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Eye on the classroom

A regular series by **John Hughes**, with practical ideas for observing teachers in the classroom and an observation sheet to photocopy and use straight away.

4 Snapshots of a lesson

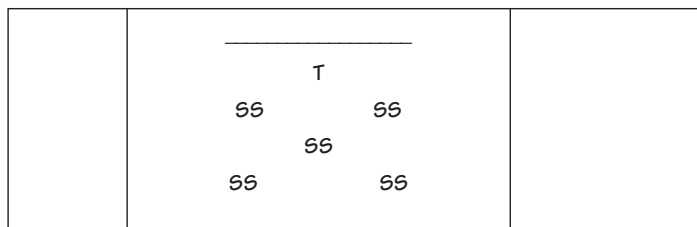
A picture is worth a thousand words, so the saying goes, and it may well be true for classroom observations, too. As observers, our tendency is to observe and then immediately try to put into words our interpretation of what is happening. Then, when we meet the teacher afterwards to give feedback, we report back on what we've written and probably add even more interpretation to the events.

The advantage of simply drawing and sketching what you can see is that you are observing rather than interpreting. At different stages of the lesson, you can focus on one particular aspect, sketch it, and then afterwards with the teacher you can look at what happened and interpret it together.

Below are some examples of what can usefully be drawn in a lesson. An observation form on which such sketches might be made is given on page 53 – these examples would come from the *Snapshot* column of this form. Different ways in which the form can be used are described at the end of the article.

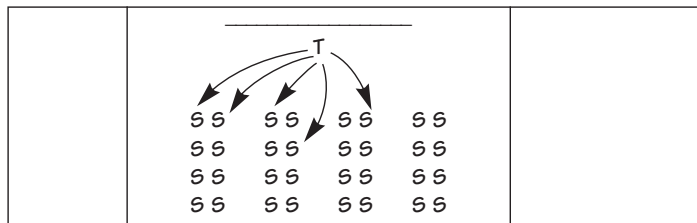
Class layout

At different stages of the lesson you can draw the layout of the class to show the position of the teacher and students. The sketch below indicates that the students are working in pairs. Whether it is intentional or not that the teacher seems to be withdrawn from the activity can be discussed afterwards. You can agree to draw the layout every five minutes of a lesson or at every change of stage. By building a sequence of such images, you get a full picture of how the layout altered – this often indicates changes in pace and variety of tasks.



Interaction

In this next sketch, as before, the observer has noted the classroom layout, but she has also added lines to indicate interaction between the teacher and students. In this case, the teacher is focusing all his attention on the students near to the front of the class and to his right. An observer could describe such tendencies in feedback afterwards, but by being shown the



diagram, the teacher will get a much clearer idea of what is happening, or not happening in this case! You could use a similar technique to monitor interaction between students.

Boardwork

The board can tell us a great deal about our lesson, so having an observer copy down what is on it throughout the lesson is very useful. Again, you could agree to have them copy it every so often to show the development of the lesson. Some boardwork images can highlight the fact that the teacher needs to organise and plan the board more carefully or can also show how well a teacher manages board use alongside the stages of a lesson.

Snapshot sketches

On a final technical point, you might be wondering why, in this age of digital photography and film, you need to draw the classroom. Well, it is true that a digital camera is quiet and if you take a snapshot every few minutes of, for example, the board, you will build a good record of events and can easily flick through the images afterwards. However, in my experience students get nervous and distracted when a camera enters the room. Also, it is not really good for capturing the full image of something like classroom layout, as you never seem to get the whole class in the frame. Making a video of the lesson is another option, but then you will need to operate the camera and move it around, and so you will only be capturing certain aspects of the class. It also requires a great deal of time to watch it at the end and find the key moments for discussion. Pencil and paper still remain preferable for this kind of observation.

The snapshot observation form

Make several copies of the form on page 53 as it is hard to predict how many you might need during a lesson. Agree with the teacher what you are observing for and write this at the top. You can also agree if you will sketch at regular intervals of time or whenever you feel it is relevant. When you sketch, indicate the approximate time in the lesson or the stage of the lesson plan in the first column. In the notes and comments column on the right of your drawing, you can write information such as which exercise was being done. Alternatively, you might note down a question to ask the teacher afterwards about this stage of the lesson.



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Snapshot observation form

Observation of

Stage/time	Snapshot	Notes/comments
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		