Activity:
Classroom Observations

Briefing
Gathering data and ongoing evidence of student learning is fundamental to effective and inclusive instructional planning. This information is used to plan, monitor and evaluate student academic and social learning. Information gathered through classroom observations can also be used to assess effectiveness of teaching strategies and to base implementation of new supports for learning that are targeted for individual, small group or whole class learning needs. A detailed picture of an individual student’s strengths and needs from observational data and information from clinical reports and other assessments helps confirm patterns or indicate discrepancies for further investigation.

Process (30 min)
1. With the whole group, review Classroom Observation Tip Sheet (p. 3). Highlight the two main ways that information gathered through student observation is recorded:
   - Anecdotal recording
   - Event recording

2. Pair Share: In pairs, have participants review the Types of Common Observation Methods: Anecdotal records, Event recording, Duration recording, and Checklists and rating scales. (p. 4).

3. Have participants consider an individual or small group of students in their classroom, and identify an area to gather data, such as determining the impact of different environments (ecological assessment), type or frequency of inappropriate behaviours, or aspects of student reading (pp. 5-6).

4. Using the Classroom Observation Worksheet, record ideas related to observing a specific student (or small group of students). The Tip Sheet may be useful to help generate ideas in response to:
   - What specifically is to be observed?
   - How will the information be organized and managed?
   - What do we intend to achieve (specific goals), through the data gathering process?
5. **Four Square**: Have each pair join with another pair; to share ways they might use this data to inform instruction.

**Wrap-up (15 min)**
Small groups share key findings and ideas with the whole group. Guiding questions include:

- How will information from observations be used to inform teaching?
- How might we incorporate other methods to confirm patterns or indicate discrepancies for further investigation?
Classroom Observation Tip Sheet

A common way to gather data is by observing a student doing a task and noting specific information about what occurs. The two main ways to record information gathered through observation are anecdotal recording and event recording.

**Anecdotal recording** is simply writing a record of what takes place. Anecdotal recording is less objective than many types of data gathering and is useful for activities that do not occur very often. It is important that the person doing the observing includes the same information each time he or she does an observation. Wright (1960) suggests the following guidelines for anecdotal recording.

1. Begin by describing the setting so that it is easier to recall what the context of the observation was. Describe the location of the student in relation to other students or the teacher, the activity that is going on, the noise level, and other significant factors.
2. Include everything the student says and does, including to whom and about what.
3. If there are other students or adults present, note everything they say and do in relation to the observed student.
4. Clearly differentiate any interpretations or impressions from the objective facts of the observation.
5. Indicate the time involved as precisely as possible. “Mary took a long time to write each spelling word” will mean different things to different people; “Mary took approximately three minutes to write each spelling word” communicates more useful information.

Anecdotal recording can be made more manageable by targeting specific behaviours or skill areas. Simple recording formats that include columns for important information such as the time, setting, persons involved, outcome, etc., can also be helpful in focusing the anecdotal record keeping process.

**Event recording** means noting each time a specific event occurs. Event recording can be used to count and document a wide range of behaviours, as long as the event or behaviour is discrete—in other words, something is happening that can be seen and that has an obvious beginning and end.

Event recording can be an accurate and practical way to gather information. There are a number of creative ways for teachers to discreetly record this kind of data without interrupting instruction, such as making a check mark on a card or transferring beans from one pocket to the other and then recording the total at the end of the instruction.

**Probe data** means setting a planned and manageable schedule to collect observations or other forms of data on skills or behaviours that occur too frequently for continuous recording. For example, a teacher might want to collect data on the frequency of a student’s interruptions during the first block after lunch every Friday. Similarly, as an indicator of organizational skills, a teacher may do four binder checks over one reporting period for three students with learning disabilities. This sampling of behaviour can provide a useful “snapshot” of a student’s performance.

Tip Sheet for Maximizing Classroom Observations

- Observe students’ learning in a continuous, systematic, planned and open manner throughout the school year.
- Obtain descriptive information on a student’s learning at a point in time that shows how the student is progressing towards a learning outcome or specific intervention.
- Communicate with the student to encourage him or her to take further risks in the classroom.
- Use observation to encourage greater time on-task, which correlates highly with achievement.
- Repeatedly observe a site-specific inappropriate behaviour or pattern of behaviour to determine whether or not it may be a barrier to learning.
- Determine whether the inappropriate behaviour occurs in a variety of learning settings (e.g., mathematics class at 9:20 a.m. compared with observations made in environmental studies class conducted after lunch).
- Approach the students’ learning of a task without bias in terms of personal perceptions of, or reaction to, possible inappropriate behaviours. Be as specific and as objective – non-judgmental, possible.
- Know what you want to observe, and design a framework to maximize information that will help enhance student learning. Observations should be factual, and include data that teachers can readily manage and use immediately after the observation period. Limit how many things you observe at the same time.
- Set specific outcome targets in advance. For example, you may choose to observe the frequency of social interaction during a specific group activity.

