



RECONSTRUCTING OBSERVED LESSONS

When I started to observe classes, I made many mental notes during the lesson. Then in the discussion after, I often jotted down some memories of the lesson. I took no pencil-and-paper notes during the lesson. When I observe classes with people who are observing for the first few times, I find that my original practice seems to be the rule with them. We seem to treat lessons we observe the same way we treat other events in life: We simply observe them.

A detective on the long-popular American television series "Dragnet" started his interviews of witnesses to crimes with a line that became famous: "All I want is the facts." Though the detective took notes as he interviewed these witnesses, I never saw the witnesses produce notes of what they had observed at the scenes of the crimes. When in daily life do we write down precise observations? Who takes notes while watching TV, for example? So, why would we take notes when we observe a class live or a video of a class?

RECORDING OBSERVATIONS

Activity 8

The person who wrote the notes below had been instructed to take notes while observing a class. The resulting material contains some "facts" and some other types of communications. With another teacher, decide which lines you consider facts and which are something else. Write an *f* for fact on the broken lines next to the communications you consider facts. (Ignore the long, unbroken lines for now.) Again: There are no wrong answers!

1. Teacher said, "What are you holding?" ... _____
2. One student repeated, "What you hold?" ... _____
3. Teacher shook head sideways. ... _____
4. Teacher repeated, "What are you holding?" ... _____
5. Teacher emphasized *are* and *ing* when saying, "What are you holding?" ... _____
6. He said the words too quickly. ... _____
7. He used a rapid rate. ... _____
8. He offset the speed with repeated models. ... _____
9. Some students were not participating. ... _____
10. It appeared that one or two students were catching the pattern.
... _____
11. The lesson was very clear. ... _____

12. He used the blackboard for writing the model he had said orally.

13. He held up two fingers when he wanted a two-word answer.

Thinking about the Alternatives

Compare which items you and your partner wrote an *f* next to with those of other partners. The process you have to engage in in order to see what you and your partner each mean by the word *fact* is more important than seeing what I mean by the word. My labeling is neither correct nor incorrect but simply reveals how I use the word *fact*.

I put an *f* next to 1 through 5, 12, and 13. I believe, for example, that "rapid rate" in line 7 is not a fact because it is more interpretative and less descriptive than "repeated" in line 4. I further believe that "too quickly" in line 6 is more judgmental than "a rapid rate" in line 7. Police stop us for speeding, after all, not for going at a rapid rate. However, I can see that "repeated" in line 4 is more interpretative than "said" in line 1 because "repeated" implies that the teacher rendered the line the same way as in line 1, without changing the intonation or tone of voice.

Now go back to the unbroken lines next to an item you did not label as fact and, without your partner, write out words on the blank lines that you think characterize or describe those items. For example, if item 6 is not fact in your view, you may, as I did, write *interpretation* there.

I consider item 8 to be an explanation. The observer seems to be trying to give a reason for the rapid rate he used. I might use the word *justification* for the same reason.

The statement in item 9, "Some students were not participating," would seem one that could be verified, indicating a fact. But calling this a fact implies that we all have the same understanding of *participating*. Does *participating* mean paying attention, following, speaking, listening, volunteering to respond, or something else? Since *participation* has multiple meanings for me, I call line 9 an *interpretation*. Judgment is a word I'd also consider here, since the statement implies that all the students, not just some students should be participating.

Saying a lesson is "clear," as in 11, is a judgment to me, just as is terrible or terrific, guilty or innocent, marvelously well centered, or fabulously fresh.

While there is no reason that you, your partner, and I should agree on the descriptors, or words we use to characterize individual lines, it is vital that we see that the descriptor or label we use fits the meaning we attribute to a specific line.

Activity 9

Now apply your grouping skills to the teaching excerpt from Activity 8. What are the other words or descriptors we can apply to characterize, label, or group the lines that were written by an observer during a lesson? The chart on the next page lists some possibilities.

You or the teacher you work with should enter the lines written by the observer where they seem to fit. For example, I'd write "What are you

holding?" in lines 1 and 4 under "transcription." And, I'd write "teacher said" in line 1 under "narration."

