

# On Being Observed

Presentation #3

## Slide 1

### **NARRATION:**

Welcome to this presentation titled, “On Being Observed: An Interactive Presentation for Beginning Teachers in Adult Education.”

This presentation is geared toward beginning teachers in adult education who are contemplating mentorship as part of their professional development. This presentation focuses on the experiences of being observed, which is a common component of mentoring relationships.

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### **NARRATION:**

To start off this presentation, I’d like to pose a question that comes from Thomas Farrell’s 2003 book, *Reflective Practice in Action*. Farrell observes that many teachers fear being observed. He asks this question, “Why do you think classroom observations trigger such negative feelings despite the fact that teachers are observed on a daily basis by their students?”

Take some time to think about this question.

If you’re listening with colleagues, please pause the presentation so you can exchange ideas.

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### **NARRATION:**

Research on teacher observation—and indeed, based on teachers’ personal experience—shows that teachers often resist being observed because they worry they will look incompetent. They may also feel like they must defend what they did in the classroom rather than explain their practices in light of their teaching goals.

Thomas Farrell, a teacher educator, believes that we need to frame the way we think about teacher observation. To move away from the perception that observations lead to judgment about teaching, we should emphasize that observations are opportunities for reflective conversations about teaching—not what Farrell calls “defensive, unproductive conversations.”

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### **NARRATION:**

This presentation is guided by two goals:

One, it aims to invite reflection on our hopes and fears about being observed by colleagues and mentors.

And two, it aims to stimulate your thinking about how we can reframe observations as a basis for conversations about teaching, rather than judgment and evaluation.

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### **NARRATION:**

To begin, let's look at a formal definition of mentor that is featured in the AIR Teaching Effectiveness materials.

“A mentor is an experienced and exemplary teacher who nurtures professional growth in a beginning teacher by sharing his or her knowledge and insights and by supporting the beginning teacher in his or her professional learning and growth.”

This definition reminds us of a very important role for mentors in our careers as teachers. We want to learn from people who have wisdom and influence, people who can offer “their knowledge and insights” so that we start to feel more successful as a teacher.

When many people think of the word “mentor,” they are reminded of the person named Mentor in Homer’s *Odyssey*. When Odysseus left for the Trojan War, he left Mentor in charge of the care of his son Telemachus. The goddess Athena supposedly took the form of Mentor so she could give advice to Telemachus who was struggling with the decision to leave home and figure out what happened to his father.

The verbs in this definition—nurtures, shares, supports—are positive behaviors that we should think about more deeply. While no one would dispute the relevance of these words to our characterizations of mentorship, at the same time, we know that we each of us has very personal expectations, hopes, and motivations for what that nurturance, sharing, and support mean to us as teachers.

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### **NARRATION:**

I’d like to highlight two more stories that give us a slightly different way of thinking about mentorship.

In ancient Africa, when a child was born, it was thought that everyone in the village should share the responsibility for raising and educating the child in the ways of a particular village. The child was nurtured by every member of the village, but there was always one older child, not a family member, who would be tasked with the responsibility to ask questions and listen carefully to the younger child. In Swahili, the person who served in this this questioning role was called “Habari gani menta” which means, in English, the person who asks, “What’s happening?”

In southern France, high in the Pyrenees, there is a prehistoric cave called La Grotte de Niaux. The cave is covered in ceiling paintings that archeologists believe were painted around 12,000 and 9,000 B.C. The cave depicts many scenes of horses and bison, but another common motif in the drawings is the scene of a group of adults walking with children to what at that time was considered to be the limits, or the edge, of the physical world. The adults are seen to be encouraging the children to be brave and explore beyond the borders of the present world.

Some posit that the origin of the word “mentor” can be linked to interpretations of these ancient cave drawings—that being a mentor can be translated into adults taking children on a tour of the world that lies just beyond.

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### **NARRATION:**

Let’s take a moment to consider these three depictions of mentorship as featured in these stories, and the implications for their role as observers.

