

An introduction to classroom observation

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'What sort of classroom observation shall we do?' This question is increasingly asked, when research into teaching and learning is undertaken, but it is also an issue discussed before the appraisal of experienced teachers, the training of novices or the inspection of schools. Nor is it only an issue for professional people. Parents, for example, may be invited into schools to see some teaching, as many schools have open days when visitors can watch what is happening in lessons. Classrooms are still relatively private places, but they are more open to scrutiny than they used to be. A great deal of money is spent on educating the next generation of citizens, consequently many people have a right to know what is going on in classrooms, where so much important teaching and learning takes place, even though children may learn from a variety of other sources.

Classrooms are exceptionally busy places, so observers need to be on their toes. Every day in classrooms around the world billions of events take place: teachers ask children questions, new concepts are explained, pupils talk to each other, some of those who misbehave are reprimanded, others are ignored. Jackson (1968) reported a study in which it was found that primary teachers engaged in as many as 1,000 such interpersonal exchanges in a single day. This means, if the pattern is repeated, 5,000 in a week, 200,000 in a year, millions in a professional career. In another study of videotapes by Adams and Biddle (1970), there was a change in 'activity' every 5–18 seconds and there was an average in each lesson of 174 changes in who talked and who listened. The job of teaching can be as busy as that of a telephonist or a sales assistant during peak shopping hours.

Yet despite greater openness to scrutiny, in many classrooms the craft of teaching is still largely a private affair. Some teachers spend 40 years in the classroom, teaching maybe 50,000 lessons or more, of which only a tiny number are witnessed by other adults. It is often difficult to obtain detailed accounts of lessons, because teachers are so busy with the running of the lesson there is little time for them to make notes or photographic records. I once went to a rural primary school and observed some of the most exciting science work I have ever seen. When I urged the teacher to write up what he was doing so that others could read about it, he declined, saying that his colleagues might think he was boasting. By contrast practice in surgery is a much more open matter. The developers of transplant and bypass surgery took it for granted that successful new techniques must be witnessed by and disseminated to others, through their actual presence at operations, or by means of videotapes and the written and spoken word.

Classroom observation is now becoming far more common than it once was. The advent of systematic teacher appraisal and lesson evaluation, the greater emphasis on developing the professional skills of initial trainees, or honing those of experienced practitioners, the increased interest in classroom processes by curriculum developers, all of these have led to more scrutiny of what actually goes on during teaching and learning. It is much more likely now, compared to the mid-1970s or even the mid-1980s, that one person will sit in and observe the lessons of another as part of a teacher appraisal exercise, or that a teacher supervising a student will be expected to make a more detailed analysis of lessons observed than might once have been the case.

If lessons are worth observing then they are also worth analysing properly, for little purpose is served if, after a lesson, observers simply exude goodwill, mumble vaguely or appear to be uncertain why they are there, or what they should talk about. The purpose of this book, therefore, is to describe the many contexts in which lessons are observed, discuss the purposes and outcomes of observation, the different approaches to lesson analysis, and the uses that can be made of the careful scrutiny of classroom events. There is now a huge constituency of people who need to be aware of what is involved in lesson observation or how it might be conducted. These include teachers, heads, student teachers, inspectors, appraisers, researchers, curriculum developers and anyone else who ever sits in on a lesson with a serious purpose. Skilfully handled classroom observation can benefit both the observer and the person observed, serving to inform and enhance the professional skill of both people. Badly handled, however, it becomes counter-productive, at its worst arousing hostility, resistance and suspicion.

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Purposes and uses of observation

Consider just a few of the many uses of classroom observation: a primary teacher is being observed by the school's language co-ordinator, who comes for the morning to look at what can be done in response to concern about the relatively low literacy levels of certain boys in the school; a secondary science teacher is watched by the head of department during a one and a half hour laboratory session as part of the science department's self-appraisal exercise; a student on teaching practice is seen by a supervising teacher or tutor; a maths lesson is scrutinized by an inspector during a formal inspection of the school; a class of 7 year olds is observed by a teacher who is also a textbook writer preparing a series of mathematics activities for young children; a researcher studying teachers' questioning techniques watches a secondary geography class, noting down the various questions asked by the teacher and the responses obtained.

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All of these are watching lessons, yet their purposes and approaches are very diverse. The mathematics textbook writer might focus specifically on individual pupils to see how effectively they coped with different kinds of activities, whereas the appraisers might give much of their time to the teacher's questioning, explaining, class management, the nature of the tasks set, and pupils' learning. One might make detailed notes, take photographs and record the whole process on video. Another might write little down, but rather reflect on what could be discussed with the teacher later.