<i>transcription</i>	<i>narration</i>	<i>something else</i>

Thinking about the Alternatives

The words in quotation marks in lines 1, 2, and 4 qualify as transcription, if transcription means writing words that are heard. If the word means writing down the phonetic spelling of utterances, then none of the lines qualify. Nor do any lines qualify if transcription means writing down only words that are heard, without any description of how they were said or who said them. If the word means writing down what was said or done by the participants, we have to add line 12 to the column marked *transcription*, since holding up two fingers is obviously something someone did.

Narration might be easier. Unfortunately, or rather, naturally, *narration* also can mean more than one thing. If you were asked to play the part of a narrator, you would have to say "Teacher said" when reading line 1. An actor or actress could then say the rest of the line "Where are you going?" Using this meaning, lines 1, 2, 4, and 5 contain both narrative material and transcribed material.

Since many fiction authors present the type of, what I consider to be, interpretative comments in their stories, items 6 to 13 could easily be considered *narration* also. They tell a kind of story. But they seem different from the words before the quotation marks, which would be read by a narrator in items 1, 2, 4, and 5. "Said," "repeated," or "emphasized" seem different from "offset" or "clear." But perhaps the difference is not sufficient to call them "something else." We would have to limit *narration* to mean what a person says before the words in quotation marks if we wanted to put lines 6 to 13 under *something else*.

Distinguishing between *transcription*, *narration*, and *something else* might be easier than determining exactly what *transcription* means when we have an audio recording before us and a pencil in hand, poised above a blank pad. Should we just write down the words that are said? Should we ignore the pauses, the "uhs" and "ohs," and the tone of voice used? Should we show variations in pronunciation by using phonetic script?

How do we show when two speakers are saying words at the same time? Should we write the lines like the lines in a play, one after the other? Or should we write all the words one speaker says in one column, the other speaker's utterances in a second? Then we could see the words of each speaker lined up, like this:

JOHN: Where's the milk?

JOANNE:

In the fridge.

JOHN: I don't see it.

JOANNE:

Behind the juice, top shelf.

From a video recording more data are available—and so there are more questions. Should we add some notes to show the position of people, objects that are pointed to? Should we describe facial expressions such as a smile, or gestures such as the shaking of a head sideways?

In fact, whether we respond “Yes” or “No” to all of the above questions, we have to realize that any transcription we make is partial. Any transcription, like any narration, whether made during an observation or afterwards, involves selection.

Which is better: a narration, a transcription, a recording, or a recollection? That question is not consistent with the theme of this book. What we need to concentrate on are the differences between the types of collected data. Take, for example, the quote in the introduction: “You call yourself a teacher? I'll show you how to teach!” You have only my recollection of what the supervisor said. I collected only one type of data. If I had a video recording of the scene, we might be able to determine if the teacher's intonation was ironic, humorous, sarcastic, supportive, or matter-of-fact. If I had a text written by this particular teacher, to describe his ideas about teaching and observations, I could compare his ideas with the words I heard. Knowing that different data show different realities at least allows us to generate a range of interpretations. Now we will see what happens when we supplement one kind of observation recording with another.

Activity 10

Below I have made some additions to the notes we read in Activity 8, after looking at a video recording of the lesson. The additions are shown in brackets.

Put an *f* for fact on the broken line next to those groups of words in brackets that you consider facts.

1. Teacher said, “What are you holding?” [student addressed was holding a beret; teacher was looking at student] ---
2. One student repeated, “What you hold?” [student said words with rising intonation and moved left hand up to left chin as if he was puzzled; did not look at the beret he was holding] ---
3. Teacher shook head sideways. [as he shook his head sideways, the student was looking at the beret in his hands—did not seem to notice the shaking of the teacher's head] ---
4. Teacher repeated, “What are you holding?” [teacher moved closer to the student as he repeated the words and pointed to the beret on the student's lap] ---
5. Teacher emphasized *are* and *ing* when saying, “What are you holding?” [teacher looked at the student as if to say, “Why can't you say the words right?”] ---

6. He said the words too quickly. [nodded his head up and down as he said the words] ---
7. He used a rapid rate. [moved his hands as he said the words] ---
8. He offset the speed with repeated models. [hearing the words over and over made them sound a bit like gibberish] ---
9. Some students were not participating. [Romero was looking at his hands, not the student speaking] ---
10. It appeared that one or two students were catching the pattern. [hard to see any way to show students catching the pattern since only one student was saying words at this point] ---
11. The lesson was very clear. [not sure what the point was—seemed to be the *to be plus ing* form] ---
12. He used the blackboard for writing the model he had said orally. [students did not look at the blackboard] ---
13. He held up two fingers when he wanted a two-word answer. [he also wrote on the board “a beret” and “I’m holding a beret,” to contrast the long and short responses] ---