Types of Common Observation Methods

There are a number of common observational methods, including the following.

- **Anecdotal records**—describing incidents or behaviours, including what occurred before, during and after the incident. Anecdotal records should be as objective as possible. Observers should try to write in concrete, narrative terms without making interpretations about the student’s feelings or motives.
- **Event recording**—tallying the number of times a particular behaviour occurs during a given time period, such as a class period or a school day (e.g., the number of times a student gets out of his or her seat).
- **Duration recording**—recording how much time a student spends demonstrating a behaviour of concern (e.g., talking to others, rocking in desk) or a behaviour to be encouraged (e.g., on-task behaviour). Observers should try to record the duration as precisely as possible.
- **Checklists and rating scales**—checklists typically involve noting whether or not a particular characteristic is present or absent, while rating scales involve noting the degree to which the
characteristic is present or how often a specific behaviour occurs. Many checklists and rating scales may be developed locally or found in published resource manuals.

**Ecological Assessment: Observation in different environments**

One strategy for classroom assessment is an ecological assessment. This process involves observing and assessing the student’s functioning in the classroom and in other environments to learn how different environments or activities affect the student’s performance. Consider the following sample questions to help direct an ecological assessment.

- Where does the student experience the most difficulty?
- Where does the student experience the least difficulty?
- What is expected of the student in each environment or activity?
- What differences exist in the physical environment, instructional and assessment methods, materials, staffing ratio, activities, rules and routines where the student has the most and least difficulty?
- What are the implications for instructional planning?
- Are there changes that can be made to the learning environments that will enhance the student’s performance?

**Observing inappropriate behaviours**

Consider the following types of questions when making observations of inappropriate behaviours.

*How often have I observed a particular behaviour?*

Consider frequency and consistency (e.g., of time and duration) to help determine how much of a barrier a particular off-task or inappropriate behaviour might be.

*Do particular behaviours seem to occur randomly or is there a pattern?*

Consider whether or not the behaviours are observed only during specific tasks or activities, subjects, times of day, days of the week. A pattern of situation-specific observations is different from observations made across situations.

*Are behaviours intense enough that they interfere with learning tasks?*

Consider that students may demonstrate inappropriate behaviour when approaching new tasks. Those who have particular difficulty learning new things will take longer and may need more time to “catch on”; or they may need a different view of approaching the new task before they understand it.

**Observation Guide to Reading**

When observing a student’s reading, you may want to check for the following.
• Does the student use any prereading activities, e.g., look at title, look at pictures, skim the page?
• Does the student hesitate to begin?
• Does the student appear comfortable reading? Is the student easily frustrated?
• Do the student’s eye or head movements suggest a lot of backtracking when reading?
• Does the student squint or keep the book close to his or her face?
• Does the student use a finger or pencil for tracking?
• Does the student have difficulty with basic reading skills: sight vocabulary, decoding skills?
• What types of words are recognized/not recognized?
• What aspects of decoding are difficult for the student?
• What does the student do when encountering a word he or she doesn’t know: Substitute another word? Sound it out? Skip it?
• Are miscues grammatically correct? For example, if the student misreads a word, is it the proper tense?
• Does the student leave out or change words?
• Is the student reading for meaning?
• Does the student replace the correct word with a different word that maintains meaning or one that looks similar but has a different meaning?
• Are words read in a monotone, without intonation?
• Are words phrased appropriately?
• Does the student self-correct without prompting?

Taken from: Alberta Education. Learning and Teaching Resources Branch. Individualized program planning (IPP): ECS to grade 12. Chapter 5: Using classroom assessment to support the IPP process. 2006.
# Classroom Observation Worksheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Observation Method</th>
<th>Student (individual or small group) to be observed:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>□ Anecdotal record</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Event recording</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Duration recording</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Checklist and rating scale</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area to gather observational data:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>□ Environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Reading</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**What specifically is to be observed?**

**How will the information be organized and managed?**

**What do we intend to achieve (specific goals), through the data gathering process?**

**How will information from observations be used to inform teaching?**

**How might we incorporate other methods to confirm patterns or indicate discrepancies for further investigation?**

**Other comments or questions:**