

Guidelines and Etiquette for Observers

Before Observing

As far in advance as possible, ask the instructor for permission to observe the class, explaining your purpose for observing. Sometimes, if the observation is for research purposes, you may not want to give away too many details that could affect what is done in the classroom, but it is still reasonable to explain in general what your research is about (e.g., "I'm studying classroom interaction") and what you plan to do with the information. (Keep in mind that it's the instructor's right and professional responsibility to decide whether or not you can visit their class.)

Avoid observing during the first two or three weeks of a semester. Give the teacher a chance to get the class gelling. (...)

Before going to observe the class, check with the teacher to see if they would like to meet with you in advance, to let you know what's upcoming, give you copies of any handouts, and discuss anything specific they would like you to pay attention to. Some teachers prefer to meet with each observer, while other teachers are too busy, so it's always best to check with them and find out their preferences. It helps if you find out in advance about the class you will be observing -- what the course is designed to do, what level the students are at, what the teacher is planning to do in the specific class to be observed and why. This could help you to make more sense of what it is that goes on in the classroom.

Other things to double-check with the teacher prior to the observation are:

- where you sit in the classroom. Many teachers may not care where you sit, as long as it doesn't interfere with instruction, but some teachers may have preferences.
- whether or not it's all right to move around from group to group during group-work activities.
- whether or not you are going to participate in activities or just observe. (Generally speaking, it's probably preferable not to participate while doing an observation, unless the purpose of the observation is to see how a certain activity works from a participant's point of view. When the purpose is to observe the teacher and/or the students, it makes more sense to focus your attention on observing.)

These are just a few things that are important to check in advance with the teacher you are observing. You may have some additional items that you'd like to check, as well.

In the Classroom

No matter how non-threatening and cooperative the observer may be, observations are an imposition on the teacher and the students of a class. They are a necessary imposition, but an imposition nonetheless. As observers, it's good to keep this in mind when observing and let it guide your actions.

Also keep in mind that the observation should be a positive experience for both the observer and the instructor. Ideally, both the observer and the instructor will gain something as a result of the observation.

Also, observers should remember that it's the teacher's class, not yours. This seems obvious, but sometimes it's easy to make choices, without even realizing it, that may not fit with what the teacher is planning for the class.

Arrive on time, or early -- arriving late is always an interruption. And stay throughout the entire class period. Getting up and leaving early is also an interruption.

Remember to sit in the agreed-upon place. If you didn't have a chance to meet prior to the observation, ask the instructor when you arrive.

Don't do things that disrupt the flow of the class or draw attention to yourself (e.g., don't chat with students while class is in session, don't get up and walk around to observe individual students while the teacher is giving instructions or lecturing, don't make facial expressions or gestures that indicate disapproval, or anything else that may interfere with what the teacher is trying to accomplish or with student-teacher rapport).

If the teacher is comfortable with having you move from group to group during group-work activities, it's better to eavesdrop inconspicuously than to join the group -- if you join groups, the students will probably direct all their comments to you instead of to each other. And keep in mind that the teacher may also be moving from group to group, so be careful not to get in the teacher's way.

When the class has ended, thank the teacher (and, if possible, the students) for allowing you to observe them.

Debriefing

Debriefing should be done as soon as is feasible after the class session, while the events are still fresh in mind.

In general, it's bad etiquette to launch into a critique of a teacher if you have invited yourself to observe the class. That is, if your observation is an assignment for a course you are taking, and the teacher is doing you a favor by allowing you to observe her class, don't tell them everything that you think was wrong with the class immediately afterwards. If you have concerns, it's better to ask questions to clarify some things that happened in the class (e.g., "I'm very interested in learning more about XXXX. Could you explain why you set up the XXXX activity the way you did?" perhaps followed by "How do you think it went?" instead of "You should have done XXXX" or "In my opinion, XXXX didn't work very well."). The teacher may have planned something that they thought was going to work marvelously, but didn't, and they may already know (and be able to explain to you) why it didn't work. Or, if they noticed that it didn't work, they may ask you for your ideas about why it went so poorly, or how it could have been more effective. Again, it's more polite to allow the teacher to ask you for your opinions, rather than volunteering them too quickly.

If, however, the teacher has asked you to observe her class, or has asked you specifically for constructive criticism, then it's fine to give your honest appraisals -- but please talk about what worked really well as well as what you might have done differently. If, prior to the observation, the teacher asked you to pay attention to certain aspects of her teaching or the students' interaction (or some other specific point), then it makes sense to limit comments to those areas (unless, of course, the teacher asks you for your comments about other points).

In any of these situations, though, if there is something that stands out in your mind as particularly troubling, and if you have a good working relationship with the teacher, then by all means tell them about it in a polite manner.

Keep in mind how you would feel if you were the one being observed, and what kinds of feedback would be most useful to you.

Since many teachers tend to be introspective and self-critical, remember to point out not just the ways you think they could improve, but also, specific things they did that you thought were effective. (Teaching is a hard enough job as it is, so highlighting the positive things can be very encouraging.)

Special situations sometimes arise involving novice and experienced instructors. If you are a novice instructor observing someone with a great deal of teaching experience, it's probably even more important to approach the debriefing from the perspective of finding out why the instructor made the choices they did, which can provide you with a number of insights to inform your own teaching. At the same time, just because someone is an experienced instructor, it doesn't mean they are perfect. Everyone has room to grow, and we hope that experienced instructors will be reflective about their practice and welcome any insights you may have to offer (particularly if you phrase them as recommended above).

Similarly, if you are an experienced instructor observing someone who is relatively new to teaching, it's good to keep in mind that they do not have the years of experience you have, so give extra care to choosing how you provide them with feedback. Additionally, if you notice a number of areas where the novice needs to improve, try not to overwhelm them with suggestions; limit your feedback to the areas where they are seeking feedback, or perhaps those points that seem most immediately important to address.

And After All is Done

If you write a report or paper that is informed by the observation, it is considered common courtesy to offer the instructor a copy. Some instructors will want one, and others won't, but again, the choice should be theirs.

A short note, or email message, thanking the instructor for allowing you to observe, is a thoughtful gesture.