

Lessons learned through reflecting on a classroom observation

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to gain experience collecting data using non-participant observation, with a view to considering using this method for carrying out research for a Masters dissertation. Using non-participant structured observation of classroom teaching as a method of collecting data was experienced, the researcher noted who was speaking at 5-minute intervals. Preparation of a chart for 7 expected students became unwieldy when some 20 students attended, which was not anticipated. It soon became obvious that 5-minute intervals were too long, as many students spoke up but not at the points where speaking was recorded, so the final chart was unrepresentative of the classroom behaviour being observed. Some challenges in doing observation emerged during the study such as trying to avoid contributing to the session.

Keywords

Classroom observation, Non-participant, Context, Lessons learned,

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Introduction

During my Masters in Advanced Education Practice, the tutor running the research module asked us all to experience, document and reflect on using a variety of data collection methods; this would then enable us to select data collection methods when carrying out the research for our dissertations. One of the data collection methods was non-participant structured observation of classroom teaching.

What is classroom observation?

Angrosino (2012, p.166) discusses that observation is “well-established and most frequently used for classroom research”, and Punch and Oancea (2014) also comment that observation has been widely used in educational research. Menter et al (2011) explain that observation can be useful when looking for how often a behaviour or event happens. Walliman (2011, p.195) describes observation as “a method of recording conditions, events and activities through the non-inquisitorial involvement of the researcher”. Kumar (2011, p.140) explains that observation is “a purposeful, systematic and selective way of watching and listening to an interaction or phenomenon as it takes place”. Johnson and Christensen (2011) refer to structured observation as quantitative, as there is standardisation of who and what is being observed, and when and where the observations will take place. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011, p.456) point out that “observation’s unique strength” is its potential to produce “valid and authentic data” because it focuses on the collection of data collected directly by looking at real situations. They explain that highly structured observation is when the phenomena being observed for and recorded is planned in advance. In addition, Moule and Goodman (2009) suggest

that strengths of observation for data collection include events that take place in real time and are natural real life occurrences; however, weaknesses that have been noted include how time-consuming and intrusive they can be. It is also important to take note of Menter et al's (2011) argument that many of the limitations of observation can be managed by the researcher's skill and experience, in addition to planning well.

What is non-participant structured classroom observation?

My plan was to observe a colleague and her students during a teaching session, with a focus on who was talking at particular points in time. I was intending to use a non-participant approach, which Gold (1958, cited in Walliman, 2016) explains as the researcher assuming detachment with the intention of being ignored by those being observed, also referred to by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011, p.459) as when the researcher "adopts a passive, non-intrusive role". Punch (2009, p.154) refers to non-participant observation as being "pure or direct", which is when the researcher observes but does not "manipulate nor stimulate" those being observed. Similarly, Menter et al (2011) describe non-participant observation as observing and recording whilst not contributing or interfering in the event. Indeed, Kumar (2011) states clearly that this form of observation is about not being involved in the group activities, but rather paying attention to what is seen and heard and then making some conclusions. Further, Check and Schuh (2012, p.194) refer to this approach as "overt observation". Green and Thorogood (2014, p.155) also support this view by stating "non-participant methods ... include studies in which the researcher is present to collect the data, but does not interact with participants".

My preparation for the classroom observation

For this activity, I asked a colleague if I could observe her for a one-hour teaching session that she was carrying out with a small class of 7 students who I already knew by name, and who I was already working with in relation to 2 other modules of study in their course. Initially my colleague had some reservations about my planned observation until I reassured her that I was simply trying out observation as a method of data collection for research, to see how it worked in practice, and I was not making judgements on her teaching skills. For simplicity, I decided to prepare a sheet of paper with a table printed on it with the tutor's name and the 7 students' names, along with columns marked at 5 minute intervals, to note who was speaking at each point. I showed this to the tutor, and although I did not show it directly to the students as I had prepared it after I had last seen them, I had previously explained to them what my intention was, so as not to worry them about what I was doing. Creating a simple and practically useful method to record information by ticking boxes is noted to be helpful for observation (Walliman, 2016).

Early trouble-shooting just prior to the classroom observation

Unfortunately, my plan went awry immediately when I arrived at the classroom early: out of the 7 students that I expected to see, only 4 were present and the tutor informed me that the other 3 would be attending the session on a different date. Also, 2 students from a previous cohort were attending instead, although in itself that was not a great problem as I also knew these students by name. Therefore, I simply made some quick alterations to the table to account for the changes. The more difficult problem was that I had not been informed that 14 students from a different course were also attending this session, and I had not met them before, so I had concerns about how I was going to know who

Lessons learned through reflecting on a classroom observation| Hopkins, Susan was speaking. This now gave me 20 students to observe in addition to the tutor. From a practical viewpoint, just as the session was starting, I struggled to hurriedly sketch in 13 more rows and extend all of the columns on the table so as to include these unexpected students – this did not help as my writing and diagrams are often messy, and I had wanted a neat table to work with. As I did not know the additional 14 students, I hastily allocated numbers to the students, according to where they were sitting. Seating arrangements in the classroom was using a U shape but because of where I sat, I also struggled so see some of the students in one part of the classroom, as they were seated very closely together. As Walliman (2016) points out, too much may be going on that it becomes too difficult to observe everything.