First, in the story from *The Odyssey*, mentors are depicted as experienced, wiser advisors. This depiction makes me think of mentors who are able to advise us on effective teaching approaches and useful strategies for working with students. Because of their own extensive teaching experience working with students, the mentor is able to help us anticipate the needs of our own students in our lesson planning. Because of their own extensive classroom experience, they are able to offer us several practical ideas for meeting our pedagogical goals.

Second, in the story from Ancient Africa, mentors are depicted as experienced peers whose job is to ask, “What’s happening?” This depiction makes me think of mentors who are skilled at listening TO their mentees. They are able to suppress the need to judge or evaluate. They also are not quick to say “If I were you, I would....” Rather, they focus on asking reflective questions that aim to open up conversation. These mentors convey a healthy curiosity about how YOU think about your teaching.

And third, in the story from the caves of Southern France, mentors are depicted as supportive figures who embolden you to “tour” your world as a classroom teacher, to go to the “edge” and look beyond. For me, this depiction characterizes mentors as people who try to help you think outside the box or outside your comfort zone. Like the mentors in the second story, these mentors also ask reflective questions. They help us to think about future action by analyzing what’s currently going on in our classroom. They help us to look at our teaching from a different angle or from a fresh perspective.

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### **NARRATION**

I can see the value of these different, but complementary, depictions of mentorship and the implications for classroom observation. Here are some “big picture” ideas that I take away from these three stories:

There is no one “right” way for a mentor to support you in the observation process.

Mentors may have different approaches to supporting new teachers. These approaches may influence the way they interact with us around classroom observation.

These different definitions can prompt you to think about your needs as a new teacher at a particular point in your teacher development and about the role of observation. These

definitions can help frame what you'd like to get out of being observed and talking to a mentor about the observation. Would you like the mentor to observe you and offer you some practical strategies for teaching a new skill? Or would you like your mentor to help you understand your classroom dynamics, for example, during group work? Or maybe you are feeling stuck and unsure about some aspect of your teaching, and you would like your mentor to help you gain a fresh perspective.

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### **NARRATION:**

I invite you to reflect on these depictions of mentorship by thinking about the following questions:

Which depiction do you like most, and why?

Can you think about teachers in your life who have played these different roles? In what ways did they help you grow as a teacher?

As you contemplate being observed, what kind of mentoring approach would you find most useful in your current teaching context?

Take a moment to think about these questions, and jot down your ideas. If you're listening to this presentation with a colleague, pause the presentation, and take some time (10–15 minutes) to exchange ideas.

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### **NARRATION:**

I'd like to invite you to listen to the stories of two different teachers, Ana Wu and Erin Lake.

These stories reveal a range of different emotions teachers can feel in anticipation of an observation, during and after.

After you listen to Erin and Ana's stories, pause the presentation, and share your reactions with your colleagues.

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### **NARRATION:**

I would first like to introduce you to Ana Wu.

Ana is currently an English as a Second Language teacher at City College of San Francisco in San Francisco, California. Born and raised in Brazil, Ana has been teaching for more than 20 years. She taught in Japan for several years. In 2009, she helped to spearhead the Non-Native Speakers of English (NNEST) in the Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) Interest Section.

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### **NARRATION:**

Now I invite you to listen to Ana's recounting of her observation experiences with two mentors in her early years as an ESL teacher.

As you listen to Ana, think about these questions:

In what ways does Ana's experience remind you of someone you know or your own experiences with observation?

What do you think Ana took away from these early observation experiences?

### **ANA'S AUDIO:**

"I used to feel very embarrassed every time my mentor gave me a corrective feedback. I was always embarrassed. And I saw myself being very submissive and very, very humble. There was nothing wrong with her, she was very professional and positive. It's just how I felt. I felt very embarrassed. This person was assigned to me. She was a very successful instructor, another native speaker, and I didn't find the mentoring process effective with this person.

"One reason is she used to share her experience with me, and tell me what I should do, or what she would do if she were in my position. Reflecting back now, I realize that she could have focused on me, on my reality, my potential when brainstorming options, instead of just telling me what she would do if she were in my position. I also remember that with her, I was very concerned with my deficiencies and whatever I tried to do to improve. My main focus was to impress her instead of being engaged in my professional development, instead of thinking about my strengths and weaknesses."

