

→ Brazil

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OBSERVATION AS OPPOSED TO EVALUATION

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This report picks up the themes developed over the course of the four workshops I gave each of which was a separate development of the central idea.

A major presupposition of the series was that:

OBSERVATION OF HUMAN BEHAVIOUR IS DIFFERENT FROM
MIND-READING, HALLUCINATION, INTERPRETATION AND EVALUATION.

Let me make clear what the above terms mean.

OBSERVATION of behaviour is done, primarily, visually and auditorily, though there are a few observers who have clear perceptions of an observee's aura and or magnetic field.

A typical observation text might read:

- you are wearing a blue top and a gray skirt- your sandals are brown
- When you spoke to John your voice was low pitched, the volume was high and you spoke slowly.

A typical MIND-READING or HALLUCINATION text might read:

- the blue and the grey and the brown speak to me of your calm but also of your resignation
- your voice reminds me of the ocean.

A typical INTERPRETATION might go like this:

- Does the fact that you are in blue gray and brown, while all last week you wore yellow and blue, mean that your mood is different today?
- I get the feeling that the volume, pitch and speed of your speaking indicate you are angry with John

Here's how an EVALUATION might go:

- I feel the blue and gray go well together but the brown does not work
- When you use your voice this way you are much more authoritative- use this voice to cope with your class if there is a discipline problem.

The above statements are easy to make and, I hope, clear. But this does not mean that clean observation, clear of all the other stuff, is easy to do and part of instinctive human behaviour. It is a skill that a few people do have naturally, but which most of us have to learn. For some of the people in the workshops it was tough getting to grips with the difference between observation and evaluation. Several times people told me:

“but my trainees want to be told if the lesson was good or bad“.

Yes, they probably do, but the participants were using the trainees' feelings as a shield to resist thinking about the evaluation-observation dichotomy. My proposal is simply that a competent trainer knows the difference between a description and an evaluation. Of course there is a place for evaluation but not intertwined with observational feedback. I fear that much ELT teacher trainer observational feedback to trainees is evaluation-contaminated.

If you ask why the dichotomy is important, I would say there are two reasons. First, the keeping of behavioural observation separate from evaluation allows for clarity in the trainer's head. A trainer who is really giving herself to the task of observing has NO MENTAL SPACE left to evaluate.

The second reason for being strict about the dichotomy is to do with the trainee's state of mind when receiving feedback. If the trainee is at all defensive, and many are, then any whiff of evaluative language

arouses those defences. If, however, the trainee knows the trainer will give her strictly observational feedback, then she does not need to defend herself. The following two statements are likely to affect a defensive trainee very differently:

“ Here is a ground plan of the classroom – you spent two thirds of the lesson around point A and one third around point B . (Observation)”

“ You spent the whole time around points A and B. Would it have been better if you had used more of the space in your classroom? (Evaluation) [though the grammatical form of the second sentence is interrogative, the apprehensive trainee hears a strong statement of authoritative opinion.] “

Given the above belief about the need for the trainer to sort out observation from evaluation, hallucination and literature making (eloquent descriptions vaguely based on things observed) I did a number of exercises with the participants which enabled me to check if they were sorting observational description out from interpretation and evaluation. How successful were the exercises? Ask the 180 participants six months after the workshops. I think I can say that there were signs of emotional and intellectual comprehension but this does not mean that each of the 180 people was turned into an expert observer of primates after the 150 minutes we worked together!(A minority of people in the four groups seemed to already have exceptional observational skills.)

Observation exercise 1.

I recited a short poem three times, using my voice differently on each occasion. The group had two tasks. The first was emotional; they were to decide which voice use they liked best. The second was to give an accurate description of the characteristics of each voice.

This was the sort of dialogue that occurred when people started their descriptions of the voices:

Participant: Well, No 2 was an evening voice.

Mario: Is that an observational statement? What auditory characteristics made it, for you, an evening voice?

P: Your voice was deep.....

P2: you spoke slowly... and quite loudly.....

The aim was to show that statements like the following have little to do with observation:

- Voice 3 sounded like you were talking to kids
- I found voice 2 really boring.
- Somehow voice 3 was very different from the other two. (too vague to be good observation)

(the three voice I used were the ones that NLP reckons bring people, respectively, into their visual area, their world of sensation and feeling, and their auditory area.)

Observation exercise 2.