Thinking about the Alternatives

The process of arguing about the meaning you and your partner each attach to the word *fact* is the critical step here. My comments, below, reflect my understanding of the meanings of the words—not the right answers. Matching items or examples with the words we use as labels enables each of us to see more clearly the meaning we each attribute to those labels or descriptors.

I put an *f* next to the bracketed words with items 1, 4, 6, 7, 9, and 12. In item 2, the single word “puzzled” prevented me from considering the more than twenty-five other words as facts. If “as if he was puzzled” were removed, I would have been able to write an *f* next to the words there. In item 3, the words “did not seem to notice” changed *fact* to interpretation for me because whether the person did or did not notice is different from “looking at his hands.” In item 5 “as if to say” would not be accepted by the detective in “Dagnet,” nor perhaps by many judges, either. The use of “too quickly” in 6 sounds like a law enforcement officer talking to a delinquent driver rather than a car enthusiast talking about the speed of automobiles, but the words in brackets seem neutral. In 8, we have a judgment signaled by “gibberish.” Item 10 is a type of explanation of why the original interpretation (“it appeared that one or two students were catching the pattern”) cannot be supported. And 13 is an explanation of why the teacher did what he did—like attributing a motive to a criminal—and is more than a fact.

Just as a person trying to sell stamps will make positive judgments—“fantastic centering”—while the person buying will make negative judgments—“faded color”—so our judgments about classes can be positive or negative and tend to reflect the roles we are in and our own beliefs rather than the value of what we are observing.

Optional Activity: Using Facts

In the appendix of supplemental activities you will find Activity 10A. It provides practice in assigning each of the thirteen items we have been working with to the categories transcription or narrative details to describe, transcriptions or narrative details used to support judgments and interpretations, or those that do neither (neutral).

Activity 11

In the by-now-familiar thirteen lines, reprinted below, write a plus sign (+) on the broken lines next to those items you think make the teacher look good and a minus sign (-) next to the lines you think make the teacher look bad.

1. Teacher said, "What are you holding?" [student addressed was holding a beret; teacher was looking at student] ---
2. One student repeated, "What you hold?" [student said words with rising intonation and moved left hand up to left chin as if he was puzzled; did not look at the beret he was holding] ---
3. Teacher shook head sideways. [as he shook his head sideways, the student was looking at the beret in his hands—did not seem to notice the shaking of the teacher's head] ---
4. Teacher repeated, "What are you holding?" [teacher moved closer to the student as he repeated the words and pointed to the beret on the student's lap] ---
5. Teacher emphasized *are* and *ing* when saying, "What are you holding?" [teacher looked at the student as if to say, "Why can't you say the words right?"] ---
6. He said the words too quickly. [nodded his head up and down as he said the words] ---
7. He used a rapid rate. [moved his hands as he said the words] ---
8. He offset the speed with repeated models. [hearing the words over and over made them sound a bit like gibberish] ---
9. Some students were not participating. [Romero was looking at his hands, not the student speaking] ---
10. It appeared that one or two students were catching the pattern. [hard to see any way to show students catching the pattern since only one student was saying words at this point] ---
11. The lesson was very clear. [not sure what the point was—seemed to be the *to be plus ing* form] ---
12. He used the blackboard for writing the model he had said orally. [students did not look at the blackboard] ---
13. He held up two fingers when he wanted a two-word answer. [he also wrote on the board "a beret" and "I'm holding a beret," to contrast the long and short responses] ---

It is possible to argue that each line can be either positive or negative depending on the beliefs we each have and the goals we have set for teaching or observing. For example, if you as a teacher think people concentrate more when the task is harder and you think that speaking quickly is more difficult, then you will write a plus sign next to 6, "He said the words too quickly," and 7, "He used a rapid rate." If you think that speaking quickly to a non-native speaker of a language is confusing and makes it harder to follow, you will write a minus sign.

