

Classroom-Based Leadership: From Observer to Ethnographer

Purpose: Whether a school leader is visiting a classroom in a formal or informal setting, being a purposeful observer is an opportunity to inspire teachers through our words and actions. Consider the following analogy as you read below: *Visiting a classroom is like an ethnographer immersing themselves in a diverse community.*

Ethnography is “the study and systematic recording of human cultures” (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*). Ethnography seeks to understand and define human interactions. During classroom observation, you can use an ethnographic lens to gain a better understanding of the culture that exists within the classroom walls.

The Ethnographer’s Sources:

The ethnographer gathers data from three sources:

- Observation — what you see, hear, feel, taste, and smell
- Interview — responses to specific questions
- Artifacts — physical evidence and representation of the culture

Triangulation of Data:

When drawing conclusions, the ethnographer seeks to achieve “triangulation of the data,” which means that the data is consistent across all three sources. For example, suppose you hear the teacher using academic vocabulary, see word walls with academic vocabulary, and read student essays to find evidence of the use of academic vocabulary with complementary notes from the teacher. Then, suppose you ask students how they learned their vocabulary and they talk about word walls, a word of the day, the use of a vocabulary website, and so forth. You can then conclude the teacher places a high emphasis on the use of academic vocabulary. If you walk into a classroom and see a word wall, but do not hear the use of academic vocabulary or see evidence of it in writing, you cannot conclude that the teacher places a high emphasis on the use of academic vocabulary.

Gathering of Data:

There are four ways to gather data as a classroom ethnographer:

1. When you walk into a classroom, **scan** the room with your eyes. What do you see? Where are the students? Where is the teacher? How is the furniture arranged? What do you see on the walls? You’ll be able to gather observational data. You’ll also generate questions or become intrigued, which will determine where you go next.
2. As appropriate, **interview** students and the teacher. You might ask students, “What are you doing? Why are you doing this?” or “How do you get help when you need it?” During the conversation, you may uncover other avenues to explore; you may also find artifacts (such as a handout or printout of student work) to take with you.
3. **Shadow** the teacher, watching and listening. You might sit next to a teacher talking with students or offering a small group. As you do, you’ll be able to gather observational data and artifacts; you may also generate ideas for further data gathering.
4. At some point, you’ll want to just take in the activity of the classroom and **drift** to where the action takes you. You may hear students talking and decide to go find out what they’re talking about. You may hear the teacher refer to a resource and decide to go and retrieve a copy.

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Directions: Use this graphic organizer to prepare for or reflect upon classroom observations, or to guide and support pre- and/or post-observation meetings with teachers.

	Questions to Consider	Insights and Reflections
Focus on Curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What objectives are being addressed? (scan/drift) • Do students know why they are doing what they are doing? (interview) • Do students find relevance and real-world connections in the standards being addressed? (interview) • How do the students know curricular expectations? (drift/interview) 	
Focus on Instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How is the teacher personally providing instruction? (shadow) • How does the teacher use other structures to provide direct instruction? (drift/interview) • How does the teacher provide feedback to students? (drift/shadow) • How are students engaged (minds-on) with curriculum? (drift/interview/shadow) 	
Focus on the Learner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are students situated? (scan) • What are students doing? (drift) • What are students saying? (shadow) • How is peer collaboration being fostered among learners? (scan/drift) 	
Focus on Classroom Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does the classroom environment promote academic rigor? (scan/drift) • How does the classroom environment promote student responsibility for learning? (scan/drift) • How are students practicing social and emotional competencies during the lesson? (scan/drift) • How does the classroom environment foster a community of learners? (scan/drift) 	
Differentiation of Instruction: Focusing on the Needs of All Learners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does the teacher assess individual progress? (shadow) • Is differentiation through learning modes, cognitive readiness, or pacing being leveraged? (drift/shadow) • How does the teacher provide instruction to meet individual student needs? (drift/shadow/interview) • How does the teacher provide multiple ways to learn the same skill? (drift) 	