What is important in all these cases is that the methods of classroom observation should suit its purposes. There is little point, when observing a student teacher, for example, in employing all the paraphernalia of a detailed research project if a different structure would make more sense. The research project might be using extensive systematic observation of pupils' movements, whereas the student might be having class management problems, so the principal focus might be on why children appear to be misbehaving, what they actually do, how the teacher responds, and what might be altered in future to avoid disruptive behaviour. The observer might, therefore, concentrate on the tasks the children have been set or

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devised for themselves, incidents that reveal the relationships between teacher and pupils and among the pupils themselves, the nature of classroom rules, or the lack of them. The purpose, timing and context of an observation should largely determine its methods, and this book describes how a range of approaches can be employed to meet a variety of needs.

ACTIVITY 1

Look at the photograph (Figure 1.1). Imagine that the teacher is concerned that she always seems to be trapped at her desk, with about a third of the class, sometimes as many as a half, waiting in line to see her. Consider how you might analyse what is happening, what would be the focus of your observations, the nature of the written record you might keep of events and what you might discuss afterwards.

There are many points on which to focus in such circumstances. Sometimes the teacher has made the pupils too dependent on her, and may simply want to know how to spell words, when they might easily use a dictionary. The observer might look for examples of dependency so that these could be discussed later.



Figure 1.1 Children queuing at teacher's desk

<i>Focus of observation</i>	<i>Written record needed</i>	<i>Discussion points</i>

The elements of the classroom

One of the problems faced by both experienced and inexperienced classroom observers is the matter of deciding what should be the focus of attention. So much happens in classrooms that any task or event, even apparently simple ones, could be the subject of pages of notes and hours of discussion. The ecology of many classrooms can be extremely rich and full. The main constituents of them are teachers, pupils, buildings and materials.

Teachers are the paid professionals, expected in law to act as a thoughtful parent might, to be *in loco parentis*. In order to fulfil what the law calls the 'duty of care', therefore, teachers are given certain powers as well as responsibilities. They may from time to time, for example, give punishments to children who do not behave properly, or take action to prevent injury to a pupil. Teachers' own background, personality, interests, knowledge, intentions and preferences will influence much of what occurs, such as the strategies they employ in different situations, the timing and nature of their questions and explanations, their responses to misbehaviour, indeed what they perceive to be deviant behaviour.

During any one day teachers may fill a variety of roles in carrying out their duties. These can include not only the traditional one of *transmitter of knowledge*, but also others such as *counsellor* (advising pupils about careers, aspirations or problems), *social worker* (dealing with family issues), *assessor* (marking children's work, giving tests, writing reports), *manager* (looking after resources, organising groups, setting goals), even *jailer* (keeping in school reluctant attenders or checking up on possible truants). As classroom life can be busy and rapidly changing, some teachers may fulfil several of these roles within the same lesson.

Children may also play different roles during lessons, sometimes in accordance with what is expected and required by the teacher, on other occasions according to their own choice. They are expected to be *learners* of knowledge, skills, attitudes or behaviour. From time to time they may also be *deviants*

(misbehaving, not doing what the teacher has asked), *jokers* (laughing, creating humour which may lighten or heighten tension), *collaborators* (working closely with others as members of a team or group), *investigators* (enquiring, problem solving, exploring, testing hypotheses) or even *servants* (moving furniture, carrying and setting up equipment). As was the case with teachers, their background, personality, interests, prior knowledge, intentions and preferences will influence much of what occurs. Furthermore they will often be conscious of other members of their peer group, especially in adolescence, and this too will sometimes form a powerful influence on what they do.

