



The LJMU Guide to Observing Lessons

*for postgraduate secondary initial teacher
education (3rd Edition)*

The purpose of this guide...

Throughout your Initial Teacher Education, and beyond, formal lesson observation will form an essential part of your professional training and development. In most cases this will involve you being observed by an experienced professional in a coaching/mentoring role. However, your observations of these experienced professionals will inform and guide is an essential part of your development as a beginning teacher.

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A Guide to Observing Lessons

for postgraduate secondary initial teacher education

Rationale

Throughout your Initial Teacher Education (ITE), and beyond, formal lesson observation will form an essential part of your professional training and development. In most cases this will involve you being observed by an experienced professional in a coaching/mentoring role. However, your observations of these experienced professionals will inform and guide is an essential part of your development as a beginning teacher.

Some of your observations will be informal and unstructured, with reflections being assimilated and accommodated into your practice on a subconscious level. The reflective writing that you are required to undertake as part of your ITE is intended to develop a conscious reflexivity (i.e. reflecting on and responding to experience). Formal observations can aid this process and enable you to focus in on specific aspects of learning and teaching. Focused and purposeful observation can be very fruitful. However, unfocused observation, without a clear purpose, can be demoralising and counter-productive.

Potential pitfalls

Many trainee teachers, however, find observation unhelpful, and are apt to dismiss it as a waste of time. The reasons for this include:

- Experienced teachers' teaching is often *so fluent that it looks easy*; the skill, which cannot be seen by the observer, is very largely in the expert information processing and decision making that is going on;
- Trainee teachers *only see what they already understand*, and when they are first in schools they do not know enough to see how complex teaching really is.
- Trainee teachers have already spent *thousands of hours in classrooms as pupils*. At first, still with this *pupil perspective*, everything in classrooms looks familiar and obvious, and *they can find it difficult to see things in the way that teachers do*.
- Trainee teachers often have strong *preconceptions* about the kind of teachers they want to be. They are quick to judge the teachers they observe as falling short of these preconceptions, and therefore think they have little to learn from them.
- Trainee teachers are generally *keen to prove themselves* as teachers. They are *eager to get on with teaching* and to learn from their own practice rather than from observing others.

The flipside

Focused observation can serve a number of different purposes. Through guided observation trainee teachers can:

1. Be helped to shift from a pupil to a teacher perspective;
2. Learn to analyse what is happening in classrooms;
3. Get a sense of the standards which teachers set;
4. Discover different ways of doing things;
5. Learn to monitor the progress of a lesson;
6. Identify things which they do not understand, and which can provide a basis for discussion with the teacher.

Observing and sharing good practice is an essential skill for the good and reflexive teacher. It helps you to know what works, or doesn't, and maintain and improve the quality of your teaching.

Summary

	Purpose of observation:	Most appropriate time:
1	Shifting from a pupil to a teacher perspective: Helping trainee teachers to be realistic about the demands of teaching and their ability to handle them	At the beginning for you to see what teaching entails; At any time when you feel that important aspects of teaching are being neglected;
2	Learning to analyse what is happening in classrooms: Enabling you to recognise that while variations properly exist between the rules and expectations of different teachers, these fall within certain acceptable boundaries...	Early on; At any time if the standards you are setting in your own teaching are inappropriate;
3	Getting a sense of the standards which teachers set: Reflecting on the personal and professional standards within the teaching profession and how these impact on personal impressions and aspirations...	At the beginning for you to see what teaching entails; Ongoing – developing professional attitudes and behaviours;
4	Discovering different ways of doing things: Encouraging you to appreciate that teachers can bring about pupil learning in a variety of ways, and to extend their own repertoires of skills and strategies...	At any time;
5	Learning to monitor the progress of a lesson Bringing home to you the importance of pace and timing, and the need for flexibility...	Early on when you are in a protected environment; Later, focusing on the need for flexibility and how teachers adapt their plan;
6	Identifying things which you do not understand, and which can provide a basis for discussion with your mentors: Identifying gaps in your knowledge and experience, which will enable you to progress and improve your classroom practice...	At the beginning for you to see what teaching entails; Ongoing – developing professional attitudes and behaviours;

Beginning to observe

For that observation to be useful it needs to have a clear purpose and be conducted in a way that is appropriate for that purpose. There are many approaches to lesson observation. Here are some quick thoughts and examples:

- Straightforward observation and using *field notes* to record general observations – a good place to begin, which can be reflected upon critically at a later time.
- Observe specific *parts of lessons* – e.g. demonstrations, starter/plenaries etc.
- *Tracking* individual learners, recording either general observation or specific, predetermined, criteria – for example, track a learner with special educational needs (SEN), using their Individual Education Plan (IEP) to inform observations (speak to the SENCO first).
- *Guided observation of specific criteria or learners* (ignoring everything else) – for example, observing individuals, groups or classes for specific behaviours (e.g. “on or off task”).
- *Timed observations*, where you make an observation of specific criteria at timed intervals. A grid can be used to record observations at predetermined intervals (e.g. every 5 minutes)
- *‘Reverse engineering’* a lesson plan from observing a full lesson – i.e. what would the lesson plan look like for the lesson that you have observed?

These are just a few examples, and the format of the recording depends on the method being used. In first few days of your Phase 1 placement you should make general field notes of observations and move towards observing specific criteria and/or learners. These notes can then be reflected on afterwards to identify patterns and trends etc.

Remember that you are observing to **reflect on your developing practice**, rather than making value judgements on the teaching being observed.

For more information on observing experienced teachers go to:

<http://www.canterbury.ac.uk/education/tf-mentors/skills/observing/Home.aspx>

Possible foci for your observation

- Beginnings and ends of and transitions within lessons
- Teachers’ questions and the kind of answers they generate
- Teachers’ explanations and instructions: how they are made clear and explicit
- Organisation of equipment
- Methods of class control: verbal and body language
- Giving praise and providing instructional feedback

Some questions to ask yourself when observing...

- **How do learners enter the teaching space (e.g. classroom, gym, lab, workshop etc.)?**
 - What is the layout of the teaching space?
 - What strategies are used to settle the learners?
 - When does the teacher take the register?
- **Start of lesson – is the first activity long or short?**
 - What is its purpose?
- **How are the lesson objectives shared?**
 - Are they revisited during the lesson?
- **What is the focus of the teaching and learning?**
 - i.e. teacher lead, group or paired work.
 - Why did the teacher plan this?
 - What was the impact?
- **What different activities are there for the learners to practise their new skills?**
- **How is new material presented?**
 - What visual aids or support are there for learning?
- **What teaching resources are used?**
 - e.g. handouts, slideshows, materials, equipment, etc.
 - How is ICT used to enhance learning?
- **How does the material match the maturity of the age group?**
 - How might it differ from, similar, materials for a different age group?
- **How does the teacher manage learners' learning and behaviour?**
 - What strategies were used?
 - What are the timings for each activity?
- **How does the teacher communicate?**
 - i.e. verbal and non-verbal, to the whole class, groups or individuals.
- **Are there points in the lesson at which the teacher assesses the pupils' understanding?**
 - How does the teacher give feedback?
- **Are *adults other than teachers* (AOTT) used in the lesson?**
 - e.g. technician, teaching assistant, learning support assistant, etc.
- **How does the lesson conclude?**
 - Does the final activity allow pupils to celebrate their new learning and reflect on how they learnt?
 - What homework was set?
 - How were pupils dismissed?

Observation 1: observing across lessons

Start with your first observations pro forma below to record observations across a number of lessons, making notes on instances where you have observed different pedagogical approaches.

Area	Notes on observed activities	When?
Starter activity		
Plenary activity		
Teacher modelling		
Teacher explanation		
Questioning		
Groupwork		
Independent learning		
Formative assessment		
Behaviour management		
Developing literacy		
Developing numeracy		
Homework		

Observation 3: observing with structure of a lesson

You will not participate in the learning activities for this observation. Find a position in the class where you are able to see the teacher and learners clearly without unduly interfering or disrupting the activities. Make a note of the time and a description of each activity you observe. Focus on transitions, such as how the teacher manages moving from direct teaching (e.g. an explanation) to pupil led activity (e.g. collaborative or cooperative learning).

Subject:		School:	
Year:	Date:	Classroom:	
Time	Activity		
<i>Introduction and start-up routines</i>			
<i>Starter activities</i>			
<i>Main activities (including episodes and mini-plenary activities)</i>			
<i>Plenary Activities</i>			
<i>End of lesson routines</i>			

Observation 4: observing learner and teacher activity

In this observation, you will be undertaking a timed observation of learner and teacher activity. It is important to make quick notes that capture the activities of both the teacher and the learners at 5-minute intervals. This approach forces the observer to focus on the general activity in the lesson, rather than focus on specific phenomena.

