Questions to Reflect On as You Read This Chapter:

1. This chapter stresses the distinction between observation and interpretation. What are some instances you have witnessed when an individual correctly described a situation or event but misinterpreted the meaning of the situation or event?

2. What are some teacher instructional concerns for which it would be more appropriate to gather quantitative data? Qualitative data?

3. How do the observation instruments presented in this chapter contrast with summative evaluation forms with which you are familiar?

4. What are some ways in which an observer’s personal experiences and values could affect a classroom observation?

5. In what ways is Eisner’s educational criticism different from any of the other observation instruments presented in this chapter?
Consider the classroom shown in Figure 13.1. If you were an observer of this classroom, what would you say is happening? Of course, one illustration is not enough basis for an observation, but pretend you are seeing this episode for an entire class period. Could you say that the students have behavior problems, discipline is lax, the teacher is not responding to the students’ interests, or the teacher is lecturing too much? If your observations are similar to those listed here, then you have fallen into the *interpretation trap*, which is the downfall of most attempts to help people improve their performance.

Observation is a two-part process—*first describing* what has been seen and then *interpreting* what it means. The mind almost simultaneously processes a visual image, integrates that image with previously stored images related to satisfactory and unsatisfactory experiences, and ascribes a value or meaning to that image. If a student yawns, our mind signals “boredom.” If a teacher yells at students, our mind registers “losing control.” A judgment derives from an image or a description of events. We must be aware of splitting that almost simultaneous process, of separating description from interpretation. When we lose the description of the event and retain only the interpretation, we create communication difficulties and obstacles to improvement. Sharing the description of events is the forerunner of professional improvement. Interpretation leads to resistance. When both parties can agree on what events occurred, they are more likely to agree on what needs to be changed.

Remember that if the goal of supervision is to enhance teachers’ thought and commitment about improving classroom (and school) practice, observations should be used as a base of information to create an instructional dialogue between supervisor and teacher. Using description first when talking to a teacher about his or her classroom creates an instructional dialogue. Providing interpretations and evaluative statements first ushers in defensiveness, combativeness, or resentment in the teacher and stifles discussion.
Differentiating description from interpretation in observation is so crucial for instructional improvement that we need to refer back to our illustration of the classroom (Figure 13.1). Look at the picture again and tell what you now see going on. You might say that there are three students looking away from the teacher and talking to each other while the teacher stands in front of the room calling on a student in the front row. Can we agree that this is happening? Probably so, and thus we can later judge the rightness or wrongness of the event in regard to student learning.
teacher can more readily change the events of three students talking to each other and two others looking away than he or she can change being “a poor classroom manager.”

Formative Observation Instruments Are Not Summative Evaluation Instruments

A formative observation instrument used to describe what is occurring in a classroom (consistent with what teacher and supervisor agreed to focus on and later discuss) is a means for professional growth and instructional improvement. Therefore, the use of a formative observation instrument is conditioned on prior agreement about what is most worthy of learning by that teacher in that classroom—whether the interest is derived from a desire to know more about himself or herself as a teacher, attempting a particular instructional model, experimenting with a new practice or strategy, or struggling with a problem or weakness. A summative evaluation instrument, on the other hand, is an externally imposed, uniformly applied measure, intended to judge all teachers on similar criteria to determine their worthiness, merit, and competence as employees. Distinctions between summative and formative evaluation are discussed in detail in Chapter 14.

Ways of Describing

There are many ways to record descriptions. At the end of this chapter, there are multiple references to various observation methods and instruments. An observation instrument is a tool for organizing and recording different categories of classroom life. It can be as simple as a single category or as complex as a matrix of dozens of possible coded combinations. For example, an instrument can be used to count the displays on a classroom wall or to record the hundreds of students’ and teachers’ verbal and nonverbal interactions.

We will first look at quantitative observations, including categorical instruments, performance indicator instruments, visual diagramming, and space utilization. The second section will deal with qualitative observations, including verbatim, detached open-ended narrative, participant open-ended observation, focused questionnaire observation, and educational criticism. Finally, we will discuss tailored observations—quantitative or qualitative observations designed to gather data on specific teacher concerns.

