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I'll Never Observe Alone: A Rule for University Supervisors?

by

Ellen Corcoran

"What can I do to encourage my interns to observe in other classrooms?" This was a question I had been puzzling over for several years without coming any closer to a solution. There was a powerful list of influences pulling interns away from fulfilling the expectation that they observe in other classrooms and in other schools on a regular basis. Interns were so caught up in their own classrooms that they resisted anything that took time away from what was going on in there. When they did get out to observe, they didn't seem to get much out of the experience. Apart from a forced "show and tell" during seminar, there didn't seem to be much carryover or shared learning from the observations that interns did do. Their cooperating teachers, who agreed with the concept of outside observations in principle, didn't tend to get out of their own classrooms either, so the interns had no strong role models to look to for support with meeting the observation requirement. And because I, as the university supervisor, was aware of the conditions mitigating against interns leaving the classroom to observe, I generally chose not to force the issue.

Yet I knew, and the interns and cooperating teachers agreed with me, that there were many positive reasons for observing. If you stay in just one classroom with one group of children for your entire year-long internship, you can get tunnel vision. If you go out to other classrooms, you can see different ways of doing things and you can see a broader range of children. Staying in one classroom is, in some ways, a limiting experience. An intern is not going to be able to teach that same group of children in that same classroom context ever again, so it is important for the intern to experience many different classrooms and models of teaching during internship so that, as a beginning teacher, s/he has a broad range of approaches to draw on. Despite the compelling logic of these, and similar arguments, I was unable to pry my interns out of their classrooms in a productive and meaningful way. I needed something more.

What would happen if, from the very beginning of the year, I made a kind of rule for myself that said, *I will never observe alone*? As with most of my ideas, I have no idea where this one came from. Originally, I envisioned it as simply a way to make sure that, whenever I observed, I had an intern tagging along with me. I hadn't thought of anything beyond that. With the rule in mind, I began to wonder what it might look like as I began the year with ten teaching interns in a first-through-eighth grade school.

When it came time to figure out how to put this rule into practice, the first thing I did was to plan out how to introduce it to interns. At the end of the first week of school, I decided to pair them up for a fifteen-twenty minute activity during seminar. For this first set of pairs, each intern was matched with an intern from the same grade level, or as close as I could make it. Their task was to talk together to identify questions about their classroom and their interactions with children that they would like the observing intern to take a look at. In other words, by the end of the fifteen-twenty minutes, Judy had some ideas of what to look for in Maggie's room and Maggie had some ideas of what to look for in Judy's room. As part of the fifteen-twenty minute activity, each pair of interns wrote down when each would be observing the other on my master schedule for myself during the following week. The observations were to last thirty minutes.

After the fifteen-twenty minute work in pairs, we came together as a whole group to share what each would be observing in the other intern's classroom. The ostensible reason for this was

that I needed to know what to observe in each classroom since I would be doing the observing right along with the intern. An effect of this sharing was that all of the interns had a larger range of questions they might think about for the next round. Interns' questions varied. "Am I getting around to every child in the room?" "Am I using my interactions with individual children to learn more about them as learners and people?" "Am I dealing with boys differently than girls?" "Am I being clear?" "Am I setting limits in a positive way?" "Am I following through on what I say?" These are samples of the questions generated during the second week of school. Quite frankly, I was delighted at the depth and the openness of these questions. It seemed to me that the interns were revealing themselves through their questions to their peers in ways that far surpassed what they would have revealed to me in similar conversations so early in the year.

The following week I appeared at each observing intern's classroom at the appointed time, the intern grabbed a clipboard and we talked together as we approached the classroom where we were to observe. We reviewed the questions and planned together how we were going to approach the observation. I found myself doing some on-the-spot teaching about observation techniques, beginning with how to enter a room as unobtrusively as possible. Movement maps, verbatim transcripts of questions or feedback, boy-girl interaction tallies were some of the techniques that the interns used. As an observation team, we agreed to divide up the labor so that we were not simply duplicating each other's efforts. I was surprised by how much more fun it was for me to observe with a partner. When something happened during an observation which directly related to what one or the other of us was working on, there would be brief eye contact and a grin between us.