15 participants became students of modern Greek. The other 30 paired off and each pair took on the task of observing one of the learners. The observers were told very clearly that a) mind-reading and stuff was out and that the task was to record observable fact about the learner and b) that only facts agreed on by BOTH observers were admissible as data.

I taught a listening comprehension lesson by telling a story in Greek and English like this:

“Once upon a time there was this ARKUTHI, a bear that is, and the ARKUTHI was walking through the THASO, a THASOS is place with many trees, as I was saying, this ARKUTHI was walking through the THASO, when.....”

There was a pair work phase after the telling and a bit of feed back to the teacher of words the learners remembered.

The lesson lasted 8-10 minutes. I asked the observers to check their data with their colleague. They then went over and reported to their learner on what they had observed of her behaviour. The learners were asked to squelch any interpretative stuff or vulgar mind-reading. (vulgar in this context). In most cases the observers did a verbally excellent job. I have no idea how much other stuff they were holding back and sitting on.

A fully competent observer does not need to do this as he gets enough pleasure and mental occupation from minutely observing.

Observation exercise 3

One participant gave the group a full length TT session on her use of poetry. The participants were trainees in her session and I did the observation work.

I observed these aspects of lesson:

- The behaviour of one student for a 7 minute period
- The three or four different ways in which the “trainees” participated. In these phases they produced very specific types of text.
- The way the teacher was dressed.
- Her hand gesture system (both complex and very rich to observe, that particular ballet of hands)
- The four different typefaces she used on her OHTs (two hand-written and two printed)
- The teacher’s language over a 8 minute segment of the lesson. -
- At various points I went into “floating attention” observation to decide on what the next points of focus should be.

When the feedback session started six participants were asked to each give the teacher a two minute window each into their internal process during her lesson. They were asked to talk about themselves, not her.

I then gave her my observational, descriptive feedback as objectively as I could though it was hard to mirror back to her gestual language without betraying the mirror’s pleasure. Mirrors are meant to do lateral reversal but any more subjectivity than that is denied to them!

Some parts of a lesson feedback may carry more important information for the observee than other parts. The playback of this colleague’s language showed the intensive use of two modal verbs:

I can/could

I had/have to....

There was one can/could to every four had to/have to’s in the eight minutes observed.

At this stage any trainer interpretation would have been idiotic. If there is a useful interpretation to be made it can only usefully and deeply be made, maybe silently, by the teacher in question.

To show the group the difference between observational description and my own personal stuff, halfway through the feedback I left my chair and took up a new position, standing, and said this to the teacher:

“Now I am no longer an observer: what follows are is a personal, Mario feeling I had at one point in the session. When you rounded off that discussion phase by saying “that was a nice discussion “ I could have willingly throttled you. I felt you were a condescending EFLy horror. Yuk”

The teacher’s reaction was dramatic. She went defensive and started to justify herself. The point was well made that “trainer stuff” and professional observation need to be kept well separated.

Observational Exercise 4

Participants got into groups of 4. One person became the “protagonist” while the other three were the observers. The protagonist shut her eyes and went back mentally into a state of happiness. She spent a minute or so in this state, gave a signal to the observers and chose a state of sadness and lived this for a

minute. In phase 3 she accessed another state of happiness. The observer task was to notice all the minute changes in her physiognomy.....alterations in breathing, facial muscles, colouring etc.....
I made clear that the three states were private to the protagonists- nobody would ask them where they had "been".

(Government Health warning: if you use this exercise make clear to participants that the sad state chosen should be one of sadness and not one of despair. If you know a person in the group is not on even keel either avoid the exercise or opt them out. Watch the whole group carefully during the exercise. People may go too deep, even in the happy state. In this workshop one person did.)

As far as I could observe most protagonists received accurate observational feedback on their changing appearance during the three states. Nobody told them what they were thinking or double-guessed what they may have been feeling. It is amazing how the intimacy of the exercise seems to foster clarity of observation and respect.

Observation Exercise 6: Fruit salad.

Phase 1: people number off as fruit: mangos, passion fruit, bananas, pineapples and grapes. The participants sit in a circle with one person, who has no chair, standing in the middle. This person's aim is to get herself a chair. If she shouts "BANANAS" then all the bananas have to change chairs. If she shouts FRUIT SALAD everybody must up and move. They must move at least two chairs.

We played 10 rounds of the game.

Phase 2: People take a partner on the other side of the circle. In this phase their task is to observe the partner's chair acquisition strategy. We played another 10 rounds.
People got hold of their partner and described the strategy they had observed.