Quantitative Observations

Quantitative observations are ways of measuring classroom events, behaviors, and objects. Definitions and categories must be precise. Eventually, the observations can be used for statistical operations.
Categorical Frequency Instrument

A categorical instrument is a form that defines certain events or behaviors that can be checked off at frequency intervals and then counted. Figure 13.2 is a categorical instrument that measures the frequency of different types of questions asked by the teacher. The seven categories of teacher questions are based on Bloom’s taxonomy. (The taxonomy is explained in Chapter 18.) By dividing the number of questions in each category by the total number of questions asked by the teacher during the lesson, the observer can calculate the percent of total questions each category represents.

Other classroom topics can be observed with categorical instruments. For example, one can focus on on-task and off-task behavior. To complete the instrument in Figure 13.3, the observer begins a sweep of the classroom every 5 minutes. During each sweep, the observer focuses on each student for approximately 20 seconds and then records that student’s behavior. During a 40-minute lesson, 8 sweeps can be made. The instrument allows the observer to record specific on-task and off-task behaviors listed in the key at the bottom of the chart.

Performance Indicator Instruments

A performance indicator instrument records whether or not actions listed on the observation instrument have been observed. With some instruments, a third option—“not applicable” (N/A)—is included. Performance indicator instruments may also include space for the observer to add supplemental notes concerning the presence or absence of the action. Figure 13.4 is a performance indicator instrument used to record the presence or absence of the elements in Madeline Hunter’s lesson design.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question Category</th>
<th>Tally</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synthesis</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application</td>
<td>///</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretation</td>
<td>///</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translation</td>
<td>/////</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memory</td>
<td>/////</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total of Questions Asked = 20

Figure 13.2 Teacher Questions
model, a model well suited for direct instruction. Figure 13.5 is an instrument to assess whether or not each of the basic elements of a cooperative learning lesson is present.

The instrument in Figure 13.6 lists indicators of an authentic constructivist lesson, and that in Figure 13.7 lists indicators of culturally sensitive teaching. Since the indicators in Figures 13.6 and 13.7 are more open to interpretation than indicators in many instruments of this type, it is especially important for the observer to describe in the comments column specific classroom behaviors that are the basis for the observer’s responses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>9:00</th>
<th>9:05</th>
<th>9:10</th>
<th>9:15</th>
<th>9:20</th>
<th>9:25</th>
<th>9:30</th>
<th>9:35</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shawn G.</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbara</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angie</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeff</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shawn L.</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michele</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melissa</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>J</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>J</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>J</td>
<td>J</td>
<td>J</td>
<td>J</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rolanda</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Key**

A = on task, listening/watching  
B = on task, writing  
C = on task, speaking  
D = on task, reading  
E = on task, hands-on activity  
F = off task, passive  
G = off task, doing work for another class  
H = off task, listening to others  
I = off task, disturbing others  
J = off task, playing

**Figure 13.3 Student On-Task and Off-Task Behavior**
Remember that performance indicators used for observation purposes should not imply an absolute standard. The fact that a teacher does not perform all of the activities listed on the observation instrument may or may not be a cause of concern. Only after the supervisor and teacher have discussed the circumstances surrounding the teacher’s instructional procedures can they be properly interpreted.

### Visual Diagramming

Visual diagramming is another way to portray what is occurring in a classroom. A video recording of a classroom captures the closest representative picture of actual occurrences, however, there are other ways to portray observations, such as verbal interactions among teachers and students and how a teacher uses space. After diagramming the occurrence, the supervisor and the teacher can view the picture and then analyze the events.
### Elements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes ___</td>
<td>No ___</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Explanation of academic and social objectives

#### Teaching of necessary social skills

#### Face-to-face interaction

#### Positive interdependence

#### Individual accountability

#### Group processing

---

**Figure 13.5** Cooperative Learning Performance Indicators

Classroom verbal interactions can be charted by drawing arrows symbolizing verbal statements between members in a classroom (see Figure 13.8). The observer can use six separate sheets of this diagram and fill out one sheet for each time sample of five minutes spaced throughout the hour. Each arrow drawn on the diagram would indicate a full statement directed to another person. The arrows are numbered in the sequence of statements. After diagramming, the observer would then have information on the frequency of individual student interaction, the amount of interaction with different areas of the room, which students triggered interactions among others, and which students were excluded.

