



Improving Teaching Effectiveness Through Self-Observation

Teachers are accustomed to being observed by their students, by their supervisors, and occasionally by their peers. However, feedback from these observations is limited. Student reactions usually are not documented until the term has nearly ended. Supervisory observation, for the purpose of overall evaluation, is a limited number of classroom visits, constrained by items on an evaluation instrument. Peer visits may provide more immediate information, but visitors usually observe little more than a slice of classroom life.

Others, through their observations, may point out strengths and weaknesses, but it is only when we see for ourselves that we can internalize and act on new insight.

There are many ways that we can observe ourselves as teachers. Some techniques that offer the most immediate and detailed feedback include student questionnaires, audio or video recordings, and observation sheets.

Student Questionnaires

Teacher-generated student questionnaires tap directly into students' reactions. Typical student evaluations are generic and occur near the end of the term. Questionnaires distributed throughout the semester allow an instructor to address specific aspects of course content or delivery and to make timely instructional decisions. A simple list of questions relating to the day's lesson can indicate whether review or elaboration is necessary the next day. Responses to a brief list of questions about a new technique can evaluate the activity quickly. Questionnaires can be tied to a particular classroom activity or to the content of a weeklong lesson. The advantage of the teacher-generated questionnaire is that it can be tailored to fit the needs of the instructor. Moreover, students can be asked to submit their own questions or comments on notecards. A bulletin board in a CAI class can provide a useful conduit for information.

Recording

Audio and video recordings can be painfully revealing, but many faculty who have used these techniques admit that they provided valuable insight. Perhaps a better use of these methods, other than dissecting teaching performance, is to use them as tools for discovering what is going on in the classroom. A video camera focused on the classroom-at-large or on students involved in group work can provide useful details. While involved in teaching or working with groups, it is impossible for the instructor to observe all students at all times. Taping can provide some insights into the types of questions asked, amount of wait-time between questions and answers, patterns of interaction in the classroom use of humor, group roles, comings and goings from class, or off-task behavior.

Observation Sheets

An observation sheet is a useful tool for answering questions about teaching tools and classroom behaviors. For example, an observation sheet can be designed to include categories of questions about patterns of questions and answers; a colleague can use these categories to observe, take notes, and identify answers. An observation sheet can allow the instructor to critique items and activities in the use of class time. Combinations of observation techniques can be implemented. For example, student questionnaires that ask students to comment on a class activity combined with a taping of that activity can provide an opportunity for a more complete evaluation. Or, using a taped session with a different observation sheet can provide a variety of information over longer periods of time.

Conclusion

Self-observation is an important tool for improving one's teaching and attitude. This rejuvenation helps us stay interested, not only in what we teach but in how we teach. Moreover, self-observation is a means of tracking one's development as a teacher and a way of sharing that development with colleagues.

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