Date:		Group:
School:		Room:
Learning intentions (objective/outcomes)		
Minutes	Learner Activity	Teacher Activity
0		
5		
10		
15		
20		
25		
30		
35		
40		
45		
50		
55		
60		

Observation 5: observing a plan-teach-evaluate cycle

In this observation, you will be shadowing your mentor before, during and after a lesson to explore how effective learning and progress is planned and delivered in the classroom. Work with your mentor to identify a class to observe: (1) discuss the class and the planned activity before the lesson; (2) observe the lesson comparing the learning intentions with the learner activities and outcomes; and (3) discuss the lesson with your mentor afterwards to debrief and evaluate the impact of learning.

Class:	Date:	Topic:
Before the lesson, meet with your mentor to discuss and make notes on...		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What are the learning intentions? ▪ What will indicate that learning has taken place? ▪ What are the possible misconceptions in the lesson? ▪ What strategies will support and challenge specific learners? ▪ What are the learning episodes (activities) in the lesson? ▪ How do the episodes link and flow one to the next? ▪ How do the episode link to the learning intentions? 		
Identify specific learners (case students) to observe in the lesson. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Why have they been selected? e.g. a range of attainment, behaviours, etc. 		
During the lesson, observe the 'case students' and make notes on...		
<i>Move around the room and talk with the case students, making field notes during the lesson if possible...</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How did the teacher start/end the lesson? ▪ How and when were the learning intentions shared? ▪ What were the main learning episodes? ▪ To what extent were learners motivated and on-task? ▪ To what extent did the case students meet the learning outcome / success criteria? 		
After the lesson, discuss the lesson with your mentor, reflect and make notes on...		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To what extent were the expectations met? ▪ Which learners were above and below expectation? ▪ Why was this the case? What factors influenced learning? ▪ What was the impact of the teaching on learners' progress? ▪ What are the implications for future lessons? 		

Observation 6: timed interval observation

This is a more quantitative version of the format from Observation 4. Don't attempt this observation until you have started solo teaching. This approach is effective for observing specific learner/teacher behaviours or phenomena in the classroom, such as:

- on/off task behaviour of specific learners
- interaction (e.g. talk or questioning): teacher to pupil; pupil to teacher; or pupil to pupil
- learning behaviours (e.g. reading guidance material, self or peer assessment, etc.)
- collaborative verses independent work
- etc.

Discuss the focus for this observation with your ITT Mentor. The columns can be used for **either** (tick as appropriate to this observation):

- observing *multiple individuals* for a single behaviours/phenomena **or**
- observing *a single individual* for multiple behaviours/phenomena

In these modes, the response every 5 minutes can be as simple as a tick (✓) or a cross (✗). More advanced approaches can use simple codes to observe *multiple individuals and multiple behaviours/phenomena*. **Note:** this observation continues on the next page...

Date:					Group:					
School:					Room:					
Observation focus:										
Interval	Minutes	Use the columns on the below to identify specific individuals or behaviours/phenomena to be observed over the lesson. Be clear about the whether you are observing the teacher, the class, a group(s) or individual(s) – and record the details above. Decide on how you will 'code' observations – i.e. ✓/✗, 1/0 etc.								
A	0									
B	5									
C	10									
D	15									
E	20									
F	25									
G	30									
H	35									
I	40									
J	45									
K	50									
L	55									
M	60									

Continue over page...

After the observed lesson...

Field notes (additional comments and observations recorded immediately after the lesson)

Reflections on observations and interpretation of collected data

Targets

Required action

Required Resources

Required by (date)

Note: other time intervals can be used for timed observations. See **Appendix 1** for an example of a timed observation.

Observation 7: unstructured observation

Use the form below to record unstructured observation notes. Try to focus on recording what you see without analysing and interpreting during the lesson. After the lesson, identify and refine emerging themes, and reflect on the implications (including questions for further enquiry).

Date:	Group:
School:	Room:
Observation notes	
Analysis (trends and themes)	Reflection (learning and implications)

Lesson Observation Pro Formas

Now it is over to you!! Downloadable and editable versions of the observation pro formas in this guide are available in the Placement website at:

<http://www.itt-placement.com/pgce-secondary/planning-and-learning-activities.php>

Trainees are encouraged to experiment with, adapt and evaluate a variety of approaches throughout the course – even not using a form, or even a piece of paper! As confidence increases, new methods can be used – either adopted from other sources (e.g. from a research article or book) or designed for specific circumstances, such as:

- using seating plans to analyse movement or other activity
- videoing a lesson (requires school and parental permission)

Further Reading

Heightman, S. (2009). Reading Classrooms: How to maximise learning from classroom observation. In Capel, S., Leask, M and Turner T. (2009). *Learning to teach in the secondary school* (fifth edition). London: Routledge.

