STUDIA UBB. PHILOSOPHIA, Vol. 69 (2024), 3, pp. 91-102
(RECOMMENDED CITATION)
DOI:10.24193/subbphil.2024.3.06

For a Hermeneutic Phenomenological Approach to Teacher Observation

Adrian COSTACHE[*]

ABSTRACT. The present paper describes an alternative mode of doing teacher observation meant to overcome the limitations of the common approach in use today. To this end, the paper first draws upon the hermeneutic theory of perception developed by Graeme Nicholson and establishes the fundamental principle that ought to govern didactic observation and the conditions of possibility of this endeavor. Subsequently, taking Lester Embree's description of phenomenological observation as model, the paper describes the basic rules to be followed. The paper ends with a series of logistic recommendations designed to increase the pedagogical gains of the process.

Keywords: teacher observation; hermeneutic theory of perception; phenomenological observation; rules of observation; reflective analysis of teaching.

Introduction

Teacher observation (also called "(high-)school observation," "classroom observation," or "observatory practice") is one of the main instruments of teacher training since late 19th century.[1] And during all this time it seems to have been done mainly one way, derived from its task. The task of teacher observation is to offer

[*] Ph.D., Department of Didactics of the Human Sciences, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca (Romania), adrian.costache@ubbcluj.ro

[1] Teacher observation is minutely described by Guy Montrose Whipple and William Chandler Bagley in 1908, but Bagley notes that, at this time, the practice was spread in "practically all normal schools" (p. 275). Which leads us to believe that it was introduced much earlier. See in this sense Guy Montrose Whipple, *Guide to High-School Observation* (Syracuse, NY: G. W. Bardeen Publisher, 1908); William Chandler Bagley, *Classroom Management: Its Principles and Technique* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1908).

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students the opportunity to learn through observation how to teach. So, students are called to attend several classes equipped with an observation protocol which draws their attention to the things they ought to emulate.

Being simply derived from the task it is supposed to fulfill, the didactic efficacy of this mode of approach to teacher observation might seem self-evident at first. Yet, upon closer examination from a pedagogical and psychological point of view, it becomes apparent that it is marked by a series of limitations which impar its efficacy as an instrument for teacher training. For, as we have showed in a previous paper,[2] through the very way it is conceived, the common approach reduces teacher observation to a mere acquaintance with what teachers do, offering no possibility to understand why they do what they do. But precisely this is needed for students to learn how to teach. At the same time, the common approach reduces the class, dynamic par excellence, to a series of static scenes. To learn to teach, though, it is important to see not only what the teacher does in class, but also how her actions influence what happens afterwards. Furthermore, the common approach focuses exclusively on the teacher and loses sight of the students, forgetting that they are correlative terms, in a dialectical relation to one another. But the teacher is what she is only in virtue of her students, just as the students are students because of the teacher who offers them the opportunity to learn. And, lastly, insofar as it draws students' attention to certain aspects of the teaching performance, the common approach prevents them from gaining a wider perspective on what is happening in class and, therefore, from making use of the experience afterwards, in other ways, to improve their teaching skills.

Insofar as these limitations are constitutive to the common mode of approach to teacher observation, our contention is that it must be abandoned and replaced with another one based on free observation. This, we have showed in the study previously mentioned, exhibits a series of pedagogical benefits attesting its efficacy as a teacher training tool.

In the present paper, drawing on philosophical hermeneutics and phenomenology, we would like to describe such an alternative mode. Our recourse to these philosophical disciplines is grounded by the fact that they deal with the matters of perception and observation from a perspective highly relevant for our task: from the point of view of their functioning in everyday life and their applicability across diverse theoretical and didactic contexts; or, to put it otherwise, from the point of view of their inner mechanisms and of how they can lead to the discovery of something new about the world around us.

[2] Adrian Costache, "The Limitations of the Common Approach, and the Educational Value of Teacher Observation," n.d. Under review.