Thinking about the Alternatives

The only explanation I thought made the teacher look good was in item 13, "to contrast the long and short responses." "Puzzled" in 2, "did not seem to notice" in 3, "as if to say 'Why can't you say the words right?'" in 5, "gibberish" in 8, "hard to see" in 10, and "not sure what the point was" in 11 all have negative connotations to me. Jack Webb from "Dragnet" would have been dismayed with the "facts" that were selected to "convict" the teacher, even if he had thought the teacher was guilty.

While we often have a clear idea of what we consider positive or negative, just as often we probably forget that one person's positive can be another person's negative. And often we forget that what we attribute to the words, or any other phenomena we are judging does not mean that the phenomena themselves are good or bad. As a tennis coach who advocates suspending judgments to more clearly see tennis shots wrote, "Judgments are our personal, ego reactions to the sights, sounds, feelings and thoughts within our experience" (Gallwey, 1974, p. 34). Or, to paraphrase one of Shakespeare's characters, "things are neither good nor bad but thinking makes them so."

We must remember that our experience and someone else's are usually different. By trying to see how what we mark with a minus can be positive and how what we mark with a plus sign can be negative, we can attempt to see another's experience. Thus, if we believe that group work is vital to teaching, it can be instructive to pretend to be a supervisor who considers group work disruptive. By looking at the possibility that the disruptive nature of group work might interfere with learning, we might be able to generate some practices that decrease the noise during group work.

Activity 12

I have selected some of the lines from the thirteen items we have been looking at for this activity. Even though you have not seen the tape of the lesson on which the notes were taken, with your partner try to rewrite a few of the lines added in brackets.

Cross out those words you and your partner think have a negative connotation. Substitute words that have a positive connotation and rewrite the comments on the blank lines preceded with plus signs. For example, in item 2, if you think "puzzled" has a negative connotation, you might cross it out and substitute "fascinated" and rewrite "as if he was fascinated."

Substitute words with a negative connotation for those with a positive connotation and rewrite the comments next to the minus sign. For example, if "offset the speed with repeated models" in 8 seems favorable to

you, you would cross out "offset" and write something such as "failed to compensate for the speed with repeated models." When you have finished, compare your comments with those written by others.

2. One student repeated, "What you hold?" [student said words with rising intonation and moved left hand up to left chin as if he was puzzled; did not look at the beret he was holding]

+ _____

- _____

5. Teacher emphasized *are* and *ing* when saying, "What are you holding?" [teacher looked at the student as if to say, "Why can't you say the words right?"]

+ _____

- _____

7. He used a rapid rate. [moved his hands as he said the words]

+ _____

- _____

8. He offset the speed with repeated models. [hearing the words over and over made them sound a bit like gibberish]

+

-

13. He held up two fingers when he wanted a two-word answer. [he also wrote on the board "a beret" and "I'm holding a beret," to contrast the long and short responses]

+

-

Thinking about the Alternatives

For "puzzled" in item 2, one observer substituted "very curious" and another "pensive," arguing that moving one's hand to one's chin to support the head is similar to the position of the hand in Rodin's sculpture *The Thinker*—to many a symbol of thought, concentration, and curiosity.

In item 5, why could the teacher's look not mean "You can say the words right, it's easy"? The "rapid rate" in 7 could be called "normal," "natural," or "at the rate a native speaker would say it," interpretations that sound either neutral or even positive.

In 8, "He complemented the speed" sounds more positive than "he offset the speed" to some. Rather than saying something sounded like "gibberish," it could be said "hearing the words over and over showed that the teacher was keen on having the students hear the form and the sounds rather than attending to the meaning."

Some see the reason given in 13 for the teacher writing two patterns on the board as positive: "to contrast the long and short responses." Those who do have rewritten the reason in ways to imply a negative reason: "written words can only interfere with oral language" or "showing two different answers confuses the students since they don't know whether the

teacher holding up two fingers is telling them to give two answers or one answer with two words in it; the signals are ambiguous.”

There are obviously other possible positive interpretations of both these and other words you might consider negative. These are simply examples.

We can use any one of the positive or negative judgments as a starting point to consider alternatives. For example, “rapid rate” in 7 opens up the area of rate of delivery for exploration. Whether we think the models have been given very slow, slow, fast, very fast, normally, or any place in between, we can alter the speed in subsequent lessons and, over time, we can alter speed within the same lesson. The judgments evoked by the range of meanings of the teacher’s signal in line 13, “He held up two fingers,” can serve as a stimulus to explore the meanings students attribute to signals.

