

Appendix: The InterActive Classroom at a Glance

It is my contention that teachers can benefit from observing other classrooms on a regular basis as part of an individual continuous-improvement process. In our own classrooms, we are so busy that we don't—or can't—stop to take a good long look at our processes and see the entire experience through the eyes of our students. Sitting *with the students* in someone else's classroom allows teachers to spend time observing closely every aspect of the classroom environment. It also permits the observing teacher to *concentrate on the students themselves* in order to gauge the impact of the lesson.

By taking the time to have a 30-minute teacher-to-teacher conversation at some point after the observation, both teachers benefit from the exercise. My suggestion is that teachers arrange to observe colleagues regardless of the content. The tendency is for teachers to observe those who teach the same subject, and that is certainly helpful if one is *concentrating* on content. In considering the interactive-classroom principles (movement, student-to-student conversation, use of music, process management techniques, listening skills), it is not necessary to limit these observations to the classrooms of teachers who teach the same subject. In fact, if one is looking at *process-related areas*, an argument might be made that a science teacher observing another science teacher might get caught up in the familiar *content* and neglect to look at *process*.

The purpose of this appendix, then, is to give teachers (and administrators) some “look fors” and thoughtful questions to consider when observing another classroom. In each of eight areas, we'll ask observing teachers to ponder the major differences between classrooms that are passive in nature and those that are more active.

Each of the pages in this appendix will begin with a chart that contrasts active classrooms with those that may be more traditionally passive. This chart will be followed by some questions teachers might try to answer during the observation, along with suggestions for the incorporation of active-classroom principles and strategies in their own classrooms. My hope is that administrators will provide as many opportunities as possible for teachers to get into classrooms and the time to meet with those colleagues about the advantages of involving students in their own learning every day and in every classroom.

Classroom Observation Consideration 1
Observational evidence of a safe classroom

The foundation of success in any classroom, passive or otherwise, in our educational system is an environment in which students feel safe, both physically and emotionally. Before taking risks, which is a critical part of the learning process, students must feel they can do so free of ridicule and sarcasm. The only consequence of failure should be improvement.

In an interactive classroom where students are sharing frequently, collaborating regularly, and otherwise taking risks on a daily basis, a safe environment is essential. While hiding in a passive classroom may be relatively easy, staying in the background in an interactive classroom is virtually impossible. Safety is a prerequisite to success.

In the classroom you are observing . . .

Does it appear that students are willing to involve themselves actively in the learning process? Do students appear to feel generally comfortable with interactions? Do they feel free to ask questions?

. . . and your own classroom . . .

Spend adequate time at the beginning of the school year on relationship building in your classroom. Making frequent deposits in the “relationship bank” will pay off over time. As discussed in Chapter 11, practice basic classroom procedures until everyone in the classroom understands exactly how things are done on a daily basis. Commit to staying calm in the face of behavioral issues that might otherwise disrupt process flow and possibly destroy the very relationships you have worked hard to build. Remember that you teach people, not content.

Observation Notes: _____

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Classroom Observation Consideration 2

Observational evidence of the purposeful arrangement of furniture and space

In traditional classrooms, the furniture, as we saw in Chapter 4, may be arranged to facilitate cleaning, not learning.

In interactive classrooms, the furniture has been arranged purposefully by the teacher, with movement and collaboration in mind.

In the classroom you are observing . . .

Take a moment to look around the classroom. What percentage of the space is devoted to student desks and chairs? What percentage is available for students to meet comfortably and efficiently in pairs or groups? Is the arrangement conducive to movement on the part of the teacher as he or she interacts with students?

Figures 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3 from Chapter 4 show three room configurations. Which of these three best describes the room you are visiting?

Figures 4.1–4.3



Source: Brian T. Jones, used by permission of Frederic H. Jones & Associates, Inc.

. . . and your own classroom . . .

Remember, your goal in the interactive classroom is to facilitate movement and conversation between and among students. Experimenting with the positioning of the furniture will help you find the right arrangement. Student chairs that are welded to the desks may present problems, forcing you to become creative about how to accommodate frequent movement and facilitate student-to-student conversations.

Observation Notes: _____

Classroom Observation Consideration 3

Observational evidence of a collaborative environment

Students in more passive classrooms, especially at the secondary level, may spend a good deal of time seated, listening to the teacher, and taking notes. Seat work may be done alone, rather than with a partner. Reflecting on the content may be something students are expected to do on their own and at home.