The guiding principle of teacher observation and its conditions of possibility

In our opinion, the essential contribution concerning the workings of visual perception was made by the Canadian philosopher Graeme Nicholson. Starting from Martin Heidegger's hermeneutic ontology and Jean-Paul Sartre's existential phenomenology, Nicholson articulates theoretically an experience familiar to most, but commonly disregarded by the psychologists and philosophers of mind who study perception in "laboratory conditions," independent of both its object and its context. Nicholson shows that perception is always governed by interest. For him "it is wrong to suppose that our practical life is one stream that runs its way and that side by side with it runs another stream, our perceptual life."[3] Because of this identity of the stream of perceptual life with that of practical life perception has two basic attributes: it is (i) selective and (ii) interpretive. Which means to say that our practical interests determine both *what* and *how* we see what we see.[4] They make us miss the things deprived of relevance for our projects and see the same things differently every time our interests change.[5] The same visual stimuli will be perceived as a tree, a chair, a desk in one context and as a shelter from sunlight, something to climb onto to replace a bulb, or a table to dine on in another, when our interests shift.

Nicholson's theory confirms Ulric Neisser, Daniel J. Simons, Christopher F. Chabris et al.'s work[6] on the selectivity of attention to which we resorted in the paper mentioned above for our analysis of the common approach to teacher observation. In fact, Nicholson's theory places this insight onto a broader, firmer

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[3] Graeme Nicholson, *Seeing and Reading* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1984), 36.

[4] Even though Nicholson focuses exclusively on visual perception, we believe that his tenets apply to auditory and sensory perception just as well.

[5] For Nicholson, the perception involved in aesthetic contemplation is not exempt from this principle. For even though it is not done for something else, it still has a purpose; its purpose is in itself. (See in this sense Nicholson, 47-48). On the other hand, even when it serves as ground for theory perception is still guided by a practical interest. For pure theory itself, mathematics, or logic for instance, are not disinterested preoccupations. In this case the interest is postponed, projected into the future when applied sciences will have found the use cases for their theoretical gains.

[6] Ulric Neisser and Robert Becklen, "Selective Looking: Attending to Visual Specified Events," *Cognitive Psychology* 7, no. 4 (1975): 480–94, https://doi.org/10.1016/0010-0285(75)90019-5; Ulric Neisser, *Cognitive Psychology: Classic Edition* (New York: Psychology Press, 2014); Daniel J. Simons and Christopher F. Chabris, "Gorillas in Our Midst: Sustained Inattentional Blindness for Dynamic Events," *Perception* 28 (1999): 1059–74, https://doi.org/10.1068/p281059; Christopher F. Chabris and Daniel J. Simons, *The Invisible Gorilla and Other Ways Our Intuitions Deceive Us* (New York: Crown, 2010); Daniel J. Simons and Melinda S. Jensen, "The Effects of Individual Differences and Task Difficulty on Inattentional Blindness," *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* 16, no. 2 (2009): 398–403, https://doi.org/10.3758/PBR.16.2.398.

ground by showing that not just attention, but perception itself is selective and this *because* it is guided by interest. But Nicholson's theory also brings to the fore a fundamental condition of teacher observation. Since perception is governed by interest, teacher observation can and must only be done when students have completed their theoretical training in educational psychology, pedagogy, didactics, and classroom management. For these courses reveal the significance of what happens in class and thereby open the possibility of observation. With no familiarity with the fundamental concepts and theories of these disciplines students are bound to remain blind.

This condition warrants particular emphasis especially in Romania where the newly introduced didactic master's program mandates that students partake in teacher observation beginning with the first semester of study. Such requirement condemns teacher observation to be a failed experience. Completely failed at first, when students have no understanding of teaching and failed in part as time goes by and they complete the above-mentioned courses. The intention of the architects of the reform is laudable, for students will benefit from more teacher observation. But the way it is put into practice undermines it.

A Phenomenological Model of Teacher Observation

Now, after having brought to light the basic principle guiding observation and the fundamental condition to be met by teacher observation, we should turn our attention to the question how it must be done. To answer this question we will take phenomenological observation as described by Lester Embree in *Reflective Analysis* as our model. The reason why phenomenological observation can and must be taken as model for didactic observation is that both have an epistemic end. Just as didactic observation is meant to enhance our understanding of teaching, phenomenological observation is meant to enrich our knowledge of the phenomena observed, to help us find answers to the questions they pose.

On the other hand, the reason why we prefer Lester Embree's description to a confrontation with the Husserlian corpus is because it was conceived from the very beginning with a pedagogical intention in mind, being envisaged as a "first introduction to phenomenological investigation" and, what is more, one meant for students and researchers in the humanities and social sciences at large, not just in philosophy, the field wherein phenomenology was first born.[7]

[7] Lester Embree, *Reflective Analysis: A First Introduction into Phenomenological Investigation*, Second edition (Bucharest: Zeta Books, 2011), 9–15.