Phase 3: the task now is to ADOPT the partner's chair-grabbing strategy while observing her doing the same with yours. 10 rounds.
Paired feedback.

How accurate a metaphor do you think this game is of a normal teaching situation where you have to do your own thing while trying to notice what the students are up to, and trying too, to see yourself from their multiple points of view?

Apart from direct focus on observation, the workshops also covered the following areas:

A The problem of projections.

When you meet a new person you often find that they remind you of some one you already know. Sometimes this is just a fleeting similarity but other times the image you have of the earlier person seriously overlays the new image. In both a TT situation and a language class it makes sense to let people check out their projections on each other and to do the same yourself.
When we did this in two groups of 20 people each at least 30 projections got reported.

It makes sense to check your own projections, if any, before observing a class.

B The complexity of giving advice.

We examined situations in daily life when we give advice or receive it and discussed the advantages

and disadvantages of these procedures.

In the run up to daring to give advice it is sensible to get a very detailed mapping of exactly how the potential advice recipient actually perceives their problem. Once you see the situation from in their shoes, your initial, spontaneous, ignorant advice often melts like snow in Spring time.

The pitfalls in advice-proffering are high-lighted in this game we played:

Groups of 6 people. One person brings to mind a small, but real problem they have. This person does NOT tell the others what the problem is. The others start giving advice in the dark and try to guess what the problem actually is by listening to the person's reactions to the advice. They must at no stage ask direct questions about what the problem is.

This exercise (devised by Gerry Kenny, a Pilgrims colleague) may seem surrealistic.

In fact it is an accurate parody of much hamfisted advice giving that goes on all the time.

Have you ever given a trainee advice that sounded perfectly reasonable to you but that did not make much sense to her? The most normal reason for this is that you are looking at a landscape she does not see- how can she be inside your head? Before daring to offer advice it makes sense to try and get a detailed picture of her landscape as she sees it.

(How have you felt about my advice on advice-giving?)

C The Logical Levels (as proposed by G.Bateson)

Bateson proposes this hierarchy of levels that may help us in understanding human beings.

- what is ineffable and above and beyond the person
- the person's core
- the person's beliefs and values
- the person's skills
- the person's behaviours
- the person's environment.

The question word for the environment level is WHERE? (WHEN?)

For behaviours: WHAT?

For skills: HOW?

For values and beliefs: WHY?

For the person's core WHO?

(for more on this system see Seymour and O Connor: Introducing NLP, 91)

In teacher training and language teaching we often observe things at the behavioural level and try to help the other person to modify them AT THIS LEVEL. Our attempts will fail if the reason for the problem at behavioural level actually lies higher up the hierarchy.

Let me give you a language teaching example: suppose you try to correct a student's pronunciation and don't get anywhere. Maybe the student has a skills level problem: did you know he was slightly deaf? Maybe he believes that it is not manly to make some of the sounds of English. You won't change his pronunciation if this lies behind his mispronunciation, not unless you unearth the belief and help him to modify this.

Do you think you could make use of Bateson's tool as a sorting mechanism in your thinking about trainees?

D The importance of remembering what you have observed.

It was John Morgan (author of *Once Upon a Time*, CUP, 84) who taught me the magic you can work as a teacher and a trainer if you remember 5% of the mass of material the students/trainees offer you about themselves. John will bring a happy glow to a trainee's face in week three of a course by reminding her of something she has forgotten she said or did in week one. He not only observes like a hawk but also retains a large amount of the information. This is one of his great trainer skills.

In one of the groups we did this exercise to help people sharpen their observational memory:

The participants were paired. One person monologued about a topic of mutual interest for 4 minutes. The other was invited to notice these things in the speaker:

- changes of posture
- manner of breathing
- voice characteristics
- gestures
- rhythm of speech
- content.

First one person monologued and then the other.

I then told a joke from Finland about people who remember things for a long time.

Listening to the joke gave participants time to begin to forget what they had listened to.

In the third stage of the exercise the partners got back together again and A said B's monologue back to her as accurately as possible, following rhythm, body posture, tempo of speech etc.... and vice versa.

Remembering what the other has told you is an act of respect and, sadly, it is not expected by most people.

This report of the four workshops in Goiania is a poor travesty of what we lived together but to describe the rich reality would require the keyboard of a Garcia Marquez. But then, who knows, how much hallucination and interpretation Marquez would have wickedly indulged in?