In more interactive classrooms, students are engaged in any number of obvious ways in hands-on and minds-on learning. Time is built into the day or class period for the specific purpose of having students process information in such a way that they can make sense of it, building on knowledge they already brought to the table.

In the classroom you are observing . . .

Is the furniture arranged for easy collaboration, either seated or standing? Does the teacher provide time for pairs or small groups of students to reflect on information that has been presented through direct instruction? If time is not provided for structured conversations, do you see occasions during the lesson where this might have been done? Do students demonstrate a grasp of speaking and listening skills?

. . . and your own classroom . . .

Many teachers will take the time to discover the talents and strengths of the students so that deliberate pairings later on will prove beneficial. For example, if Yolanda (an “idea person”), Randy (the “analysis person”), and Fred (who has a reputation for “getting it done”) can be placed on the same team for a large project requiring multiple talents, so much the better. Purposeful pairings or groupings will result in harnessing *individual strengths in pursuit of a collaborative goal*.

Before grouping students, spend quality time working on collaborative skills. If “reporter” or “recorder” or “timer” are jobs within the groups, make certain everyone understands *exactly* what those jobs entail. Build in time to practice, practice, and then practice some more before introducing content into the mix.

Observation Notes: _____

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Classroom Observation Consideration 4

Evidence of frequency of movement as part of the classroom experience

In more traditional classrooms where seat work is the norm and collaboration is rare, life can become one dimensional and boring. Teachers who do most of the work (and most of the moving) in the classroom may also be doing most of the learning.

Teachers in interactive classrooms understand that movement facilitates memory and learning, and it provides much-needed breaks on occasion for students who find it difficult to stay seated for long periods.

In the classroom you are observing . . .

Are students seated for most of the class period? Are there opportunities for students to stand and reflect on course content with a partner or in a group? Are there obstacles to movement in the classroom? Do the students seem comfortable working in pairs and groups? Do students seem to appreciate the opportunity to stand and move?

. . . and your own classroom . . .

When planning how to work movement into your own classroom environment, consider moving from pairs to trios to quartets in a progression that lets students find comfort and success at each level before moving on. Once students are in their pairs or groups, move among them, listening to what is said. Remember: Before introducing content into their conversations, have them discuss something familiar to them. Once they get the process down, shift them into subject area conversations. Finally, during longer periods of direct instruction (at their desks), give your kids plenty of “brain breaks” where they can stand, talk, laugh, and generally recharge their batteries before returning to their seats. One teacher who does this frequently reports that she has few discipline problems, partly because she allows for these purposeful breaks and movement in the classroom.

Observation Notes: _____

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Classroom Observation Consideration 5

Observational evidence of the use of music to manage process

In traditional classrooms, music may be used infrequently and in support of the content. A social studies teacher, for example, might use songs of the Civil War to enhance students' understanding of that period. That same teacher, later in the school year, may use the song "Over There" during a study of World War I.

Today, we have a much greater understanding of the uses of music in the classroom. It can be played as students enter or as they leave, it can be used as a "pad" behind structured conversation, or it can serve as a cue for cleaning up after a lab or getting ready to leave for the next class or for the day.

In the classroom you are observing . . .

Is music being used in any way? If so, how are the kids responding to its use? Is its use tied to *content* (1960s music used to enhance students' understanding of that decade in U.S. history) or to *process* (music used to cue a lab cleanup)? As the lesson unfolds, do you see opportunities for the use of music along the lines of what we discovered in Chapter 8? If music is used, how do the students respond to its use?

. . . and your own classroom . . .

Many teachers who wish to begin slowly with the introduction of interactive-classroom strategies into classroom practice begin with music. One of the simplest ways to introduce its use is by playing some upbeat songs as the students enter. A CD player with a remote is probably all you will need.

If students ask you to use their music, my suggestion is that you check it out before playing it in class. Many lyrics are explicit and inappropriate for classroom use. I suggest teachers who want to use music in the classroom locate a copy of *The Rock 'n' Roll Classroom: Using Music to Manage Mood, Energy, and Learning*, by Rich Allen and W. W. Wood (2013). This book is well researched and contains hundreds of song titles for use in every way possible in K–12 classrooms.