In *Reflective Analysis* Embree argues that phenomenological observation must obey three basic rules. First, the observer must adopt a "detached," "dispassionate" or "neutral" attitude toward the phenomenon observed.[8]

In everyday life we are incessantly delivered to the temptation to spontaneously judge what comes about from a practical and/or aesthetic and/or ethical standpoint. In passing, it should be noted that Graeme Nicholson's theory offers us a good explanation why this is so. We spontaneously evaluate the things we encounter because our perception is guided by our interests. Didactic observation is exposed to all these temptations, but, in addition, it is also exposed to the temptation to judge things from a didactic point of view. Through all the time spent in class students learn not only what their teachers and the hidden curriculum tell them, but also what teachers do, what their duties and means to fulfill them are. This implicit learning is what makes teacher training so difficult. For the things thus learned will constitute the stock of knowledge and practices to which they will spontaneously turn when called upon to teach. But this stock of knowledge and practices is also taken as reference for appraising the didactic performance witnessed during didactic observation. Students in training often tell us they "liked" or "didn't like" the teacher and they deem the class/ lecture/explanations given etc. to be "beautiful" or "boring."

Such spontaneous appraisals though classify the thing appraised. As soon we reach a verdict, the thing is integrated into our stock of knowledge and falls into forgetfulness; as soon as it becomes non-problematic, it becomes uninteresting and gets out of sight. So, because phenomenological and didactic observation have an epistemic goal – i.e. because they endeavor to discover something new about the phenomenon observed, respectively to find out what works and what does not work in class, what makes the educational content intelligible for the students and what seems to block this understanding – any such spontaneous appraisal must be withheld. Of course, this does not mean that teaching is exempt from moral evaluations. On the contrary, it needs to be closely scrutinized, both from the point of view of the code of conduct of the school and from a wider viewpoint, of the values of a democratic society. But such scrutiny must not come at the beginning of the observation endeavor, but at its end, when we have reached an overall understanding of what happened in class.[9]

Second, phenomenological observation must focus on the phenomenon in the foreground and not the entire setting in front of the observer.[10] Even though it

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8 Embree, 49.

9 We will return to this issue later.

10 Embree, *Reflective Analysis: A First Introduction into Phenomenological Investigation*, 33.

might seem so at first, this does not mean to take it out of its context and study it independently, as it currently happens in the common approach to teacher observation. Rather, it means to transform it into a point of reference which, in virtue of its relations with the other things surrounding it, will open the possibility to systematically map the entire setting. The phenomenon in the foreground will draw the observer's attention step by step, from one thing to another, toward all the constitutive elements of the visual field, thereby offering her the possibility to trace its contours.

In the case of didactic observation, the thing in the foreground is, alternatively, the teacher, a student, or the class taken as a collective subject, and each of these is given to the observer as a point of accumulation and juxtaposition of a series of things. For instance, the teacher is a point of accumulation of a verbal, paraverbal and corporeal discourse; of a mood expressed in behavior, which reflects the behavior and mood of the students and will be reflected in its turn in theirs; a bridge between students, one playing a fundamental role in those classes where they do not know each other; a bridge between students and their textbooks as well as any other instruments at their disposal in class; a bridge between students and the theories, concepts and practices of the subject taught, on the other. And so on. Likewise, the student is a point of accumulation of a verbal, paraverbal and corporeal discourse; of a mood reflecting the mood of the teacher and of the colleagues'; a bridge between the educational contents learned and the world of youth etc.

Third, phenomenological observation must proceed in a categorial manner. The phenomenologist approaches the world through the lens of several general categories, which, when needed, are better specified. She sees "phenomena" or just "things" (which can be objects, or actions, or persons) endowed with two types of "determinations" – "properties" and "relations" –, which are either "naturalistic" or "cultural."[11] In everyday life such "cultural properties" and "cultural relations" take primarily the form of practical "values," i.e. properties and relations which make the phenomenon encountered useful or useless, depending on the context and how it is encountered.

In a pedagogical setting the phenomena to be observed are the teacher's verbal, paraverbal and non-verbal (corporeal) discourse; her and her students' (taken both individually and as a group) mood and all the other things enumerated above.