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### **NARRATION:**

Here is another story on being observed. First, I would like to introduce you to Erin.

Erin Lake is currently employed as an English language instructor at the American Academy of English in San Francisco, California. After teaching English in South Korea, Erin decided to pursue her MA in English at San Francisco State University. She is particularly drawn to understanding the intersection between the fields of technology and TESOL.

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### **NARRATION:**

I now invite you to listen to Erin as she shares her experiences with being observed. As you listen, again think about these two questions:

In what ways does Erin's experience remind you of someone you know, or your own experiences with observation?

What do you think Erin took away from these early observation experiences?

After listening to Erin's story, you may pause the presentation, and take some time to jot down your reactions to both Ana's and Erin's experiences. If you are listening with colleagues, take some time to exchange your reactions and reflections.

"It can certainly be nerve-wracking to be observed, and I think that's mainly because, at that point, you usually have a pretty good sense of your mentor teacher's expectations, and the expectations of the students in that class. So, you're trying to match those expectations, while at the same time establishing your own instructional style. So, that can be a pretty challenging balancing act there. That said, observations were a fairly painless experience for me because I knew that my mentor teacher was mainly there to provide support. She rarely took notes, so I really felt like she was just another active participant in the class, rather than someone who was there to judge me. In terms of feedback, she often allowed me to share my initial impressions of the lesson before she offered her own, and I think that allowed me to express any lingering frustrations or successes that I interpreted within a lesson. And really I think that gave her insight into how perceptive I was about my own instruction. So she seemed to use that to her advantage as an observer."

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### **NARRATION:**

Ana's and Erin's experiences highlight some key themes that may resonate with your own experience.

For example, consider the various emotions that came up in their recollections:

Ana recalled feeling very embarrassed, submissive, and concerned about her deficiencies when talking about her teaching with her mentor.

In contrast, Erin felt the experience was nerve-wracking but "fairly painless," as she felt comfortable with her mentor's teaching style and expectations.

Both teachers talked about the need to align their teaching with their mentor's expectations. For Ana, this was not a positive experience, because she felt the need to "impress" her mentor; whereas Erin saw the process as a necessary balancing act in their relationship.

Finally, both teachers drew attention to desirable mentor behaviors that they found useful and helped them to feel supported as new teachers.

I think it's important not to characterize Ana's experience as "bad" and Erin's as "good." This interpretation would treat their experiences too simply. Both teachers were able to learn something very valuable from these interactions with other teachers. And, in Ana's case, it's possible that there was a misalignment of expectations that in, Erin's case, she and her mentor were able to resolve.

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### **NARRATION:**

I appreciate Ana's and Erin's stories because they remind me that mentorship, and in particular the observation process, have very real emotional dimensions. Both teachers remind me of Parker Palmer's views on vulnerability in teaching, as captured in this quotation:

"We lose heart, in part, because teaching is a daily exercise in vulnerability."

In what ways do you agree that "teaching is a daily exercise in vulnerability"? In what ways can ongoing observations and conversations with a mentor help new teachers feel less vulnerable?

How have you found this to be true in your own teaching?

Take a moment to think about these questions, and jot down your ideas. If you're listening to this presentation with a colleague, pause the presentation, and take some time (5 minutes or so) to exchange ideas.

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### **NARRATION:**

Palmer's quotation about teacher vulnerability also reminds me of a framework from psychology called "The Johari Window," which is used to promote self-awareness. I present only part of the model here, but you can check out the references at the end of this presentation for more resources related to this model.

This model promotes self-awareness by asking us to think about the parts of our identity that are public, private, and hidden. We are asked to think about the information we share with others and about how much we are aware of our own beliefs, assumptions, and expectations.

First, there is the **Open (public) self**. There are dimensions of our teaching that are readily made public. These dimensions are known to the teacher and others. This self reflects those parts of being a teacher that the person is willing and able to share.

There is also the **Secret (private) self**. There are dimensions of our teaching that are known to the teacher but not to others. For example, a teacher may be struggling to implement a new set of course guidelines but is not able to share his/her uneasiness with colleagues. She may be worried that others will judge her as incompetent, so she chooses to keep quiet.

