is more about getting practitioners to engage critically and reflexively with the mechanism of classroom observation and its role in their professional lives. Over the past twenty years or so a whole industry of ‘education consultancy’ has developed in England offering its services, most of which are targeted at improving the quality of educational provision. More often than not these services are reactive as they take their lead from the latest government and/or Ofsted agenda. In the case of classroom observation, this has typically consisted of consultants offering advice on what makes an observation system ‘robust’ and ‘rigorous’, or providing insights into what makes an outstanding teacher or lesson. It is not the intention of this book to go down the consultancy path, but to develop an informed awareness of current practices and future possibilities with a view to empowering practitioners to
understand how they can use observation to be the best that they can be in their chosen profession.

**What is the theoretical framework of this book?**

Conceptualizing classroom observation is not an easy task given it is a topic that crosses over into several disciplines such as educational management, professional development, teacher assessment and teacher identity to name but a few. This multi-disciplinary nature of classroom observation means that it makes it very difficult to rely on a single theory or conceptual framework in order to make sense of it. What this book therefore attempts to do is to draw on a range of theories and ideas from different disciplines so as to provide a broad and varied insight into the topic. For instance, the book draws on the work of the French sociologist, Michel Foucault (1977, 1980, 2002) as its theoretical backbone, along with aspects of critical pedagogy (e.g. Brookfield 1995, 2005; Freire 1972, 2005) and concepts relating to theories of new managerialism (e.g. Clarke et al 1994; Clarke and Newman 1994; Randle and Brady 1997) and performativity (Ball 2001, 2003, 2012), discussed in detail in Chapter 2. At the same time, it also makes use of concepts from the fields of assessment and teacher development, particularly in relation to the use of observation in assessing teachers’ classroom performance (see Chapters 4 and 5) and how best it might be applied to encourage teachers to develop and learn from each other (see Chapters 7 and 8).

Foucault’s work, for example, provides a suitable framework for analyzing the phenomenon of classroom observation from a sociological perspective. Some of the key concepts he explored in his work, i.e. power–knowledge, surveillance, discourse and normalization, resonate with the related literature on observation and underlying themes to emerge from the empirical data informing the book. They also provide a useful lens through which to examine relationships of individual agency (i.e. practitioner level) and structure (i.e. institutional level), as well as an appropriate language with which to describe and discuss the phenomenon of classroom observation.

Foucault’s ideas about the paradoxical and complex nature of power link well with classroom observation in an applied context and the book’s overarching critique of how it currently operates largely as a performance measurement within a regime of surveillance and regulation in schools and colleges in England. For Foucault, power was capable of being both repressive and liberatory in the same situation. This dichotomous conceptualization provides a useful framework for understanding the different contexts and cultures that impact on the way in which teachers make sense of observation. It also links to the contradictory notion of professionalism, i.e. that it can be used both to control and to empower teachers.

In Foucault’s eyes, power and knowledge are inextricably linked. This has particular resonance for classroom observation given that it is regarded by many as the most important means of collecting knowledge about what happens in classrooms and what it can reveal about teaching and learning. Thus, viewing classroom observation through a Foucauldian lens inevitably connects its use to power, which means that if we are to construct a detailed understanding of it then we must also understand the mechanisms of power that underpin it. This discussion is developed further in subsequent chapters (e.g. Chapters 2, 3 and 5) when examining the socio-political background to its emergence and the key themes and issues surrounding its use in the English education system.
What are the main themes and topics covered in the book?

Some of the main themes and topics explored in the book include:

- Educational assessment and evaluation
- Knowledge and power
- Normalization
- Observation methods and models
- Professional autonomy
- Professional identity
- Professional learning and development
- Professional standards
- Teacher effectiveness.

How is the book organized?

