Tips for Using Direct Observation

The Management Information System (MIS) Team has developed this resource to provide you with basic information to collect data through *direct observation* to support your PI/PD plan or for other program improvement efforts. Gathering information through *direct observation* can be a complex process depending on the context and purpose of the evaluation. This tip sheet provides *only* basic background information about *direct observation*. For more in depth information and direct support regarding *direct observation* from the MIS project, consider registering for the Data Learning Community: Direct Observation (non-credit learning option) or the MLP *Making Sense of Data: Qualitative Data*, three-module credit-bearing courses. The MIS project provides additional information at: [http://www.ed.psu.edu/educ/isal/edata/](http://www.ed.psu.edu/educ/isal/edata/)

*Direct observation* is a useful tool to capture what happens in a program or classroom in the “moment.” The method enables the observer to collect information firsthand, and not rely on second-hand or self-reported information. However, a single observation may provide only a snapshot of the full picture or situation. It is recommended to have multiple *observations* with the same purpose and protocol in order to document improvement or changes over time. *Direct observation* is especially helpful when combined with other qualitative data collection methods, such as:

- Document analysis (to review curriculum, lesson plans, homework assignments)
- Interviews (to gather information from teachers and/or students)

Types of Observations:

1. **Descriptive Observation.** Observe anything and everything without pre-conceived ideas. This can help you gain a rich context (and perhaps baseline); however, the disadvantage is that you may collect a lot of irrelevant information.

2. **Focused Observation.** This is probably the type you will use most often. Your observation will be centered on a goal or have a particular focus. You observe and probably follow up with an interview to talk about what you observed. There should be subsequent follow-up observations to document change, if any.

3. **Selective Observation.** Your focus is on selected activities to delineate differences. For example, you might want to know how different teachers are using a new curriculum. You would then focus on their use of the curriculum using *direct*
observation to compare and contrast how teachers are implementing it and if it is being implemented as intended. Or, your observation may focus on how students with different demographics (determined beforehand) are reacting to the curriculum (e.g. male/female; ELL/English speakers; those in the 20’s/those in the 40s; those current with technology/or those who are not; etc.) You would then observe the selected target groups and document how they interact with the lessons. Selective observation can also be followed by an interview to supplement the information gained from the observation.

Planning:

1. Planning is critical.
2. Plan ahead of time with the person(s) to be observed so that the conditions and purpose of the direct observation are clear. What do you want to know?
3. Decide on your role in the observation. Where will you be on the continuum from “fly-on-the-wall” to “participant observer?”
4. Your observation protocol should relate directly to the purpose or goal of the data you want to collect. Is it to be descriptive to investigate what’s going on? Or will it be more evaluative to measure against a set of criteria?
5. After your purpose is determined, plan what you specifically want to observe. For example:

   Characteristics of participants (individually and as a group)
   - Attitude toward class and others
   - Perceived skill and knowledge level
   - Differences in class types (ELL, ABE, GED®, etc.)

   Interactions
   - Level of participation and interest (student to student, teacher to student)
   - Power relationships, decision-making, problem solving
   - General climate for learning
   - Level of support and cooperation (teacher and student)

   Non-verbal behavior
   - Facial expressions, gestures, posture
   - Engagement

   Teacher/Leader
   - Knowledge of subject

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Use of materials, curriculum, technology
• Teaching/learning techniques
• Clarity of communication
• Ability to foster interaction and discussion
• Flexibility and adaptability

Physical surroundings
• The room—space, comfort, resources
• Seating arrangements
• Amenities (refreshments)

6. Once you plan what you want to observe, you can develop your protocol. Think about: How will you capture the data from the direct observation? Will you use field notes to describe what you observe; a rating or continuum scale with prescribed issues; a checklist of specific behaviors/activities: Or something else? Perhaps you will decide to audio or video tape for later reflection. The Annotated Bibliography includes information for selecting and developing protocols (see below).

7. Plan how you will get permission to use direct observation. Your program policies should guide you in developing this.

8. Consider having two or more observers to capture more information and provide additional points of view. For example, if a family literacy program uses direct observation to collect PI/PD data, it makes sense to have an observer who knows adult education and one who knows early childhood education.

The Observation(s)

1. Arrive at the site ahead of time and be well-prepared. Make sure you have the tools you need as described above. Be familiar with the setting ahead of time.

2. Explain or have the staff member explain the purpose of the observation. Ensure that those being observed understand that the data from the observations are confidential and that they must provide consent to be observed. In so doing you will build trust and establish rapport.

3. While it should be obvious, be sure to be attentive, have your cell phone or other personal electronic device turned off, and stay for the duration of the class unless otherwise planned.

4. If you plan a series of direct observations, you may want to keep the first one short to establish yourself in the classroom, not overwhelm the class, and limit your observation so that you are not overwhelmed with note taking and subsequent analysis for you first observation.
5. Keeping facts separate from your interpretation will help with later analysis. You may consider using this simple tool to separate factual from interpretive information as you observe. This may make later analysis easier.

Conducting Direct Observations with Field Notes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observation Notes</th>
<th>Interpretation Notes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There are eight adults in the classroom. However, three arrived after class started and needed to be brought up to date. The teacher takes ten minutes to bring them “up-to-speed.”</td>
<td>For the three late students: Is this an issue of need for classroom guidelines or did they have a legitimate reason? Is this a recurring issue? How do the other students feel about late arrivals?</td>
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After the Interview

1. Thank the teacher and the class for the time they have given to assist you.
2. Allow plenty of time to transcribe and analyze your data. Don’t expect that analysis will be simple! Do it immediately.
3. Follow-up with the teacher if you have any questions.

For more resources about Direct Observation, please visit the e-Data website and access the Annotated Bibliography in References, Tips, and Tools.

http://www.ed.psu.edu/educ/isal/edata/references-tips-tools