For illustration purposes, if the diagram was a sample consistent with the other five samples of the classroom period, the observer would be able to state some of the following conclusions:

1. Interaction is mainly directed toward the left aisle and front row.
2. There is almost no attention to the last two rows in the back of the room or the two rows on the right.
3. Of 14 interactions, 12 included the teacher and 2 were between students.
Such diagramming is easier to follow with small groups and when students are not moving around the classroom. Class activities such as teacher lecturing interspersed with questions and answers or classroom discussions would be instructional sessions appropriate for diagramming. Another type of diagramming is flowcharting teacher space utilization, which follows the teacher’s movement throughout the
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Indicators</strong></th>
<th><strong>Response</strong></th>
<th><strong>Comments</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Teacher</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Displays understanding of diverse cultures</td>
<td>Yes ___ No ___</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Displays personal regard for all students</td>
<td>Yes ___ No ___</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses instructional materials free of cultural bias</td>
<td>Yes ___ No ___</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses examples and materials that represent different cultures</td>
<td>Yes ___ No ___</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotes examination of concepts and issues from different cultural perspectives</td>
<td>Yes ___ No ___</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitates higher-level learning for all students</td>
<td>Yes ___ No ___</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adopts materials and instruction to different student learning styles</td>
<td>Yes ___ No ___</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides equitable opportunities for student participation</td>
<td>Yes ___ No ___</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides individual assistance, when necessary, for all students</td>
<td>Yes ___ No ___ N/A ___</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervenes to address acts of student intolerance</td>
<td>Yes ___ No ___ N/A ___</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses “teachable moments” to address cultural issues</td>
<td>Yes ___ No ___ N/A ___</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinforces student acts of respect for diverse cultures</td>
<td>Yes ___ No ___ N/A ___</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 13.7** Indicators of Culturally Sensitive Teaching
classroom. A sketch of the physical classroom is done first; then the observer follows the teacher by using arrows on the sketch (see Figure 13.9).

Figure 13.9 illustrates a period of reading instruction. The arrow follows the teacher with each movement and is labeled with the time on the clock. After a class
period, the observer and the teacher can see where the teacher has been and for how long. Such information might help make a teacher aware of the relationship of his or her space utilization to concerns of classroom management and instruction. For example, Figure 13.9 shows much physical presence in the front and on the left side of the classroom, with no presence at the rear learning centers or the middle work area.

**figure 13.9 Teacher Space Utilization**
Qualitative Observations

There are alternative means of observing based on not knowing exactly what is to be recorded. These are called qualitative or descriptive forms of observation. The observer goes into the classroom with a general focus or no focus at all and records events as they occur. The events are not made to fit into a specific category, nor are they measured. Only after the recording of events does the observer rearrange his or her observations into themes. Such recording of observations defies the use of an instrument. (An instrument is technically a measurement device.) Instead, qualitative observations record the complexity of classroom life.

There are several types of qualitative observations. We will look at verbatim, detached open-ended narrative, participant open-ended observation, focused questionnaire observation, and educational criticism. These observations can be used by a supervisor to provide a broad and complex recording of classroom life.

Verbatim and Selected Verbatim

The observer taking verbatim notes (sometimes called scripts) records all verbal interaction taking place in the classroom. Verbatim notes allow the observer and teacher to identify patterns of interpersonal behavior during a lesson. Verbatim also provides specific examples of teacher–student or student–student interactions. For more efficient recording, the observer may abbreviate words and leave out words that add no meaning to the transcript.

Despite these time-savers, verbatim can be an arduous process requiring the observer to spend every moment taking notes, with no time for attention to anything else going on during the lesson. One alternative to verbatim is selected verbatim, in which the observer records only those interactions that relate to a particular focus agreed to by the observer and teacher prior to the observation. Figure 13.10 provides an excerpt from selective verbatim notes focused on teacher responses to students who initially gave incorrect or partially correct answers to teacher questions.

Detached Open-Ended Narrative

Detached open-ended narrative occurs when the supervisor steps into a classroom and records every person, event, or thing that attracts his or her attention. At the start, the pages are empty, without questions, indicators, or categories. The heading might simply look like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Open-Ended Narrative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Observation Teacher:             Time: ___ Observer: ________________</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The recorder then has the task of writing, writing, and more writing. A sample of such an observation might read as follows:

Students begin arriving at 10:13; the teacher is at his desk correcting papers. The bell rings at 10:15 to begin third period. Students keep arriving. Mr. X gets up from his desk to begin class at 10:25. In the meantime, students have put away their school bags and are awaiting instruction, except three girls in the back corner who are talking, combing their hair, and spreading the contents of their pocketbooks on their desks. Five minutes after Mr. X begins, he talks to them and they put away combs and pocketbooks. Mr. X describes the activities for the day but then cannot find his prepared handouts. After two minutes of looking, he finds the papers in his desk drawer.