The naturalistic determinations of paraverbal discourse are the property of being loud or quiet, cadenced, or syncopated. The naturalistic determinations of non-verbal discourse are its property of being noticeable, ostentatious, or inconspicuous. While the cultural determinations of both spring from their consonance or lack thereof.

[11] Embree, 36–41.

Verbal discourse does not have any naturalistic determinations since, as we know already from Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*, there is nothing natural in human speech.[12] But it has a long series of cultural determinations such as its property of being monosemic or polysemic, logically structured or unstructured, conceptually precise or vague, as well as the fact of having close ties to both paraverbal and non-verbal discourse, being consonant or incongruous with them, or in line or dissonant with the discourse and the behavior of the students.

The naturalistic determinations of the teacher's movements are the fact of being jerky, enthusiastic, or slow, while its cultural determinations, the fact of being threatening, disturbing, or soothing.

The naturalistic determinations of the textbooks are their size, or readability or lack thereof (due to the size or colour of the fonts, or the quality of the paper) while their cultural determinations, the fact of being easy or difficult. In this context we cannot exhaust the list of things to be observed in class, as we cannot exhaust the list of their possible determinations, but the examples given ought to make clear how phenomenological observation must be put to work in a pedagogical context.

In phenomenological research, to lead to the knowledge, the observational data gathered based on these principles are always subjected to a reflective analysis. This must also be done with the data gathered through didactic observation. But given that in this case the knowledge sought is practical in nature, being meant to guide teaching, now, the reflective analysis must follow three particular lines of questioning. The first will focus on the effects of the things observed on how the class progresses. The second must explore alternative courses of action at the teacher and the students' disposal and their possible outcomes. While the third must examine the ethical implications of the things observed.

For instance, upon noticing that a philosophy lecture is overly metaphoric the observer should wonder whether students will realize that philosophical concepts do have precise meanings and if they will be able to make a rigorous argument about the things discussed. And, subsequently, they should wonder whether a discourse in which metaphors are accompanied by rigorous descriptions would not be more useful from a pedagogical standpoint.

Or, upon observing the teacher often making jerking moves the observer should start questioning whether students can focus on their task, what triggers these moves, and if and how they can be avoided. Afterwards, the observer should ask whether the atmosphere in class would have been different if the teacher moved gently as well as if this would not have predisposed students to daydreaming.

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[12] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), 9–11.

Then, observing that the teacher stands very close to certain students when she talks to them should make the observer wonder if this will not be perceived as an invasion of one's private space and if it can be considered inappropriate conduct or not. Or, to take a final example, a reference made by the Civics teacher to a political party ought to make the observer ask whether this might not be construed as propaganda for that party or as negative propaganda for the others.

Observance of these principles will ensure the pedagogical value of teacher observation. But this value can be increased by a good organization of the process. This will be our focus in the last section of the paper.

The Logistics of Observation

To maximize the pedagogical gains of observation it is important to bear in mind the following recommendations.

First, students should engage in teacher observation for extensive periods of time following, if possible, one teacher in multiple parallel classes. This will increase the chances to encounter different types of response to the same didactic and/or behavioral input which, by confirming or infirming their hypothesis regarding the consequences of this input, will help them better understand what works in class as well as what makes things work.

For instance, if we see that a PowerPoint presentation given to classes with similar levels of training and interest in the discipline has one outcome at 9 a.m. and a completely different one at 2 p.m., we discover the pedagogical relevance of the schedule and we learn to plan our lessons accordingly and to choose class activities based on it.

The second recommendation is for students in teacher training to consult the curriculum to become familiar with the competences to be developed through the lesson they will observe. These competences contain important clues as to why the teacher chose to use a certain strategy rather than another or to evaluate her students the way she did.

The third is to start the program with a teacher – student conference meant to offer students the opportunity to become familiar with the yearly plan of the teacher and to learn what has been taught so far and what follows.

The fourth recommendation is for the students to take notes during observation. Being based on this phenomenological model, observation yields a significant amount of data in 50 minutes. Because they must also be subjected to

a reflective analysis which requires a constant return to what was observed, the observer cannot and must not rely on her memory. Along with the events taking place the notes should also record:

1. The name of the school and of the teacher, the subject, and the period when observation took place.
2. Details about the context, such as the arrangement of classroom furniture, the types of didactic tools and instructional materials available (video projector, smart board, maps, textbooks etc.), the general atmosphere in the classroom, as well as the mood of the teacher and of the students at the beginning of the class.