The book is divided into three main parts, each of which explores classroom observation from a particular angle and comprises a series of interrelated chapters. Part I seeks to contextualize the topic against the wider socio-political and educational backdrop in which observation emerged as a key mechanism in teacher learning and assessment. I believe that an understanding of this wider context is essential for the reader to fully appreciate the way in which observation operates in the English education system and thus be able to critically reflect on it. Part II is likely to be of most interest to those who wish to explore the use of classroom observation as a method of assessment, whereas Part III shifts its focus onto the use of observation for professional development purposes.

At the end of each chapter there is a section that includes discussion topics/tasks that are aimed at encouraging the reader to develop their understanding and thinking around some of the key areas covered throughout that chapter. These are primarily designed to be done in pairs or small groups, though they can also be done individually if the reader does not have regular contact with other colleagues.

Part I – ‘Exploring the role of classroom observation in teaching and learning’ sets the scene for understanding how and why classroom observation emerged as a pivotal tool in the domain of teaching and learning. In focusing on the English education system as an exemplar case study, Chapter 2 situates its emergence against the socio-political, historical and educational contexts in which this took place. It provides a critical analysis of the wider socio-political developments underpinning the educational reforms that were responsible for the implementation of classroom observation as a key mechanism in the training and appraisal of teachers, many of which occurred in the wake of the introduction of a performance management-driven culture in schools and colleges. This analysis draws principally on theories and ideas most closely associated with the discipline of educational sociology in order to interpret some of these changes. The chapter also discusses what the implications have been and continue to be for new and experienced teachers in terms of what it means to be a ‘professional’ in the field of teaching in the 21st century.

Chapter 3 reviews a range of related literature across the three education sectors in England [i.e. schools, Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE)] in order to compare and contrast the role of observation. In doing so it discusses the key themes and
issues surrounding its use in each sector and identifies both common and contrasting patterns. It argues that in schools and FE observation has become entrenched as a mechanism of performance management over the last two decades, from which a dominant yet contested model has emerged that has come to rely on a simplified rating scale to grade professional competence and performance. In contrast, in HE there is limited evidence of it being linked to the summative assessment of staff, with preferred models being peer-directed and less prescribed, allowing lecturers greater autonomy and control over the use of observation and the opportunity to explore its potential as a means of stimulating critical reflection and professional dialogue about practice among peers. The chapter concludes with a synopsis that draws together the recurring themes and issues to emerge across all three sectors, as well as highlighting areas that are discussed in more depth in later chapters.

Part II – ‘Classroom observation as a means of assessing teaching and learning’ concentrates on the application of observation as a form of assessment and is made up of three chapters. Chapter 4 examines the use of observation as a research method for collecting data about what goes on in classrooms. As part of the discussion, quantitative and qualitative approaches to observation are compared and situated in an applied classroom context with the aim of developing awareness of some of the pros and cons of each approach. Examples from previous studies and current models in use are presented in order to illustrate how quantitative and qualitative approaches differ in practice and what they can tell us about the process of teaching and learning. Validity and reliability, fundamental cornerstones of any research method, are considered and discussed in relation to the use of observation as a means of data collection along with the repercussions for subsequent judgements made about the quality of teaching and learning.

Chapter 5 explores differing typologies of classroom observation in the context of assessing teaching and learning. The first half of the chapter examines the links between observation models and their underlying purposes by discussing the interrelated questions of what models exist, in what contexts do they occur, what are their purported aims and to what extent are these achieved? In order to answer these questions, the discussion draws on empirical data from a range of studies carried out in different educational settings. Among topics discussed in the first half of this chapter is the use of observation for performance management purposes, with particular attention given to the ‘Ofsted model’ of graded observation and the effects of grading on teacher identity and notions of self. The second half of the chapter outlines some of the protocols and procedures associated with assessed observations and includes practical guidelines for observers and observees on their respective roles in the feedback discussion.