The intercom comes on at 10:30 with two announcements by the principal. Mr. X gives the assignments, and the class begins to read at 10:33. Two students are reprimanded for talking, and occasional student talk can be heard as Mr. X moves around and reviews yesterday’s homework with students. He talks with 12 students before asking for class attention at 10:45. He then lectures on the classification of insects. The PowerPoint is difficult for students in the back to read. One student asks if he can darken the lights . . .

With practice, the observer can write in shorthand to keep up with the flow of events. It is impossible to record all that could possibly be seen and heard in a classroom. The observer must constantly scan the entire classroom and decide what is significant.
Participant Open-Ended Observation

Participant open-ended observation occurs when the supervisor becomes a functioning part of the classroom (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). He or she assists in the instruction, helps students with questions, uses classroom materials, and talks with the teacher and students. Being involved in the classroom gives the supervisor an inside-out view of the classroom different from that of the detached observer who tries to be invisible and keep away from students and teachers. Obviously, events cannot be written down as they occur if the supervisor is engaged in talking, moving, and assisting. Instead, he or she must write between pauses in the action. The observation form can be carried on a clipboard so that notes can be taken on the run.

The participant observer takes sketchy notes (catch phrases and words) during classroom time so that afterward he or she can write in greater detail. These quick notes serve to remind the observer of the situation that will be described more fully after the observation period is over. The following is an example of such short notes:

Teacher X directs students into study groups.
John B. does not understand the assignment. I work with him on organizing the theme of a play.
Sally T. and Ramona B. are wandering around. I ask them if they need help; they say no and leave the room (ask teacher about this).
Sondra and her group are ready to role play their theme. I listen as they read through their parts.
Steven’s group is stuck; he doesn’t know how to find materials on historic buildings. I suggest calling the town historic society.
Susan is not participating at all—looking at Teen Magazine. The rest of the group just leaves her alone. (I wonder why?)
The video shown has everyone’s attention.
Teacher X dismisses the class. I overhear a student say, “This class goes so quickly. I wish other classes were as much fun.”

These are some notes from a 50-minute classroom period. Much more happened in the classroom than is noted, but the observer picks up insights from his or her involvement. The supervisor can later fill in details—the two girls leaving the classroom, the specifics of John’s confusion about the theme, Susan’s absorption in Teen Magazine, and so on.

Focused Questionnaire Observation

Qualitative observation can be done in a more focused manner by having general topics to use in recording events. An observer seeks information about specific questions.
For example, if a teacher was attempting to teach problem solving skills, the observer might use the following questions to focus the observation:

*Are students able to:*

1. Distinguish between problems and their effects?
2. View a problem from the perspective of different groups and individuals?
3. Gather and analyze data to better understand the problem?
4. Identify various causes of the problem and how those causes relate or interact?
5. Generate alternative solutions and reflect on the potential effects of each alternative?
6. Develop a feasible plan for solving the problem?
7. Collaborate with each other in solving the problem?
8. Reflect on and assess their problem solving efforts and how they can improve problem solving in the future?

A focused questionnaire can revolve around a particular instructional model, such as direct instruction, cooperative learning, jurisprudence, advanced organizers, or indirect learning. It can be as narrow as looking at one or two questions within a particular model or as extensive as to include numerous questions about a model, or it can be generic in posing questions that would cross different teaching practices.

**Educational Criticism**

Elliott Eisner (1985) has developed an approach to observation that merges detached and participant observation with description and interpretation. Observers are trained to look at the classroom as an art critic might look at a painting. Just as a person would have to accumulate the experience of viewing numerous paintings and become knowledgeable in the history and variations of particular art forms to be a critic, so must an educator become familiar with many types of classrooms and forms of instruction to be an education critic.

Eisner has stated classroom observations can be done via the same procedures of criticism. He calls the needed educational expertise “connoisseurship.” Just as a wine connoisseur can look at the color, viscosity, smell, and taste of a wine to form specific judgments about its overall quality, so can an educational connoisseur make judgments about the specifics of classroom events and the overall quality of classroom life.

Eisner argued that supervisors can develop educational connoisseurship by finding what the classroom *means* to the participants. The education critic attempts
to take the perspective of students and teachers in viewing the influence of the classroom environment, events, and interactions and then makes the hidden meaning of the classroom known to the participants to see whether they agree. Teachers and students may be so involved in the classroom that they are unaware of the meaning of what they do. The participant observer attempts to describe and interpret events through their eyes.