As we know, furniture arrangement enhances certain activities and inhibits others, while the teacher's mood has direct impact on student learning.[13]

Fifth, for taking notes the literature on academic development recommends splitting the page in half and noting the activity of the teacher on one column and that of the students on the other.[14] This way it is easier to follow their interaction and the effects of one party's input on the other. [15]

The sixth recommendation, coming still from the field of academic development, is to take notes at regular intervals. Graham A. Martin and Jeremy M. Double recommend a 2- or 3-minutes interval.[16] In our opinion, any tempo imposed a priori has limited value for, sometimes, in the span of two minutes can happen a lot, while other times almost nothing. The rhythm of the class cannot be anticipated despite being predetermined through the lesson plan. That is why our recommendation is the observer to take notes at the end of every didactic sequence, regardless of its duration, or as soon as something unexpected happens.

[13] See in this sense Victor E. Mastin, "Teacher Enthusiasm," *The Journal of Educational Research* 56, no. 7 (1963): 385–86, https://doi.org/10.1080/00220671.1963.10882963; Edward M. Bettencourt et al., "Effects of Teacher Enthusiasm Training on Student On-Task Behaviour and Achievement," *American Educational Research Journal* 20, no. 3 (1983): 435–50, https://doi.org/10.2307/1162610; William D. Coats and Uldis Smidchens, "Audience Recall as a Function of Speaker Dynamism," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 57, no. 4 (1966): 189–91, https://doi.org/10.1037/h0023568.

[14] Graham A. Martin and Jeremy M. Double, "Developing Higher Education Teaching Skills Through Peer Observation and Collaborative Reflection," *Innovations in Education and Training International* 35, no. 2 (1998): 164, https://doi.org/10.1080/1355800980350210.

[15] For a template of teacher observation notes see appendix 1.

[16] Martin and Double, "Developing Higher Education Teaching Skills Through Peer Observation and Collaborative Reflection," 164.

And the last recommendation is for the observer to choose a seat that will enable her to see the facial expression and the gestures of both the teacher and the students. If the class furniture consists of individual desks or tables of two arranged in rows, the ideal place is in front of the class on the extremities, position which puts both the teacher and the students in full view if she turns to the side. If the furniture is arranged in U or chevron, the ideal place is opposite the teacher.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to describe an alternative mode of doing teacher observation. For this, we have begun with a discussion of Graeme Nicholson's hermeneutic theory of perception, and, on its ground, we have brought to light the fundamental principle that ought to guide such an endeavor. Nicholson shows that human perception is selective in nature because it is always guided by an interest. That is why, we have argued, teacher observation can yield the pedagogical benefits it is expected to have only by cultivating students' interest in teaching through courses in educational psychology, pedagogy, curriculum theory, didactics and classroom management, to name just the core of the curriculum of initial teacher training programs.

In the second part of the paper, to show how didactic observation ought to take place, we turned to Lester Embree's description of phenomenological observation. We argued that this can serve as model for didactic observation because both are called to serve an epistemic purpose: they both aim to further our knowledge of the thing observed.

Embree shows that phenomenological observation is bound by three fundamental rules. First of all, the observer must take a "neutral," "distanced" attitude towards the thing observed. Second of all, the observer must focus on the thing in the foreground of the scene in front of her, and not on the entire scene. And third of all, she must approach the thing observed in categorial terms. Our tenet is that these rules can and must be followed also in didactic observation. But, we maintained, insomuch as it is called to help students learn to teach, the observational data collected based on these rules must be subject to a reflective analysis guided by three lines of questioning regarding (i) the effects of the things observed on how the class unfolds; (ii) the alternatives at the teacher's disposal and their possible consequences; and (iii) the ethical implications of the things observed.

In the last part of the paper, we have offered a series of suggestions concerning the logistics of the process of observation.

Appendix 1

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2">Teacher Observation Notes

School:
Teacher:
Class:
Subject:
Date:
Time:</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Background:</td></tr>
<tr><td>Teacher's activity:</td><td>Student's activity:</td></tr>
</table>

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