Another component is the **Blind self**. These are dimensions known to others but not to the teacher. For example, a teacher may unknowingly be reinforcing stereotypes about (quote) quiet Asian students (unquote) without realizing it, even though other students may recognize this pattern.

Finally, there is the **Hidden self**. These are dimensions not known to the teacher NOR to others in the teaching environment.

I invite you to take some time to review these aspects of the teacher self.

How can teachers support one another – through mentorship and observation – to explore these dimensions in our teaching?

Please take some time to think about these questions, and share your thoughts with your colleagues.

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### **NARRATION:**

I like to think of our observation opportunities, whether part of a formal mentoring dynamic or not, as opportunities to discover the parts of the teacher self.

To illustrate this point, I invite you to listen to Estefany who shares how her interactions with a mentor—being observed by her mentor, talking about her teaching with her mentor—helped her to recognize her own strengths. You will hear Estefany say about her mentors: “They were kind of a mirror that would tell me or show me ‘Look, you did this’ or ‘This is where you are good at.’”

First, I will introduce you to Estefany:

Estefany lives in Boise, Idaho, where she teaches ESL and helps to run a service learning program at Boise State University. She has taught ESL at community colleges and intensive English programs in San Diego, Albuquerque, Chicago, and now Boise.

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### **NARRATION:**

As you listen to Estefany, think about how teachers in your life have been “mirrors” for you. What was that experience like? What role did observation play in this “mirroring” dynamic?

After listening to Estefany, pause the presentation and share your reactions with your colleagues.

### **ESTEFANY’S AUDIO**

“Something else that I’ve learned from my mentors—and that was a huge benefit—was not only to learn new skills and new approaches and new attitudes, but also to appreciate the strength that I have—to value myself. Maybe I’m not the most outgoing person or have the most creative mind, but I have other strengths. I’m very good at organizing. I feel that I’m a genuine person. I don’t try to take advantage of situations or people. They were a kind of mirror that would tell me or show me, ‘Look you did this,’ or ‘This is what you are good at,’ ‘This is what you should be doing,’ ‘You will be good at this job,’ or ‘You are perfect for that.’ If there wasn’t another person to tell me that, I wouldn’t have started seeing those things in myself, like I do now—and for that I’m very grateful.”



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### **NARRATION:**

I hope this presentation has given you an opportunity to think differently about the role of observation in our lives as teachers.

If you are anxious about being observed, I hope this presentation has given you a new, hopefully more positive and engaging, framework for thinking about the value of observations:

Conversations about “what’s happening” in classrooms

“Taking a tour” of your own classroom practice

Looking into “mirrors”

My hope is that these metaphors give you a new vocabulary for seeking out colleagues who can support your exploration of your own practice, without judgment or need to impose their own teaching style.

If you are a teacher who already feels at ease with observations, I invite you to go public with your experiences. Share your experiences with new teachers. Offer to observe others. These exchanges will go a long way in cultivating a culture of inquiry and collegiality in our world of teaching.

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### **NO NARRATION**

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### **NARRATION:**

The Literacy Information and Communication System or ‘LINCS’ website includes a wealth of resources to support the induction of new teachers through mentorship and enhance teacher effectiveness in adult education. In particular, the Teacher Effectiveness page features a comprehensive Adult Education Teacher Induction Toolkit. The Toolkit is an integrated multimedia resource intended for instructional leaders, mentors and beginning teachers. The Toolkit contains information briefs, instructional strategies and techniques, online interactive tools, online courses, and role-based step-by-step implementation guides.

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### **NARRATION:**

The *Mentoring Guide for Teacher Induction* and the *Adult Education Teacher Induction Toolkit* give guidance and resources as well as support a systematic process for orienting and training beginning teachers in adult education. The *Guide* includes tools for beginning teachers to assess their strengths, needs, and teaching context; identify professional learning priorities; and work with their mentors to improve their instructional practice. It also supports mentors with effective mentoring strategies and tools to guide mentoring activities, such as classroom observations. It supports reflection and discovery and offers suggestions for improved teaching practice.