

# “More Like a Conversation”: Cultivating Reflective Dialogue With a Student-Centered Classroom Observation Form

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Supervision of teacher candidates (TCs) in the field is often teacher-centered, anti-dialogical, and focused on the evaluation of TCs (Nolan & Francis, 1992; Coombs et al., 2013). With a teacher-centered approach to supervision, university supervisors often play the role of “silent outsiders” who take notes at the back of the room, produce written reports of what is observed, and provide TCs with ratings of their performance. While this approach is common, it is not always compatible with the learning needs of TCs (Paris & Gespass, 2001). In addition, it does not promote active engagement by TCs, require them to take initiative and responsibility for their own learning, or promote reflective practice.

Observation forms help guide the interactions between TCs and their supervisors. Unfortunately, many forms do not consider the individual differences of TCs, have ratings that can be consistently defined, and gauge TCs based on standards that assume a teacher-centered philosophy (Paris & Gespass, 2001). Rather than promoting a dialogical mentor-mentee relationship in which observations/conferences are opportunities for TCs to receive constructive and supportive feedback, observations with these forms often become sessions where TCs' performances are evaluated and quantified (Coombs et al., 2013).

## Context of Pilot

Prior to fall 2012, faculty and university supervisors at Wichita State University used a locally-developed 13 item classroom observation form which was aligned with the contextual framework of the College of Education. During an observation, university supervisors rated TCs on each item using a five-point Likert scale of 1 to 5 (1=Unsatisfactory, 2=Needs Improvement, 3=Proficient, 4=Very Good, 5=Distinguished). After the lesson, supervisors and TCs generally conducted a short post-conference in which they discussed the lesson, ratings, and observation notes.

While the paper-based observation form and protocol had been used for the past 30+ years at the college, they had numerous limitations. First, the Likert scale ratings were vague and inconsistently defined among supervisors. Secondly, the quantitative nature of the form items rendered it a tool for evaluation rather than one that could provide TCs with support and opportunities for growth. Further, items did not provide TCs with much qualitative feedback or details as to how they could improve their lessons (Coombs et al., 2013). Finally, because supervisors often did not have measures of the TC's prior knowledge, their feedback was solely based on lesson plans and short observations.

Beyond the form, faculty and supervisors also noted limitations in the observation process which was more teacher-centered and placed extensive responsibility for reflection and critical lesson analyses on supervisors.

## Purpose of Pilot and Participants

In efforts to promote more student-centered supervision, faculty members (at the time) piloted a new digital form and protocol. The purpose of this project was to investigate the successes and limitations from the perspective of faculty and supervisors. Participants included five faculty members from the middle/secondary teacher education programs at Wichita State University, five university supervisors, and 55 middle/secondary level TCs.

## New Classroom Observation Form and Protocol

The new observation form and protocol is aligned with NAPDS Essential 4 (a shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice by all participants) and addresses many of the limitations of the previous teacher-centered form. It consists of eight items aligned with the research-based InTASC standards (e.g., Learner and Learning, Content Knowledge, and Instructional Practice). Example items included: “The teacher planned instruction based on the learning and developmental levels of all students;” “The teacher demonstrated a thorough knowledge of content;” and “The teacher used methods and techniques that are effective in meeting student needs.” On the form beside each item, two columns are provided for qualitative notes. The first column labeled “Observable Teacher Evidence” was used to document evidence of observable teacher behaviors demonstrated during a lesson, while the second column labeled “Observable Student Evidence” was used to document observable student behaviors (see Figure 1). This observation form was developed by the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE) and was concurrently piloted by several school districts in the state of Kansas (KEEP, 2012).

student-centered. Before the observation, TCs reflected on the decisions they made while planning their lesson and documented anticipated observable teacher and student evidence based on those decisions. In addition, TCs described why they designed the lesson in the manner that they did and justified their decisions based on InTASC standards. During an observation, supervisors built on what TCs typed and posed questions for reflection.

After the lesson, TCs and supervisors discussed the lesson and observation form. In addition, TCs made updates to the form and composed answers to questions asked by the supervisor on the same form.

## Successes and Challenges

In depth discussion and evaluation indicated that faculty and supervisors preferred the more student-centered form and protocol, which required TCs to take a more active role in critiquing their own lesson plans and teaching. Supervisors also appreciated having TCs partially complete the form before the lesson because it allowed them to informally assess and build upon TCs' prior knowledge, which in turn led to richer post conference discussions. Furthermore with the form, which emphasizes qualitative rather than quantitative feedback, the observation process became an opportunity for collaborative dialogue and learning. Supervisors and administrators praised the new form, revealing that it “helped start up good conversations,” “allowed collaboration between supervisors and TCs,” and helped observations feel “more like a conversation rather than evaluation.” Furthermore, the digital format of the form helped make the conversations more immediate, accessible, and transactional.

While the form had successes, the novelty of the form may have resulted in challenges, including increased time commitments from TCs and supervisors and uncertainty by TCs as they completed the form.

## Future Plans

In future semesters, once TCs are familiar with the new form and protocol, faculty members plan to gather feedback from TCs, analyze the quality of their reflections, and revamp the types of questions supervisors pose. We are especially interested in the collaborative interactions between supervisors and TCs.

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## Construct 1: Learner and Learning

Component	Observable Teacher Evidence	Observable Student Evidence
<p><b>1.1 Learner Development: The teacher planned instruction based on the learning and developmental levels of all students.</b></p> <p><i>Examples of demonstrated evidence:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Lesson plans illustrated teacher understanding of student developmental levels and needs.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Use of a variety of teaching methods and resources.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Student work and/or lesson plan demonstrated adapting instruction to meet student needs.</li> </ul>		

Figure 1: Screenshot of Observation Form Item

In addition to a new form, we strove to make the observation process more