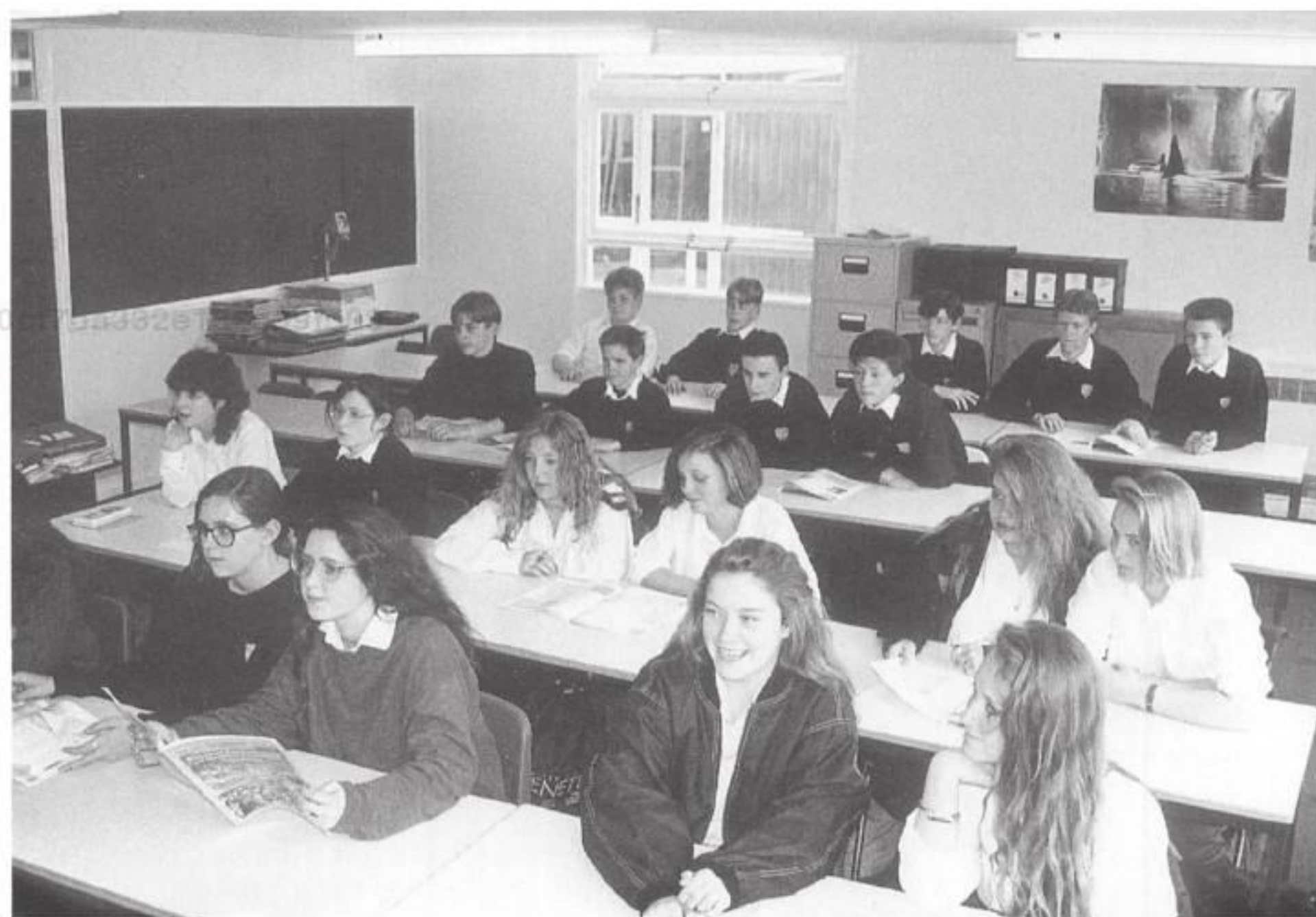
Teaching takes place in a huge variety of locations. In institutions like schools and colleges, there are usually box-shaped classrooms, with furniture arranged in rows or around tables. This may not be the case in subjects like physical education or dance, however, where learning may take place in an open space or outdoors. Nor is it necessarily the norm in adult education, which may be located in the factory, the retail shop or even in settings like clubs, hospitals and people's homes, where there may be considerable informality. Open plan areas in schools may be L-shaped, circular or constructed with some quite irregular arrangement of space. We may well, on relatively rare occasions, be able to sit down with architects when designing a new school and try to turn our aspirations into reality, but most teachers have been given little say over the classrooms in which they teach and may find the buildings influence the styles of teaching that are possible, rather than the other way round.

Even within the same building there may be different uses of the spaces available. Teacher A may have a room with desks laid out in rows, teacher B may prefer groups working around tables, and teacher C may do so much practical work and movement that neither of these arrangements is appropriate. One primary age child may spend each day as a member of a large group of eighty pupils of similar age in a three class open plan area, another may be in a small village school built in the nineteenth century with twenty pupils of different ages. All these ecological factors, some beyond the direct control of teacher or pupil, can affect the nature of classroom interaction.