The following excerpt from an observation of a college composition class was made by Sugie Goen*, one of Eisner’s students. Goen provides a vivid description of “Life in Room 132”:

A few minutes after six, the teacher, Helen Deakin, enters the room—streams in is more like it. Her movements are liquid, from the way her loose fitting clothing flows around her as she moves into the room, to the way she repeatedly gathers full handfuls of long thick hair that, in one sweeping gesture, she lifts from her forehead, releasing great locks that spill languidly down her back. She flows into the room slowly, in no apparent hurry even though it is now several minutes past six o’clock. Her students are in no apparent hurry either. Right at six o’clock, the scheduled start time for class to begin, only six of the seventeen students are present. Students continue to arrive until half past the hour, an arrival pattern that I was to witness during each of my visits. This is clearly a class where no one rushes. Life in Room 132 doesn’t gush, torrent or swell. It flows; it spreads out thickly and slowly; maybe even, I would soon suspect, deliberately.

While students are arriving, Helen stands in front of the class, gazing out at the students sitting at the even rows of tables. “Do you want to sit this way? Or in a circle like before?” No rhetorical question here, for she stands patiently still, waiting for a response. When none comes, she poses the question again, and again she waits.

**Tailored Observation Systems**

Supervisors often observe lessons to collect data on unique instructional concerns or improvement efforts. If no observation system exists that is capable of gathering the desired data, the supervisor can design a tailored observation system. Tailored observation systems can be quantitative, qualitative, or a combination of both.

Figure 13.11 is a system designed to collect four specific types of data. The teacher in this example requested that the observer collect data on (1) how often the teacher called on each student; (2) whether each student’s response was correct or incorrect; (3) whether the teacher drew out correct student responses through encouragement or prompting, especially after a student’s initial response was incorrect; and (4) how often the teacher provided positive feedback to students making

correct responses. In Figure 13.11, codes symbolize both student responses (→, +, ×) to teacher questions, and teacher reactions (→, O) to student responses. Several codes on the same line indicate verbal behaviors that were part of the same series of interactions. Codes on different lines indicate separate series of interactions.
In another example, teacher Simmons was concerned about the conduct of one of his students and asked the supervisor to collect data on the student’s behaviors, Simmons’s responses, and the effects of those responses on the student. Figure 13.12 is the observation chart completed by the supervisor. Arrows point to immediate responses of the teacher to selected student behaviors and immediate responses of the student to relevant teacher behaviors. Some of the most meaningful and helpful classroom observation data we have viewed have been collected with instruments designed by supervisors and teachers focused on specific teacher concerns.
Types and Purposes of Observation

Figure 13.13 illustrates the types of observation available to a supervisor. The purpose of the observation should determine the type, method, and role of observation:

- The **categorical frequency** observation is a quantitative method used by a detached observer for the purpose of counting, totaling, and statistically analyzing behaviors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Role of Observer</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Detached</td>
<td>Participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Categorical frequency</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance indicator</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual diagramming</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Space utilization</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbatim</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detached open-ended narrative</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant open-ended observation</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focused questionnaire</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x or x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational criticism</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x or x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tailored</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x or x</td>
<td>x or x</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*figure 13.13 Observation Alternatives*
• The performance indicator observation is quantitatively used by a detached observer to record evidence of human behavior.
• Visual diagramming is a quantitative observation used by a detached observer for the purpose of depicting verbal interaction.
• Human space utilization observation is a quantitative measure used by a detached observer for the purpose of depicting the length and pattern of physical movement.
• Verbatim is a detached qualitative method in which the observer records all verbal interaction.
• The detached open-ended narrative is a qualitative observation used by a detached observer for recording events as they unfold.
• Participant open-ended observation is a qualitative technique used to record how people and events unfold to one involved in the classroom.
• The focused questionnaire is another qualitative method that can be used by a detached or participant observer for the purpose of gathering evidence according to general questions about classroom topics.
• Educational criticism is a qualitative observation conducted by a combination of detached and participant observation for the purpose of capturing the meaning of classroom life from the teacher's and students' perspective.
• Tailored observation systems cut across the different categories previously discussed. They are designed by the supervisor (or supervisor and teacher) to collect data on specific teacher concerns when there is no existing observation system for collecting such data. They may be quantitative or qualitative and may be used by a detached or participant observer.