Toward the end of our half hour, I caucused with my co-observer and we shared our findings. In all cases the intern-observer had taken careful notes and had things s/he was excited to talk over with his or her intern-observee. Then the three of us (intern-observer, intern-observee, and I) were able to meet for a fifteen or twenty minute post-conference in the hall. Where possible, the cooperating teacher joined us. The intern-observer and I debriefed our experience and compared notes as we walked back to the observer's classroom.

I am truly amazed at what is beginning to emerge from my *never observe alone* rule.

- The intern-observers have real reasons to observe: they are collecting data for a peer who has questions.
- I am presented with many teachable moments about observation: the intern-observers and I need to work out how to collect the data that the intern-observee has requested.
- My relationship with each intern is one of a professional colleague: we are working together toward the common goal of helping another intern learn more about his or her own teaching.
- Being observed is an opportunity for growth, not a threat: intern-observees are in control of what the observers are focusing on and since the observees have experience with observing, they realize how intense and all-consuming it is to gather data in a classroom.

Interns have been in one another's classrooms and have a growing pool of shared experience from which to work together. Not only the dynamics of intern-to-intern and intern-to-supervisor relationships are changing, however. So is the level of feedback each intern is receiving.

For example, one eighth grade intern wanted to know how he was doing with respect to paying equal attention to males and females. I did a movement map and my co-observing intern did some verbatim transcripts of the interactions. The three of us sat in a triangle on the floor

outside the classroom immediately following the observation. My co-observer began with, "Well, on this boy-girl thing, you failed. But let me show you why." My heart stopped and the bottom fell out of my stomach. This was not exactly the tone I would set for a post-conference. But I listened. My co-observer went on to praise the observee with how he approached each small group with, "How are you folks doing here?" Each small group was of mixed gender and in each small group the girls said they were doing fine and the boys had questions that they wanted help with. "So," my co-observer went on, "you spent almost all of your time with the boys." All three of us agreed that this was what had happened and we began to explore why and what might be done about it.

After some discussion, my co-observer said, "But it gets worse. The girls weren't fine. They just *said* they were. One threesome had their notebooks open and they looked like they were making progress, but they weren't. They were talking about making bracelets to sell to make money for the spring class trip. For fifteen minutes." Once again, I was worried by the abruptness of the feedback. I needn't have been. The observer went on, "I can see the same thing happening in my class. I mean, how can you tell what's going on? You ask, they say they don't need help, and so you go on to someone who says he does need help. What are you supposed to do, stand there and tell them that they do need help?" Although we were able to talk for a few more minutes, we just scratched the surface of a problem that challenges even the most experienced teachers. And again, this level of discussion occurred during the second week of school.

Although I consider myself a fairly good observer and supervisor, I am sure that I would not have picked up on the dynamics of that small group activity had I been observing alone. I am also sure that I would not have approached the post-conference in the same way. Because it was a peer who could identify with precisely the same problem, the conversation was non-judgmental, despite the opening line of, "You failed." The tone of our post-conference was one of we-are-in-this-together. None of us had "the answer." All of us have become intrigued with the questions. What better way to start an internship year?

As Austin, Sweet, and Overholt (1991) note, "Observation can be a mutual gift between the observer and the observed. Both stand to gain self-awareness, perspective, an introduction to new teaching techniques, and fresh enthusiasm for their craft" (p. 216). My *never observe alone* rule has certainly been a gift for me and I would like to think it could work equally well for other university supervisors who are interested in collaborating with their interns or student teachers. Working as a co-observer with each of the ten interns whom I supervise has provided me with opportunities to share what I know about teaching, learning to teach, observing, and reflecting in ways that feel both are authentic and productive to me. I look forward to experimenting with many variations of this concept of shared observation as the weeks and months progress.

References

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