When it comes to the materials which children and teachers use, the books and equipment, the same variety can be noted. Herbert (1967) spent two years studying a school which had been specially designed for team teaching; he found that the learning media being used included eleven forms of book and printed matter (e.g. textbooks, worksheets, periodicals), nine forms of reference book (dictionary, encyclopedia, atlas, almanac), five kinds of test (textbook test, teacher-made test, standardised test), nine sorts of contentless media (paper, paint, crayon, clay), eleven forms of flat graphics (charts, posters, diagrams, magnetic boards), nine types of three-dimensional media (globes, models, toys, mobiles) and thirteen kinds of visual or audio-visual equipment (overhead projector, slide viewer, television monitor, micro-projector). Nowadays he would have found even more additions, such as computers, word processors and interactive technology, like the CD-ROM, virtual reality, workstations where pupils search world-wide databases for information. Any of these learning media can be influential on teaching and learning styles, and some classroom studies focus exclusively on their use.



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Figure 1.2 Two contrasting classrooms

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Different methods of observation

One result of the diversity of purposes, practices and locations is that several different styles of classroom observation have been developed over the years. Some are drawn from traditions which involve systematic measurement and careful control of the conditions under which observations take place. Others are based on the approaches developed by anthropologists studying tribal life. Some observers may be influenced by the context in which the lesson takes place and may concentrate on some specific aspect of the teaching of one particular subject, like science or English. This in turn may influence whether they adopt a quantitative approach, counting and recording individual events, or a qualitative style of observation, trying to look behind and beneath the mere frequencies. If a teacher felt that she was not involving enough pupils in oral work then the observer might keep a log showing each pupil who answered, whereas if she believed she should improve the way she explains to lower ability pupils, then focus might be on the transcript of an audio recording of actual moments when she explained something.

The origins of many of the common approaches to classroom observation lie in the earlier part of the twentieth century. Indeed, there were examples of systematic approaches even before this time, and some of the best known teachers in history wrote down analyses of their own teaching practices. In the fifth century BC Confucius stated in his *Analects*: 'I shall not teach until the pupils desire to know something, and I do not help unless the pupils really need my help. If out of the four corners of a subject I have dealt thoroughly with one corner and the pupils cannot then find out the other three for themselves, then I do not explain any more'. In Greece, in the second century BC, Dionysius of Thrace laid down the steps to be followed when teaching about a literary work. They included the need to explain figures of speech, historical references and the etymology of some of the words used, and to estimate the literary merit of the work they were reading. In Rome Cicero and Quintilian analysed teaching methodology in detail. Their prescriptions on delivering a lecture, or asking children to write sentences in the style of the writer being studied, were highly influential.

Quantitative methods

In the twentieth century educational research came strongly under the influence of the nineteenth-century French philosopher Auguste Comte, who argued that human thought proceeded through three stages: the theological, the metaphysical and finally the positive or 'scientific'. There was a strong belief that systematic observation and analysis could lead to social behaviour being predicted, as relationships between one event and another became clear. An example of subsequent systematic quantitative analysis is the study by Stevens (1912) of 100 random observations of lessons in which the focus was on the questions that teachers asked in a variety of subjects. It was found that teachers talked for about 64 per cent of the time and pupils for 36 per cent, and that two

to four 'lower level' (i.e. largely requiring the recall of information) questions were asked each minute.

Much of the early quantitative work was done in the United States at a time when the 'recitation lesson', that is the formal presentation of information by the teacher standing at the front of the class, was standard. In the 1920s and 1930s there was a great deal of interest in 'attentiveness', and observers would sit at the front of the class scanning faces to see how many pupils were arguably paying attention to the teacher. This allowed profiles to be drawn up showing the high and low points of the lesson, which could be related to content matter, test scores or other measures to see when the teacher seemed to be most effective. These were crude studies, but they laid the foundation for later work.

It soon became apparent that talk was an important element of classroom life, and classroom observation switched strongly to focusing on what teachers and pupils said to each other. Early investigators concentrated on devising category systems to elicit what kind of talk the teacher engaged in; Withall (1949) drew up a seven category system consisting of three 'learner-centred' (reassuring, accepting, questioning) categories, three 'teacher-centred' (directing, reproving, justifying own actions) categories and one 'neutral' (repetition, administration) category. Already these category systems began to take on their own values, favouring certain acts by the teacher and deprecating others, and much of the work published was highly tendentious.

One very influential writer at this time was Robert Bales (1950), who actually conducted most of his own observations on small groups of adults. He devised a twelve category system which appealed to investigators studying classrooms, because it had such elements as 'agrees', 'gives opinion', 'asks for suggestion' and 'shows antagonism'. Each member of the group under observation was given a code number, the observers were trained until they reached a high level of agreement about which category they would assign to events, and what happened was noted down in sequence. All these became standard practice in later quantitative observation. His finding that ten to twenty different events might occur within a single minute of discussion influenced later work by writers such as Ned Flanders (1970). The ten category system devised by Flanders is described in Chapter 2, which deals more fully with quantitative methods, but one feature of it is that the observer records what is happening every three seconds.