Kawulich, B.B. (2005). Participant Observation as a Data Collection Method. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 6(2), Available at <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/466/996L> [accessed 27 July 2018]

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Smith, M.K (1997). *Participant observation: A guide for educators and social practitioners* [online article]. Available at <http://infed.org/mobi/participant-observation-a-guide-for-educators-and-social-practitioners/> [accessed 27 July 2018]

Taber, K. (2015). *Observation* [online article]. Available at <http://people.ds.cam.ac.uk/kst24/EdResMethod/Observation.html> [accessed 27 July 2018]

Taber, K. (2015). *Participant observation* [online article]. Available at http://people.ds.cam.ac.uk/kst24/EdResMethod/Participant_observation.html [accessed 27 July 2018]

Wragg, T. (1999). *An introduction to Classroom Observation* (second edition). London: Routledge.

Appendix 1

Example of timed interval observation

Liverpool John Moores University
Initial Teacher Education Unit
Lesson Observation pro forma 2011

Name	A N Other	Route	PGCE	School	Barkhill High
Subject	RE	Year	2011/2012	Date	3 rd October 2011

Notes about class/group/individual to be observed:

I have been timetabled to observe and support a Year 9 group as part of my Phase 1 orientation. The class is a small (Set 5) group with a significant number of pupils on the school's SEN register. When I was observing last week I noticed that there were a group of about 5 learners who appeared to be "off task" for much of the lesson, so have decided to focus on this group in this observation.

Interval	Time (min)	Learner					Comments
		Learner 1	Learner 2	Learner 3	Learner 4	Learner 5	
1	0	x	x	x	x	x	Learner 4 arrived five minutes late (from PE).
2	5	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
3	10	x	x	x	x	x	A message came for the teacher (via a year 7 pupil)
4	15	x	x	✓	x	x	
5	20	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
6	25	✓	x	✓	✓	x	Learner 5 leaves for 10 minutes (toilet)
7	30	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	
8	35	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
9	40	x	x	x	x	x	Teacher speaks to Learner 5 (to the side of the room)
10	45	x	x	✓	✓	✓	
11	50	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Homework – copied from board into planner
12	55	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	End of lesson (break time)
13	60	✓	x	✓	x	x	
14	65						
15	70						
16	75						
17	80						
18	85						
19	90						
20	95						

What you might observe

Teaching:

- Starter/plenary activities;
- Transitions;
- Teacher explanation;
- Teacher modelling.

Learning:

- Individual/group work;
- On-task/off-task;
- Behaviour/attitude;

Communication:

- Teacher to pupil;
- Pupil to teacher;
- Pupil to pupil;
- Pupil to learning activity;
- Teacher to teacher/adult;

Field notes:

Learner 5 sits with the group, but does not appear poorly organised, often forgetting to bring home planner unless prompted by the teacher.

Liverpool John Moores University
Initial Teacher Education Unit
Lesson Observation pro forma 2011

Reflection on observations:

Prior to undertaking the observation it Learner 4 appeared to be the dominant member of the group, making inappropriate comments or asking unnecessary questions. His arrival 5 minutes later than the rest of the class resulted in some disruption in his group, but did not appear to affect the class as a whole. However, there was a marked difference in the groups learning behaviour when Learner 5 left the room (toilet break) about 30 minutes into the lesson. All but Learner 4 settled to work immediately.

After speaking to the SENCO I became aware that Learner 4 has been diagnosed, within the last 3 months, with ADHD. This might explain his difficult to settle and focus on the work in front of him. Learner 3 seemed to work reasonably consistently throughout the lesson and whilst he socialises with the group does not participate with the low level disruption. In discussion with the class teacher (after the lesson), I became aware that he has a relatively low target level, even in comparison to the rest of the group, but is a "hard worker".

Targets

Action required	Resources needed	For when (date)
Split the group when I begin to teach them after half term	seating plan	26 th October 2011
Read up on ADHD and use Learner 4's IEP to identify targets and teaching strategies.	IEPs for the group Book(s) on SEN (visit LJMU LRC)	12 th October 2011
Further, informal, observation of Learners 1 and 2 and discuss with class teacher	SEN register and IEPs where available	26 th October 2011