Technology-Enhanced Observation

A wide range of technology now is available to assist supervisors with both quantitative and qualitative observations. This technology can be placed on a continuum from simple to complex. On the simple end of the continuum are digital pens. These pens initially are used to record data much as they have traditionally been gathered, but the digital pen is not your grandfather’s writing instrument. Besides an ink cartridge, digital pens include a microphone, digital audio recorder, infrared camera, flash memory, and speaker. The observer uses the digital pen to write observation data—including words, symbols, and diagrams—on digital paper at the same time the pen is recording sound. Later, the observer can review audio from the lesson simply by tapping the observation notes from any part of the lesson. The observer analyzing data may have missed part of the verbal interaction or simply not recall what is meant by observation notes from part of the lesson. In such cases, the supervisor can immediately listen to the relevant part of the lesson for clarification. Also, the
supervisor discussing written data with the teacher can play the audio from any part of the lesson for the teacher. The digitized, synchronized, written observation data and audio recording can be transferred to the observer’s personal computer or sent directly to the observed teacher.

Video recording of teaching is another relatively simple type of technology-enhanced observation. Observers have been using video cameras to gather classroom observation data for decades, but a number of factors have limited the use of video, including the obtrusiveness of large cameras and tripods, technical problems (lighting, acoustics, and so on), and the limited scope of teacher and student behaviors captured by standard lens cameras. Modern digital cameras, however, are small enough to be unobtrusive; wide-lens cameras can capture much more of what is going on in the classroom; and small wireless microphones clipped to teachers’ clothing provide high-quality audio recordings (Johnson, Sullivan, & Williams, 2009). Additionally, we now have software that can convert audio recordings of classroom verbal interaction into transcripts that can be used for detailed analysis. The observer can use videos or transcripts of lessons to analyze data prior to a postconference, or analyze the video with the teacher during the postconference. Additionally, the ease with which videos now can be edited means that teachers can share and analyze each others’ video clips in collaborative work for instructional improvement (Van Es, 2010).

A more complex type of observation technology is webcam and Bug-in-Ear (BIE) technology (Rock, Thead, Acker, Gable, & Zigmond, 2009; Scheeler, McKinnon, & Stout, 2012). Scholars studying the supervision of preservice teachers have done much of the research on this technology, but the technology can easily be adapted to the observation of in-service teachers. BIE technology allows the observer to provide immediate feedback to the teacher by electronic transmission to a battery-operated receiver (bug) placed inside the teacher’s ear. BIE technology enables the observer to provide the teacher with real-time feedback on student behavior and teacher actions. The webcam allows the supervisor to observe the lesson from a distance, which, in addition to providing convenience and efficiency, removes the obvious awkwardness and disruption the observer would cause by communicating orally with the teacher while present in the classroom. The technology includes video recording of the lesson for later analysis and discussion. An important caution is necessary when considering webcam and BIE technology for the observation of in-service teachers. In teacher preparation programs, such technology often is associated with providing novices with immediate corrective feedback, reinforcement, and so on, which represent judgment by the observer. BIE feedback to in-service teachers, excepting an emergency situation, should consist of observations that can assist the teacher during the lesson, with the interpretation of those observations awaiting teacher-observer discussion in a postconference.

Highly complex forms of technology-enhanced observation include systems that require coding of lesson videos followed by software analysis. An example of this type of system is Individualizing Student Instruction (ISI), a video coding system
focused on literacy instruction (Connor et al., 2009). In this system, every activity on the video that lasts 15 seconds or longer is coded according to (1) management of the activity (teacher, teacher and child together, peers, or child), (2) context of the activity (whole class, small group or pair, or individual student), (3) content of the activity (instruction on a specific aspect of literacy or noninstruction), and (4) duration of the activity. Behavior coding software is then used to carry out statistical analyses that yield a variety of data displays on what was going on during the video-recorded lesson. One simple example of the many data displays the software can create is a bar graph showing how much time each individual student was involved in small-group, teacher-managed, focused instruction. Other bar graphs can be generated to illustrate myriad other combinations of activities. ISI is just one example of many complex technology-enhanced observation systems. University researchers using observation and technology to study teaching and learning often use these systems. High-end technology is not necessary for discreet observations focused on individual teacher concerns, but is sometimes used in district or schoolwide efforts to improve a particular area of the instructional program.