In subsequent lessons, we could use a series of hand signals. First we could ask students to draw the signals. Then, we could ask students to write down what message the students thought each signal was sending. The sketches might show us that what we considered the signal—holding up two fingers—was missed by the students. Some might draw the position of our head or the expression on our face rather than the position of our fingers. Those who consider the fingers the signal might write a range of meanings that are different from the ones we intended. We can use each judgment we and others make as a source for generating alternatives rather than as an order to stop a particular practice or increase the use of another practice. Judgments can be sources of exploration rather than of evaluation.

SEEKING DIFFERENT REPRESENTATIONS OF REALITY

There are of course many perspectives that could be brought to bear on the lesson “What are you holding,” which we have viewed in the past few activities. As you know from your work grouping stamps, one way to present other views of reality is to develop titles for types/groups of communications that you want to extract from the data. Here are a few possibilities:

value-free	with values
without feelings	with feelings
what happened	what happened plus
words alone	words plus extras from the voice box and mouth
words alone	words plus body language
what happened	what happened related to goals
transcription deals with	transcription does not deal
position or location of	with the location or
participants	position of participants
important facts	unimportant facts
details	general points
facts to prove that the lesson is	facts to prove that the lesson is
boring	engaging
practices that deal with form	practices that deal with
	meaning

**Activity
13**

Select one of the above pairs of groupings, write it in the blank line after "Your selection." Then, on the bracketed blank lines below each of the thirteen observations add words to embellish the original observations so that you have new notes that fit your selection of grouping titles. When you have finished, compare what you did with what others did.

Your selection: _____

1. Teacher said, "What are you holding?"
[_____]
2. One student repeated, "What you hold?"
[_____]
3. Teacher shook head sideways.
[_____]
4. Teacher repeated, "What are you holding?"
[_____]
5. Teacher emphasized *are* and *ing* when saying, "What are you holding?"
[_____]
6. He said the words too quickly.
[_____]
7. He used a rapid rate.
[_____]
8. He offset the speed with repeated models.
[_____]
9. Some students were not participating.
[_____]
10. It appeared that one or two students were catching the pattern.
[_____]
11. The lesson was very clear.
[_____]
12. He used the blackboard for writing the model he had said orally.
[_____]
13. He held up two fingers when he wanted a two-word answer.
[_____]

Thinking about the Alternatives

Using the pair of titles *what happened/what happened related to goals* to group the observations, the first step one teacher took during this conver-

sation was to state a goal. The goal stated was "provide samples of a language for students to hear and associate an action with the model." Given this goal, lines 1 and 4 are congruent with the goal since the model is given in these lines. Line 8 suggests that other models were spoken as well. The communications after the student said the model incorrectly are not in line with the goal since they involve production rather than simply hearing. It is not clear from the transcript of line 1 that the holding of the beret (as embellished from Activity 10) is an action that is supposed to be associated with the model. Writing the model on the board, reported in line 12, does not appeal to the students' ears, but their eyes. The same can be said for the two fingers in line 13.

Here are words added to embellish the lines to meet the title what happened related to goals:

1. *Because the goal was to provide the model as much as possible, teacher said: "What are you holding?"*
2. *One student repeated "What you hold?" and because there is an error, the goal of providing the model as much as possible is not met.*
3. *Teacher shook head sideways is an unfortunate behavior since it in no way provides the model; the student has no way to know where the error is since no model is given.*

The two teachers who selected the titles *form/meaning*, found that all the observations as written seemed to deal only with form. Consequently, they found they had to write the same type of embellishments for each observation. Here are some of their embellishments:

1. *Teacher said "What are you holding?" so that the students could recognize the sounds sequence of words in the pattern.*
2. *One student repeated "What you hold?" showing that the form of the present participle and the use of the verb to be has not been recognized or remembered.*
3. *Teacher shook head sideways. In order to stress to the student the importance of the correct form, the teacher indicated that the student's rendition of the pattern was incorrect when the student said "What you hold?"*

HOW WE SELECT AFFECTS WHAT WE SELECT

The activities in this section were designed to get you to realize that there are many different ways of collecting and grouping data. For example, in research in which you have only one chance to see the data you are analyzing, you do not have the benefits that a tape or videotape recorder provides. Here is how one scholar lamented the usual lot of researchers:

The explorer returns after a long absence with bottles, boxes and bags. On arrival he exclaims, in a variety of modest phrases, "Look what I've

found!" but it takes him longer to sort out his findings than it did to collect them. . . . The more he analyses his material the more he feels that if only he could make the journey again in the light of the knowledge he now has his miscellaneous collection could be made more orderly, coherent and complete.