Carrying out the classroom observation

I therefore made a note of who was speaking during the one hour session at 5 minute intervals. I realised that I was using standardised observation, and Flick (2015) notes that one way of carrying this out is to record the frequency of a specified behaviour observed in a set period of time. Johnson and Christensen (2011, p.207) explain that this “time-interval sampling” means checking at specifically pre-planned time intervals to see if a particular event is taking place. This is also referred to by Moule and Goodman (2009, p.291) as “time-sampling”, when the researcher selects a specific timeframe for making a record of the phenomenon being observed. Although this was an interactive lecture style of teaching, it covered a good deal of new and often difficult material, so it was not surprising that the tutor was speaking at 7 of the noted times. For the remaining 5 noted times, 5 individual students were speaking, leaving 15 students who appeared on my table as being silent.

Forgetting that I was not a participant

Perhaps I should also mention that I inadvertently spoke myself by offering a suggested answer to one of the questions posed by the tutor, much to her and the students' surprise, indeed my own as well, as it was obviously unplanned and inappropriate, but as it did not fall on one of the observation points, it was not recorded. Check and Schuh (2012) point out that the researcher's presence in itself may well alter the situation and dynamics, as it is unusual for someone to observe and record what is happening in a classroom setting, therefore those being observed might behave differently. However, I had potentially affected behaviours of those being observed by interfering with my unexpected contribution. I believe that my interjection was because I knew that there was a 5-minute gap between recordings and I was bored waiting for the next time interval, and so became interested and involved in the material and interactions of the session. However, as Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) suggest, researchers should practice structured observation, for example, where to sit or stand, how to observe with discretion and without inhibiting people's behaviours, and to test out the best time intervals for the observations. They also review a number of areas of potential bias, including "reactivity" (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, p.473), which is when participants alter their behaviour, perhaps to impress the researcher, a phenomenon also noted by Menter et al (2011), something I had not considered had only the 7 original students been in the classroom alone.

Considering how representative my recorded observations were

As I spent the whole 60-minute period observing the session, I feel that in hindsight, choosing 5-minute intervals to record who was speaking was too long. I observed several

Lessons learned through reflecting on a classroom observation| Hopkins, Susan

students, particularly student numbers 7 and 8, who talked a good deal during the session, animatedly answering questions and thinking out loud, and also giving examples of how they were linking what they heard to help their understanding; however, by chance, neither of them were speaking at the 5 minute intervals. Thus recording at these wide intervals did not accurately represent what I had seen. Indeed, although student numbers 6 and 10 were observed speaking at the intervals recorded, they also both spoke more than this; in addition, student numbers 9, 17 and 18 who were recorded speaking, did not actually participate very often, so were over-represented on the chart. This left 15 students who appear as silent in the session, whereas in my own overall observation of the session, I know that many of these students did respond frequently to the tutor's questions, particularly student number 16. Indeed, Flick (2015) comments that when carrying out time sampling, the specified behaviour can happen at other times outside of the set times.

I chose 5-minute intervals as I had originally thought that this would be the easiest to manage, but in fact I now believe that I could have very easily reduced these time intervals down to one-minute frequencies, which would perhaps have produced a much more accurate representation of who was speaking at any one time in the session. Indeed, Menter et al (2011) comment that, unless there are a good number of observation events, then what is recorded may be atypical, and it is better to carry out a range of observations to give a better overall picture. Further, Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) also stress that structured observation does need to be piloted in order to check out issues such as recording of events and the frequency of observations, and also for the researcher themselves to become accustomed to the procedure. A suggestion that I had not

considered comes from Menter et al (2011) who propose that one of the ways to select time intervals is to observe for 10 minutes, then stop for 10 minutes, and so on over an hour.

I assumed that all of the classroom conversation would be about the topic being taught, I may equally have had to record talking related to requests to leave the classroom to use the toilet, or perhaps opening a window if anyone was too warm, for example, something that I had not thought about. In addition, in response to the tutor's questions, in many instances a number of students responded at the same time; this did not happen at the set observation times, but I would think that I would have had some difficulties in identifying how many students had responded so that I could record all of them. Indeed, Walliman (2011) points out that observation can prove difficult if a good deal is happening at the same time, so that the researcher cannot observe and record everything.

Consideration of the importance of context

One final point is that I had not expected the additional 14 students from the different course. It is worth noting that these were UK students, whereas the other 6 were international students for whom English was not their first language, and this context is important, since there is a possibility that they may have felt inhibited speaking technical English in front of others who were clearly fluent. Indeed, only one of the recordings was for an international student, although all of them did join in at times when I was not recording. As Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) discuss, structured observation ignores the importance of context, which may have played an important role in this observed session.

Conclusions about my learning

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) point out that researchers need to practice structured observation, with specific reference to issues such as thinking about where to sit, time intervals, and also piloting the technique. Although I clearly made numerous errors with these, arguably this classroom observation was intended to be a pilot for me to try out this particular data collection method. Indeed, as Green and Thorogood (2014, p.166) point out; the researcher has to consider “refining observational skills”. In addition, I have learned that it is best to be well prepared, for example, bringing in extra copies of blank charts with plenty of additional columns, thinking about how to record if more than one student talks at once, however also recognising that even the best preparation does not guarantee that nothing untoward will happen.

Obviously, the main learning for me was that I need to avoid the possible temptation to participate. Numerous authors have pointed out what non-participant observation means, stressing in particular that it is about passively observing behaviours and recording them, not contributing, stimulating, being involved, or interacting in any way (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011; Menter et al, 2011; Punch, 2009; Kumar, 2011; Green & Thorogood, 2014). In summary, the main lesson for me is - don't participate!

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