Lying at the heart of the quantitative approach is a belief that the effectiveness of teachers can be improved if a body of knowledge is established which shows that they should do more of some things and less of others. Though this has an appeal, it has to be said that there are relatively few findings that can be said to be of wide general concern. There are some quantitative studies that are of general interest, such as the one by Jackson (1968) that teachers can engage in over 1,000 interpersonal transactions in a single day, by Brophy (1981) showing infrequent and haphazard use of praise, by Deutsch (1960) that some inner-city teachers in American schools spent up to 75 per cent of their day trying to keep order, by Rowe (1972) that teachers allowed on average one second between a pupil answer and their own statement, by Wragg (1993a) that 57 per cent of primary teachers' questions were related to class management, 35 per cent to information recall and only 8 per cent required a higher order of thinking.

However, Jackson (1962) summed up earlier work as 'so low in intellectual food value that it is almost embarrassing to discuss them'; even high quality recent work offers relatively little that is generalisable to all classrooms, though a great deal that is of interest to any individual curious to know whether what is reported elsewhere is also the case in his or her own teaching. The observation of individual teachers, therefore, can utilise some of the approaches of those who have devised good quantitative methods, albeit with caution, even if the eventual findings from them are not the same as those of the original investigator or category designer.

Qualitative methods

While the counting of events may offer some interesting insights, it falls far short of telling the whole story of classroom life. Consider the following statement: 'Andrew, haven't you started yet?' An analysis of the lesson that concentrated entirely on event counting might note that this was one of thirty-seven questions asked by the teacher during the lesson observed. In a category system it might be coded as 'managerial' or 'addressed to individual pupil'.

Yet suppose that the teacher was extremely exasperated with Andrew and that he uttered the words in a loud and rough voice, following it up with a punishment. This might provoke a reaction different from the one that would have followed a gentle chiding voice. Alternatively suppose that Andrew was a sensitive boy for whom one more reprimand was the final straw, as he felt the teacher always made him a target, but ignored other pupils' misbehaviour. Such context factors may override in importance the fact that the teacher's statement was the seventh of fifteen managerial questions.

The origins of some approaches to classroom observation that concentrate on the significance, meaning, impact, individual or collective interpretation of events, are rooted in a different tradition from that of the positivists described above. One strong influence is the work of cultural and social anthropologists; this style of observation is often given the generic label 'ethnographic'. It attempts to address the problem that most of us find with observing in a classroom, which is that it is such a familiar location. After all we have usually spent some 15,000 hours as pupils, many observers are themselves teachers, and it is easy to look straight through events that might hold significance, simply because we take them for granted, so we never really see them with a critical eye.

Anthropologists have to detach themselves from the familiar and, like intelligent Martians, probe behind the surface of what happens. If they arrive in some location where their assignment is to study the life in a particular tribe, they may initially understand little of what they see. However, by building up a picture of tribal life, noting down certain events, interviewing members to hear their explanations, matching one happening or explanation against others, they can soon establish a framework of understanding. A dance that appeared meaningless at first can be seen later as part of a series of rituals connected with fertility and growth, related to the planting of crops, the harvest, beliefs about the weather in general, or rainfall in particular.

Some of these approaches to the observation and understanding of human behaviour can be translated successfully into the study of classrooms. An observer might make notes about an event and then interview the participants afterwards, asking questions about who did what, and why. This then allows one to pool the perceptions of the people who witnessed what happened. Consider, for example, this exchange between a teacher and two 13 year old secondary pupils:

- Teacher:* What on earth do you think you're doing? (*in response to geometry instruments falling noisily on the floor*)
- Lila:* I was just borrowing Marion's ruler.
- Teacher:* Well why are you making such a fuss about it?
- Marion:* It fell on the floor.
- Teacher:* I didn't ask you. You can both stay in for half an hour at lunch time.

In interview afterwards the teacher said that he always took a firm line and would punish these two pupils if ever they misbehaved as an example to the rest, as they were, in his view, 'ringleaders' of a group of others. Lila and Marion, however, saw the same event differently. They would frequently wind the teacher up, they said in interview, even though they were a little apprehensive about what he might do. No one liked him, they explained, as he was too severe and was constantly carping about petty misbehaviour, so, by taking him on, they acquired heroic status in the eyes of others. Having to stay in occasionally at lunch time was a small price to pay. Further observations confirmed this pattern of abrasive interaction between the two friends and the teacher.