(Michaels, 1987, p. 2)

With recordings, in fact, you can make "the journey again in the light of the knowledge" you have. You and your partner can write notes from small segments of lessons you observe live. And then, after some grouping of the communications you wrote, you can rewind and listen again to audio- and videotapes to make different notes and different types of transcriptions. You can watch videotapes at fast speed, regular speed, frame by frame, and backwards, with or without the sound.

But the point of this section is not just to emphasize the potential value of taping classes nor even of taking notes when you observe live. Rather the purpose of the grouping activities, the purpose of substituting words with negative connotations for words with positive connotations, or vice versa, has been to make us conscious—each time we observe, transcribe tapes, or view lessons on video—of how we are selecting.

What I hope you will gain from this book is the realization that by looking a second or third time at the same part of a lesson and by changing words with positive connotations into words with negative connotations and vice versa, you can alter the facts themselves as well as your interpretation. And perhaps you will become more conscious of the way in which your beliefs cause you to be selective in your retrieval of facts both during and after observations.

In my experience, it is impossible not to reflect personal beliefs at some level either in the recollections from a lesson, the notes taken during a lesson, or transcriptions or narrations from recordings. Nor can a person's values fail to show up in the use of these recollections, notes, transcriptions, and narrations. If the goal was to involve the class, an observer will more likely notice communications that he or she thinks show involvement rather than estrangement. If you know that the objective was to teach how to balance chemical formulas, as you listen to a recording of the lesson, your concentration on comments about chemical formulas may prevent you from hearing comments to the class to be quiet, descriptive information about elements, words of astonishment, excitement, or bewilderment.

Bateson makes the point this way: "But what gets to consciousness is selected; it is a systematic (not random) sampling of the rest. . . . I, the conscious I, see an unconsciously edited version of a small percentage of what affects my retina. I am guided in my perception by purposes." (Bateson, 1972, p. 434)

This is not to say we should not try to relate what we see to our purposes or our beliefs. But by engaging in conversations such as those stimulated by the activity sections, we are likely to see how our goals and beliefs are both congruous, or matching, and incongruous with our practices and behaviors. We will be arguing about such congruence rather than how successful or unsuccessful we were.

We will be arguing about grouping what we have observed, how to select different facts to refute the judgments and interpretations we make,

ways to make our negative interpretations positive, and different types of transcription and narrations, rather than about the greater validity of our interpretations and judgments over those of others. The process of matching words, meanings, and interpretations defuses the temptation to engage in power play. The matching can enable us to play with the communications the way we played with the stamps when we grouped them in a range of ways.

**Activity
14**

Before turning to the specific classroom situations we will talk about in Part Two, take this opportunity to record a lesson in a manner other than your usual one. If you have not habitually taken notes during observation, write notes during a short segment of your observation and tape-record the lesson as well. After the observation, transcribe some of the exchanges from the tape, exactly as the words were said. After you have done that, listen again, and in brackets add other features to the words. Compare your notes and both types of transcriptions. Group some communications in a range of ways, related to goals, or to your beliefs.

If you are used to writing copious notes, go into a class without anything to write with or on. Just sit and observe. After the class write some notes about the lesson.

In either case, with a partner characterize the data you have and group the data in a range of ways. Ask which items are facts, which judgments, which explanations, or other types of words you use to characterize what you see. See how facts are selected to support interpretations, judgments, or the intentions set out for the lesson. See how close you come to feeling the way a police lieutenant did, in *Who Killed Palomino Molero?* by the Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa, as he was asked by one of his police officers if he knew everything about a murder they were both investigating: "Nothing's easy, Lituma," he answered. "The truths that seem most truthful, if you look at them from all sides, if you look at them close up, turn out either to be half truths or lies." (Vargas Llosa, 1986, p. 86)