Chapter 6 discusses the topic of ‘teacher effectiveness’ and what it means to be an effective teacher. When it comes to assessing the quality and effectiveness of teaching and learning through observation, most models have tended to rely on competency-based approaches. This chapter critically evaluates the underpinning principles and constituents of such models as well as discussing what the implications are for teachers in the workplace and how best to make sense of them. A key part of the discussion in this chapter centres on teacher standards, including analysis of the 2012 Teacher Standards in England. Mindful of the practical needs and interests of teachers, the chapter provides a set of ten key principles for ‘good’ or ‘effective’ teaching that could be applied to any context.

Part III – ‘Classroom observation as a means of promoting teacher learning and development’ explores a range of collaborative approaches to observation, each of which is
Role of classroom observation

underpinned by its use as a mechanism for stimulating teacher growth. Chapter 7 focuses its discussion on examining the value of observation as a tool for developing expansive professional learning among practitioners. It starts by outlining the importance of critical reflection in teacher development, along with the perceived benefits of observation as a collaborative and reciprocal tool. Peer-based approaches to observation are discussed in detail, drawing on theories of expansive professionalism and democratic notions of professional learning (e.g. Avis 2003). This discussion is also linked to the wider concepts of autonomy and ownership in professional development. There is a separate section that includes a range of targeted observation tasks where the focus and structure is varied, enabling both observer and observee to maximize the developmental benefits of observation and to use these observations as a springboard for collaborative, professional dialogue and learning.

Chapter 8 explores some alternatives to conventional models of observation through three separate case studies. A description of how each of these alternative models work in practice is provided, along with discussion and analysis of their potential contribution to the way in which classroom observation might best be harnessed as a tool for enhancing teacher awareness and understanding of pedagogic skills and knowledge. The first case study focuses on a model or process known as ‘lesson study’, originating from Japan but recently employed in the USA and countries in the Pacific Rim. Lesson study is based on an action research model of classroom investigation where a group of teachers work collaboratively to study specific features of their subject curriculum and pedagogy, with a particular emphasis on improving student learning. Lesson study involves teachers working together to plan, teach and observe a lesson(s). While one teacher implements the lesson in the classroom, others observe and take notes on student questions and understanding, which is then discussed and analyzed in a post-lesson focus group. In theory, lesson study appears to offer a more democratic approach to professional development as it is the teachers themselves who shape the focus and direction of the study.

The second case study explores a radical model of observation known as ‘unseen observation’ in which the observer or ‘supervisor’ does not actually visit the class, but relies on the teacher’s account of it after it has happened. It might therefore seem contradictory to use the term ‘observation’ as no observation takes place, but the teacher and supervisor meet before and after the lesson for a professional dialogue as is the norm in many models of observation. In order to illustrate how this model works in practice, this case study draws on data from a small-scale qualitative research project. Within this model the teacher is allowed the freedom to choose their own areas of development, as the supervisor acts as both an active listener and a facilitator in assisting the teacher’s development. One of the distinctive qualities of unseen observation is its potential for a role reversal in the power dynamics between the observer and observee, or, in this case, the supervisor and teacher.

The third case study examines the use of state-of-the-art remote, mobile video technology as an alternative and/or replacement to a ‘live observer’ present in the classroom. It discusses the opportunities that this technology has to offer for innovative professional learning and development and explores some of the practicalities of its use. Although video recording has been used for several decades in classrooms, particular features that are unique about recent advances in remote, digital video technology include the ability for non-intrusive observer–observee interaction to occur remotely and for ‘live’ coaching to be transmitted through the use of an earpiece.
The final chapter, Chapter 9, draws together discussion from the previous chapters. It provides a critical synopsis of the key themes/issues and concludes with a list of recommendations about how classroom observation might best be used along with the possibilities for future areas of research.

**Author’s note**

I am aware that in recent years there has been an increase in the use of the phrase ‘Teaching, learning and assessment’ in some educational circles. As such, some readers may be wondering why the word ‘assessment’ has not been included in the book’s title. The answer to this question is quite straightforward. I see it as an integral part of the teaching and learning process and as such do not believe that it needs to be named separately.
References


