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Young, Niki, "The Value of the Narrative Teaching Observation" (2010). *Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education: Archives*. 60.

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Essays on Teaching Excellence

Toward the Best in the Academy

Volume 21, Number 7, 2009-10

A publication of The Professional & Organizational Development Network in Higher Education (www.podnetwork.org).

The Value of the Narrative Teaching Observation

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I am a teacher at heart, and there are moments in the classroom when I can hardly hold the joy. When my students and I discover uncharted territory to explore, when the pathway out of a thicket opens up before us, when our experience is illuminated by the lightning-life of the mind—then teaching is the finest work I know.

Parker Palmer

Dear Fellow Teachers,

What do you do when silence breaks out in your class, the times when you suddenly forget everything you were going to say, or you ask a question no one answers, and you sit there wishing you were dead, blush rising from the throat, face hot, throat clenched?

Jane Tompkins

No monuments record the bravery of teachers.

Jane Tompkins

College teaching can, at times, be joyful and exhilarating or painful and frustrating. How do we gauge our effectiveness? How can we learn more about what led to the moments of elation, or alternatively, those of struggle alluded to by both Palmer and Tomkins? Teaching observations are a powerful and effective faculty development strategy (Wilkerson & Lewis, 2002,) that can help faculty make discoveries about their teaching behaviors and consider the impact of their teaching behavior on students (Chism, 2007; Lewis 2002; Millis, 2006; Wilkerson & Lewis, 2002). The literature on this topic, however, contains few examples of observational narratives that

document what this powerful professional development process looks like. In this essay, I offer examples of a narrative approach to observation. Since teaching observation narratives resembles field notes or diaries used by anthropologists, I follow the habits of these social scientists when I record, as fully as possible, what the instructor says and does during the class, as well as student responses and behaviors.

The first part of the task is to describe what we see, specifically, the instructor behaviors we observe, with as much precision as possible, for example, differentiating between “Professor A. *said...*” “Professor A *asked...*” “Professor A *explained...*” “Professor A *showed...*” and “Professor A *demonstrated.*” We should then do our best to write down what the instructor said, asked, explained, showed or demonstrated, documenting both the action and the content. For example:

Professor B connected student comments to one another, ‘That is like what Russ said,’ summarized, ‘It is a great focusing technique,’ and elaborated on student comments, as well as invited additional comments, asking: “Does anyone want to add to that?” and ‘Anybody else?’ and ‘Who else?’ She did not jump in to answer her own questions but rather waited for students to answer.

Similarly, we should record the student behaviors we observe. When the instructor poses a question, how do students react? Do they raise their hands, shout out an answer, consult their textbook or notes, or remain silent? What do they say, ask, note, and comment upon? For example:

Professor D asked, ‘what is plagiarism? Who can tell me?’ He waited for students to respond and repeated the question three times. When students still did not respond, he added, ‘It’s on your handout.’ Students still did not respond. Finally, Professor D wrote the answer on the white board.

Another useful technique is to count specific behaviors: how many questions an instructor asked during a given class period, how many

times students asked questions of the instructor, how many times students responded to the instructor, how many times the instructor called on students by name. For instance:

Throughout the class Professor E referred to students by name, using 20 names in the course of the class I observed. She explicitly thanked students 7 times for their contributions to discussion throughout the class. She provided explicit feedback in discussions, noting, 'I heard you say...' 'And I noticed you also said...' She also gave students positive feedback on their responses in discussion, commenting, 'Great.' 'Fantastic.' 'Interesting.' 'Lovely. I really like those.'

After the observation, I compose a chronological narrative of everything that occurred that functions as what anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) called "thick description" (p. 14). This detailed record of teaching behaviors and student responses can be a route to discovery. In many cases, faculty have not seen themselves in action. The descriptions provide snapshots, or freeze frames, of what faculty do and say in the classroom to which faculty can later refer, giving them the opportunity to reflect on their teaching. Many faculty are grateful for this kind of detailed information. "This is so much more than I expected," is a typical comment.

Limiting the amount of judgments offered is important, since the power of the observation is in the descriptive act. However, the observer does need to provide an interpretive frame and grounding in order to make descriptions intelligible. When our descriptions and comments are recast in the language of teaching and learning we provide faculty with a new way of looking at their teaching. If this feedback is strengthened with the addition of interpretive comments, it becomes more instructive, since interpretation classroom events can draw out the purpose of teaching behaviors more explicitly. For instance, interpretive comments added to descriptive feedback can potentially help faculty to recognize their classroom behavior as to its degree of "student-centeredness." In turn, the observer may follow-up with suggestions, models and references to help faculty solve problems identified in these discussions.

When the observation's purpose is to improve a poor performance, it is helpful to begin with description, such as, "Students seemed

confused about the oral directions,” and then, to ask questions or make specific suggestions that can lead to corrective action, such as “Are there other ways to give directions so that student understand them more readily? Would it be helpful to put the directions on a handout or PowerPoint slide?” This kind of questioning allows the faculty member or instructor to ‘take the reins’ in the development of their teaching, rather than having to submit to an evaluative process.

The final step in the process is the post-observation meeting. This face-to-face meeting brings together two professionals to engage in discussion and problem-solving. Teaching observations can be an effective means of professional development when they confidentiality is ensured and the process is based on trust and mutual respect.

Conclusion and Implications

The examples provided provide an argument for the advantages of narrative teaching observations. Because narratives furnish snapshots of given moments in time, they give faculty and other interested parties a way of documenting effective and less-than-effective teaching behaviors. Second, because they are written, the data have permanence. We can refer back to them later. Third, they help guide faculty in recognizing and understanding their own behavior, providing an interpretive frame that video-tape or digital recordings cannot. Fourth, narratives can contain suggestions, models and references to help the faculty member address problems discovered in the process of the observation. Finally, the narrative is flexible and useful in a variety of contexts and situations. “Teaching observations involve complex social situations with large numbers of variables that cannot be controlled...” as each educational experience is a unique event (Hatzipanagos & Lygo-Baker, 2006, p. 99).

In conclusion, narrative teaching observations allow educational developers to document a variety of teaching behaviors and, by framing these behaviors with the appropriate vocabulary, to highlight their pedagogical functions. We use the vocabulary not to obfuscate good teaching in educational jargon but to illuminate effective teaching behaviors using an agreed upon professional vocabulary and to make the teaching process more transparent (Hatzipanagos & Lygo-Baker, 2006). Similarly, through its examples of narrative

teaching observations, this essay adds to the literature by making our contribution as faculty developers more evident and making our professional practice more explicit.

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