This is a good example of differing perceptions of the same events. Both the teacher and the pupils saw themselves as winning these regular confrontations: the teacher because he punished Lila and Marion for their misbehaviour, which usually meant it ceased or lessened for a while, the pupils because they defied his authority, which they regarded as enhancing their status in the eyes of their peers. Since both sides saw such exchanges as reflecting credit and success on their part, they were content for this pattern of interaction to continue. By observing the events and interviewing the participants the observer was able to fill out an interpretation of what was happening in the classroom that would not have been apparent from event counting alone. Chapter 3 describes such qualitative methods in more detail.

Other approaches

One interesting angle on classroom life comes from ethologists who have studied animal behaviour. This might seem a very appropriate or inappropriate perspective, depending on your view of children, but many colonies of creatures show interesting patterns of behaviour when younger and older members are together. Indeed, teaching and learning can often be witnessed, even though they may not take place in such formal institutions as schools. Certainly different kinds of social learning—knowing your place, respecting your elders, staying on your own territory and not straying on to that of others—take place regularly in animal communities.



Figure 1.3 Different interpretations of the same event—how do pupil and teacher see it?

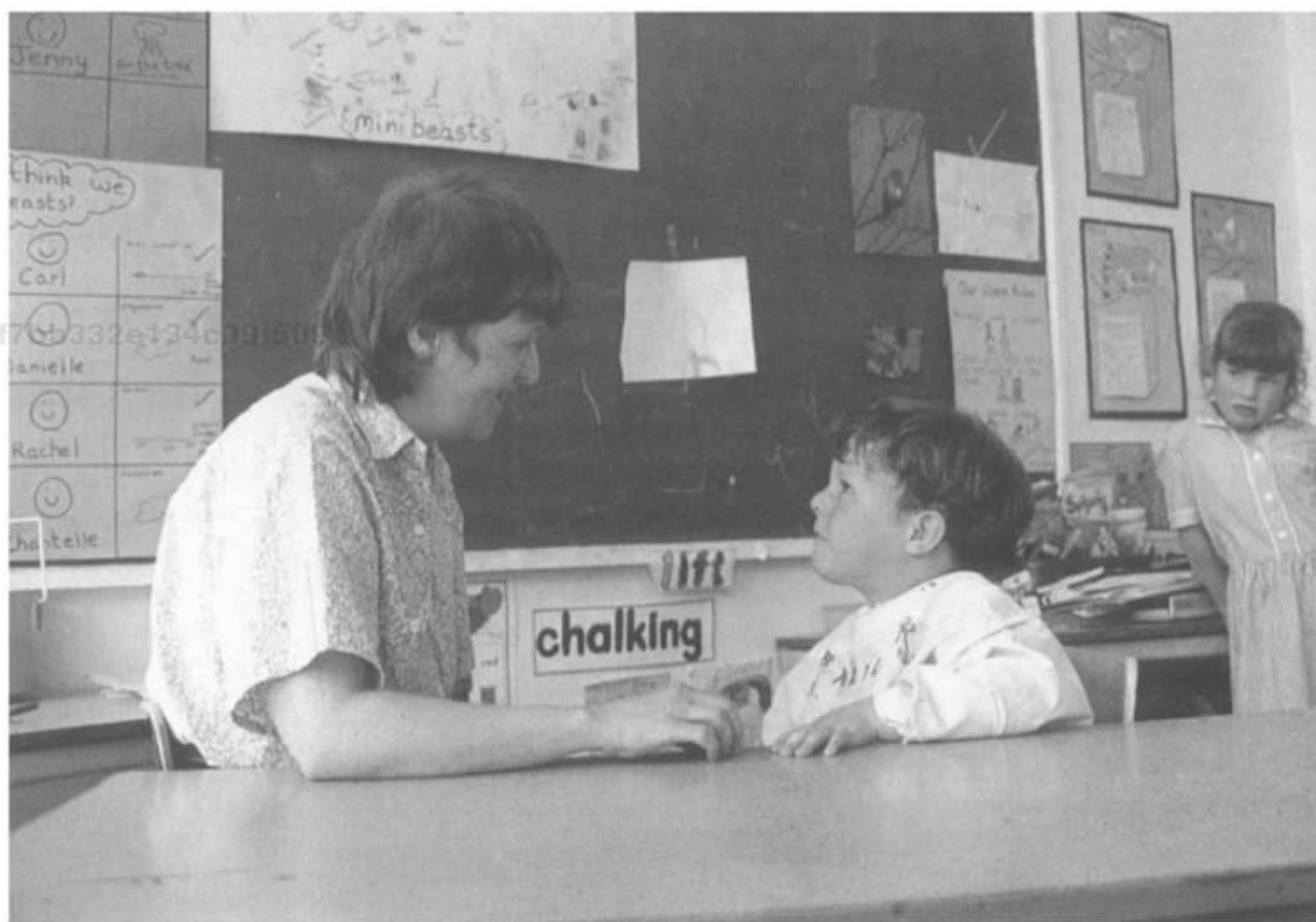
Ethologists have often studied phenomena which can be witnessed in classrooms. The seminal book by Lorenz (1966) *On Aggression* is titled in the original German *Über das sogenannte Böse* (about the so-called 'evil'). It tries to look at the manifestations of aggression, like bared teeth or the bristling mane, and see how and why they occur. Pupils can sometimes be aggressive with each other, pushing and shoving often taking place when children are jostling for facilities, perhaps trying to get to the computer or the science experiment first. This raises questions during classroom observation, like whether boys or girls as a group, or certain individual pupils, are more aggressive when it comes to securing equipment, materials or the teacher's attention, and how, if at all, the teacher responds.

