

Chapter 3

Topic 6 Participant observation

Page 144

Activity: Research

Classroom observation: structured or unstructured?

Learning objectives

At the end of this activity you should be able to:

- Identify key features of structured and unstructured observations.
 - Carry out different types of observation.
 - Evaluate the strengths and limitations of structured and unstructured observations and compare the two.
1. Working in pairs, conduct one structured and one unstructured observation of a class. Ask permission to observe the class choosing if possible one you are not familiar with.
 2. The structured observation should last approximately 10 minutes. Use the Flanders interaction analysis categories (Box 24 on page 144). One of you should observe and record, while the other indicates every ten seconds when to record. (Tip: first get some practice by doing a two-minute observation of your sociology class.)
 3. The unstructured observation can be longer if you wish. For this one, you should each make separate, detailed notes on the interactions you observe. For example, note body language, tone of voice, type of speech, shared jokes etc. Don't collaborate, as you will need to compare your results with each other later.
 4. As a pair, compare the structured observation with your two unstructured observations. Which method was easier to use? Which one gave you the deeper understanding of what was going on?
 5. Now compare the notes from your unstructured observation with your partner's notes. Did you note the same things? Did you interpret them in the same way? If not, what does this tell you about the validity of this method?