Observation Notes: _____

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Classroom Observation Consideration 6

Observational evidence of confidence and effectiveness of the teacher as presenter

Traditional classrooms are replete with teacher talk in the form of lecture. Teachers can get so used to talking that they forget about the effectiveness of the delivery and neglect presentation components such as vocal variety, pitch, timing, use of silence, body language, and the effective use of visuals and technology as part of the presentation. A teacher who talks in a monotone will reduce the effectiveness of the delivery.

In the interactive classroom, teachers consider all the components of an effective presentation. They may also, as I suggested in Chapter 5, tape themselves in action and get critical visual and auditory feedback that will assist in their own continuous-improvement efforts. They may also ask for feedback from their own students in a way that not only helps to the teachers but also lets students know they are working on making themselves more effective presenters.

In the classroom you are observing . . .

Are there any indications the teacher is moving too quickly in the direction of information overload? Does the teacher seem to consciously work on her pitch, volume, and timing? Does the teacher allow sufficient wait time after asking a question to allow students to think about possible answers? Are there occasions when the teacher you are observing uses a purposeful pause to generate thinking or solicit more questions?

. . . and your own classroom . . .

Costa (2008), citing the work of Mary Budd Rowe, recommends at least 3 seconds of wait time after asking a question. As noted in Costa (p. 210), this increase in wait time can lead to longer student responses, an increase in “the number of unsolicited but appropriate” responses, a decrease in failures to respond, and an increase in student-to-student interaction. When possible, try asking questions that are more open ended and that lead to more thoughtful deliberation on the part of your students.

Observation Notes: _____

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Classroom Observation Consideration 7

Observational evidence of the effective use of visuals and technology

In passive classrooms, students may watch many videos. A movie may run for 3 consecutive days. Before beginning a classroom activity, directions may be given verbally and in a rush, so that students wind up asking a dozen questions, chief among which is this classic query: "What are we supposed to be doing?"

Interactive-classroom teachers don't have time to show an entire movie. They may show short clips that support a concept or other course content. As for directions, they are given one at a time and are posted in clear sight so that students involved in an activity can check visually for the next step in the process.

In the classroom you are observing . . .

As you observe in this classroom, what do you notice about the way directions are given? Are they verbal, or are written directions posted on the board or overhead? If there are posters or other visuals on the walls, is there evidence that they are part of reflective exercises that aid students in processing information and building new knowledge?

. . . and your own classroom . . .

Remember that any time you can provide a visual backup to a verbal direction or series of directions, do it. As you plan for a weeklong unit in science (for example), have students chart information as part of reflective activities. *Post the charts and leave them up all week long, referring to them as needed.* The charts will provide visual anchors as students wrestle with the material.

Short film clips may be enough to highlight a concept, reinforce a point, or otherwise illuminate subject matter. Time is, as every teacher knows, perhaps *the* most precious commodity. Use it wisely and efficiently when it comes to technology.

Observation Notes: _____

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Classroom Observation Consideration 8

Observational evidence of a commitment to students with different learning styles

Teachers who are high auditory may rely on lecture as the main method of delivery in the traditional classroom. I can attest to that, as I am high auditory and did not think twice about adopting lecture as my single most-used tool. Kids who are high visual or high kinesthetic do not do well in high-auditory environments.

Teachers in interactive classrooms understand that we must provide lessons and strategies that engage all learning styles. Increasing the number of visuals and allowing for plenty of movement and hands-on activities will go a long way toward meeting the needs of those who learn and process information differently from high-auditory learners.

In the classroom you are observing . . .

Who, in your opinion, seems to be doing the most work—teacher or students? To what extent are the students involved in their own learning? Are students provided with an opportunity to reflect and process information in the classroom? What does the body language of the students say if there are extended periods of lecture in the classroom? Does it appear that the teacher is differentiating by acknowledging various learning styles?

. . . and your own classroom . . .

Here lies the rub. Do everything you can to shift the workload to the kids. They are the ones who need to do the work. It is by doing things that students best learn—by taking risks, making mistakes, grappling with the material, pondering the questions, comparing and contrasting, analyzing the facts, reflecting on the information, talking it over with peers, questioning conclusions, responding without fear, doubting implausible answers, discarding unreliable information, raising uncertainties, surfacing tentative conclusions, acknowledging each other's contributions . . . and doing all of this in ways that allow them to take advantage of their own strengths and learning styles.

Observation Notes: _____

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