The establishment and maintenance of dominance among animals has also been studied by ethologists, and this too has some relevance to classroom life, especially if one is studying class management. Infant teachers, who normally crouch alongside children when monitoring or discussing their work in order to minimise the height difference and reduce anxiety, may suddenly switch to maximising the difference in their height by towering over them if they are telling them off for misbehaviour.

The spoken word has often been a central focus during classroom observation, and it can be enhanced by variations in *voice*, when teachers use a loud or soft tone, emphasise certain words, or change from a high to a low pitch. However, although a great deal of attention has been given to what teachers and pupils say to each



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Figure 1.4 Teaching and learning

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other in the classroom, there are important *non-verbal* aspects of classroom life that observers will often find of interest. Teachers often amplify an explanation with *gesture*, pointing a finger or spreading their arms, to make a point more clearly or emphatically. Another important element can be *movement*, when the teacher walks towards somebody or away from a group. *Body language* generally signals important messages, as when the teacher leans casually on the desk, or when a new teacher underlines his anxiety and uncertainty by holding his hands tightly under his armpits.

For observers wanting to conduct a detailed analysis of what is said in the classroom it is sometimes worth recording and transcribing a part of a lesson. Although a written transcript is time-consuming to compile and leaves out a great deal of what happened, especially the non-verbal aspects, it does allow much more detailed analysis of events than many other methods. Looking at the written record as soon after the event as possible allows teachers and observers to recall what happened in the lesson and discuss important aspects of classroom interaction.

ACTIVITY 2

Imagine you have just observed a lesson on the topic 'Insects'. Below is a transcript of the opening part of the lesson. Decide what you would want to discuss with the teacher.

- Teacher:* I'm going to give you the little word 'insect'. Immediately in your mind there's a picture of something, I expect. There is in mine. What sort of picture have you got Cassandra?
- Pupil 1:* A spider.
- Teacher:* OK, you think of a spider. You keep the spider there. Catherine, what about you?
- Pupil 2:* (no response).
- Teacher:* When I say 'insect' what do you immediately think of—an insect?
- Pupil 3:* A ladybird.
- Teacher:* Yes, that's right.
- Pupil 4:* A worm.
- Teacher:* Yes—anything else?
- Pupil 3:* A snail.
- Teacher:* How do insects move around, Peter?
- Pupil 2:* Legs.
- Teacher:* How many legs has an insect got?
- Pupil 2:* Six.
- Teacher:* Yes, six, but do insects get around any other way?
- Pupil 2:* Some insects fly.
- Teacher:* Yes, some insects use wings. Can you think of an insect that flies?
- Pupil 2:* An eagle.
- Teacher:* An eagle? Is that an insect? No, it's a bird. A bird is definitely not an insect.

The outcome of this lesson was that most children were unclear what an insect actually was, as tests given to them afterwards revealed, and the teacher himself made a number of factual errors during the lesson. The availability of even a short piece of transcript means that the teacher and observer can focus on such matters as factual inaccuracies (a worm is not an insect), uncertainty (the teacher never indicates whether the answer 'snail' is correct or not) and the shape and structure of the explanation (the focus shifts from parts of the body to forms of locomotion for no apparent reason).

The observer

It has to be recognised that when someone new comes into a classroom to observe, then the very presence of an additional adult who is not normally present may itself influence what happens. It is not easy to say exactly how things might change, because this will depend on many factors, such as how common it is for visitors to arrive in the room, the status of the person concerned, even such matters as the age, dress and sex of the observer. The class of a student teacher might be unusually well behaved if the head teacher arrives to observe; a group of adolescent boys or girls in a single sex school might react differently depending on whether the observer is of the same sex as themselves; a class in an open plan school, well used to parent helpers, numerous unannounced visitors and the presence in the same area of more than one teacher, would be less likely to change its behaviour radically if an observer turned up one day, than a class in a school which rarely saw any strangers.

