



Become a Keen Observer of Classroom Environments

When observing teachers, our natural tendency is to keep our eyes on the action. This “action focus” is a natural function of our brain’s attention systems. We are drawn to focus first on what is moving, what is changing, or what is happening. Noticing action is an important element in survival and, of course, survival is the brain’s first task. Collecting artifacts, recognizing patterns, and analyzing cause-effect in “classroom action” are important elements in a skillful observation.

The action in the classroom tells a compelling story, but an incomplete story. In a novel, the reader must appreciate the setting to fully understand the action of the characters. Likewise, keen observers of instruction must train themselves to also look beyond the action and focus also on the classroom environment.

Here are a few practical ideas for becoming an even more keen observer of the classroom environment.

- 1. Don’t take notes or record any artifacts for the first two or three minutes.** Take a moment to let the action and the setting of the classroom “wash over you.” Try to get a sense of how the classroom’s mood, climate, feel, culture, pace, and space are affecting the teaching and learning. When we rush to begin recording data or complete observation forms, we often miss the subtle, but powerful, effects of the classroom’s environment.
- 2. After a time of observation, notice the classroom’s social/emotional state.** Look for how the teacher and students interact. Examine the information flow in the classroom- both quantity and quality. Are interactions tense or relaxed, formal or informal, collaborative or competitive, forced or natural? Are students mostly interacting with each other, with the teacher, or is there a balance of both? Is there a feeling of inclusiveness for all students or are some students clearly more a part of the action.
- 3. Remember to look for the three C’s.** Culture, climate, and community are three interrelated elements of the classroom environment- each tells a different, but essential, part of the story.

Culture- the unwritten “ways we do things around here”

Climate- the classroom’s mood or “local weather”

Community- the degree of inclusiveness or “family atmosphere”

4. **Do a 360° check of the room's physical characteristics.** Notice where things are positioned, what's on the walls, or how the classroom may be divided into zones. Note how students are positioned relative to the teacher and to each other. Is the space clean or cluttered, bright or dim, spacious or cramped? Look for physical classroom elements that are:

Attractive. Classroom elements that grab and hold students' attention. (Not a synonym for "pretty")

Engaging. Classroom elements that invite active participation from students. (a button to push, a vote to cast, a question to answer, a flap to look under)

Changing. Classroom elements that are temporary since they are matched to a particular activity or curriculum focus. (Here today gone tomorrow)

5. **Look for these five elements of an enriched social environment.** (From *The Artisan Teacher: A Field Guide to Skillful Teaching*, Chapter 16: Enriched Environments)

Unconditional Positive Regard (UPR): The degree to which students believe their teacher genuinely likes them and is glad they are present.

Relaxed Alertness: An optimal learning state produced when stress levels are high enough to cause students to be focused, aware, alert and keenly engaged, but not so high as to induce anxiety, threat, or tension.

Special Treatment: A strategy for enhancing a student's sense of self-worth and belonging by granting an unexpected or undeserved measure of favor.

Positive Rituals: Any regular and repeated action that carries with it a positive message and is seen as a sign of group membership or inclusiveness.

More collaboration, less competition: situations that call for teamwork toward a common goal or to overcome an obstacle rather than individual work that pits students against one another.

Teachers who can shape their physical and social classroom environments are able to put their students at a significant advantage. There is much evidence that the positive effects of a well-designed, enriched classroom environment go well beyond a simple positive feeling. When operating inside an enriched classroom environment, students are more persistent, resilient, more innovative, more collaborative, and take more risks.

We know the effects of an enriched classroom environment are powerful and pervasive. An administrator's ability to observe, understand, and provide growth feedback to teachers on these specific elements of enriched environments is a key leverage point for growth. Time and effort spent toward honing observational skills and understanding the cause-effect relationships among the elements of enriched environments is a smart investment with a direct effect toward student success