How much technology is appropriate for classroom observations depends on a number of things, including the school’s instructional improvement goals, types of data to be gathered, and available resources. We must keep in mind that for instructional supervision, the purpose of observation is not to measure every action that can be observed or produce impressive computer-generated data displays, but to improve teaching and learning.

**Collaborative Walkthroughs**

Administrator walkthroughs of classrooms have become popular ways to observe instruction. They are quick (a few minutes) and allow the administrator to have a visible presence in classrooms. Walkthroughs, if part of a teacher’s summative evaluation, can provide the administrator with supplemental data to verify formal evaluations. Nonetheless, when it comes to the systematic observation and analysis needed to help teachers reflect deeply on their teaching and grow in teaching expertise, administrator walkthroughs have little to offer. In contrast, the collaborative walkthrough involving the supervisor facilitating 8 to 12 teachers visiting classrooms and gathering observation data has considerable potential for the improvement of teaching and learning.

In a collaborative walkthrough, different teachers can gather different types of data and consolidate those data after the observation, an advantage over the school administrator observing alone during a brief walkthrough. Additionally, the teachers doing the walkthrough have the opportunity to observe colleagues teaching, often to students whom the observers also teach, and to view teaching methods they may wish to try out in their own classrooms. Finally, collaborative walkthroughs can
lead to collegiality and instructional dialogue—both among observers and between observers and host teachers—that we know is necessary for schoolwide instructional improvement.

Collaborative walkthroughs described by Madhlangobe and Gordon (2012) illustrate the power of this type of observation. The supervisor and approximately 12 high school teachers participate in each walkthrough. The supervisor and teachers meet before the walkthrough to discuss the observation. One teacher is asked to serve as group leader. The group of teachers is divided into three teams; one team is assigned to gather data on the classroom environment, a second team is asked to gather information on the teacher’s behaviors, and a third team is assigned to gather data on student learning. The supervisor participates in the walkthrough with the teachers. During the walkthrough, teachers gather data they can use to improve their own teaching as well data to assist the host teacher.

The supervisor and teachers meet in the school library after the walkthrough to share observation data, discuss observed teaching methods they would like to try out in their own teaching, and decide on feedback to share with the host teacher. The supervisor attends the meeting, sharing ideas from other collaborative walkthroughs and raising questions to enhance the discussion. The teacher assigned as the group leader takes notes on the group discussion, and later meets with the host teacher to share data and discuss the observed lesson. The supervisor who facilitates the collaborative walkthroughs reports that since the collaborative walkthroughs began teachers have improved their instruction, and collegiality and collaborative problem solving have increased throughout the school.

### Cautions Concerning Observations

Quantum physics informs us that a phenomenon cannot be measured without the measurement process interacting with the phenomenon and thus affecting the measurement (Rae, 2008). Closer to home for those of us who are educators, the constructivist epistemology holds that rather than identifying a fixed reality through objective observation, we construct knowledge by interacting with our environment and with others.

One implication for classroom observation is our need to realize that our observations are affected by our personal experiences and values, our presence in the classroom during the observation, the observation instrument we use, our skill at recording data, and so on. Another implication is that the interpretation of what the observation data mean is a construction and in most cases is best co-constructed with the teacher. Observation data, thus, should be an entry point for teacher–supervisor dialogue and co-interpretation during a postobservation conference. Clinical supervision, discussed in Chapter 15, provides a structure for teacher–supervisor dialogue on classroom observation.
chapter 13 Observing Skills

REFLECTIVE EXERCISE

Return to Figure 13.1 at the beginning of this chapter. Create two different interpretations of what is going on in the classroom depicted in the figure. In Interpretation 1, the teacher has lost control of the classroom. In Interpretation 2, all students are on-task and engaged in meaningful learning activities. For each interpretation, explain what students who are out of their seats or facing each other are doing.

MyEdLeadershipLab™

Go to Topic 4: Assessing and Planning Skills in the MyEdLeadershipLab™ site (www.myedleadershiplab.com) for Supervision and Instructional Leadership: A Developmental Approach, Ninth Edition, where you can:

• Find learning outcomes for Assessing and Planning Skills along with the national standards that connect to these outcomes.
• Complete Assignments and Activities that can help you more deeply understand the chapter content.
• Apply and practice your understanding of the core skills identified in the chapter with the Building Leadership Skills unit.
• Prepare yourself for professional certification with a Practice for Certification quiz.