There have been studies of the effects of observers on classroom interaction. Samph (1976) planted microphones in classrooms and then sent observers either announced or unexpected some weeks later. He found that teachers made more use of questions, praise and were more likely to accept pupils' ideas when someone was present. Teachers and indeed pupils may attempt to provide what they think the visitor expects, and this will vary according to the impression or stereotype they form of the observer concerned. They may be irritated or excited by a visitor and behave differently from normal, hence the need for observers, where possible, to study a series of lessons rather than a single one.

Some observers are members of the school, often teachers in it. There are differences between what in the literature on classroom observation are called *participant* and *non-participant* observers. Insiders can sometimes find it difficult to detach themselves from their own prior knowledge, beliefs, commitments and prejudices about a place they know very well and have seen every day for years. On the other hand they often understand the significance of events that might elude strangers. Outsiders are sometimes able to be more emotionally detached about what they see, but may occasionally be bewildered by it, or even misinterpret events through their unfamiliarity.

It is important for non-participant observers to make sure they learn what they need to know by looking beneath the surface of what happens, and discuss their perceptions with others. It is equally valuable for participant observers to shed the worst of their pre-judgements, approach observation with an open mind and



'Remember to be discreet'

Figure 1.5 Classroom observation

ask themselves what, if anything, might get in the way of their seeing things objectively. Even matters such as dress and positioning are worth thinking about. Most observers try to dress in a manner that will not draw attention to themselves and find some discreet position in a corner or at the back of a room, where their presence will be less likely to affect events. Minimising the intrusion, not overplaying the 'status' card, making contact with the teacher beforehand, clarifying the purpose and likely outcome of the observation, all these are necessary if what is seen is to be as natural and unstaged as possible.

Recording the observation

Observers have some choices about what sort of record should be kept of a lesson, and some may choose to keep none at all. Most, however, will at least keep notes, but there are several other possibilities. Small compact video cameras and sound cassettes offer further options beyond written notes, though teachers and pupils who are not used to being video recorded may be inhibited. Each approach has advantages and disadvantages, and some of these are listed below:

Method	Advantages	Disadvantages
<i>Written account</i>	Immediate and fresh account available; economic use of time; account can be available for discussion immediately after lesson; full picture of events available to observer at time of observation.	Observer must make immediate decisions about what to record, so may be superficial or unreliable account; no chance of 'action replay'; some effects on class behaviour because of observer's presence
<i>Video cassette</i>	Good visual and sound record which can be replayed several times; no pressure to make instant decisions; focus can be on teacher only or on individual or group of pupils; lesson can be discussed with participants.	Loss of information such as room temperature, smells, events out of camera shot; effects on class of presence of camera; increase in time needed for analysis
<i>Sound cassette</i>	Good sound record can be replayed several times for discussion, analysis, or corroboration of written account; radio microphone can be used to obtain high quality record of what the teacher says; observer's comments can be recorded simultaneously on twin-track tape; allows lesson to be transcribed by audio typist.	Loss of important visual cues such as facial expressions, gesture, body language, movement; sound quality can be poor without radio microphone, especially if acoustics are poor; difficult to identify individual children who speak; analysis time substantially increased.
<i>Transcript</i>	Enables really detailed analysis at leisure; permits analysis by several people not necessarily in the same place, as text can be distributed easily; person being observed can work on specific aspects of language, such as choosing good examples of analogies, using appropriate vocabulary	Loss of important visual and sound cues such as tone of voice, volume of noise, emphasis; high cost in time and money to have lessons transcribed (one lesson might fill twenty or thirty pages); difficulty of deciding what to focus on if numerous transcripts are collected.

Nonetheless, despite some of the difficulties of visiting classrooms and observing lessons, it is a worthwhile enterprise and one that should be undertaken in a thoughtful and professional manner. There is still a great deal to be learned by any teacher, novice or seasoned practitioner, or by any investigator. Good classroom observation can lie at the heart of both understanding professional practice and improving its quality.

In the remainder of this book I shall describe quantitative and qualitative approaches in Chapters 2 and 3 respectively; the use of classroom observation in specific contexts, such as teacher training, professional improvement and teacher appraisal, in Chapter 4; the place and use of observation in research and curriculum development in Chapter 5; and finally, in Chapter 6, I shall give additional examples of classroom observation in action.