Background

Having been a classroom teacher in three different high schools, all with decidedly different forms of administrative oversight, I can honestly say that I have a spotty past with observations. I’ve had everything from a three-page report to a two-line summation of my teaching from others who were supposed to gauge my quality as an educator. From the perspective of a teacher, there are good and bad things about getting both types of feedback.

I was personally floored when I read the note a principal left in my mailbox after spending only 20 minutes in my classroom – “After watching you teach today, I know I won’t need to come back again until spring.” Sure, I was elated at the obvious (although implicit) compliment, but what about things that I could do to improve? What about my assessments? What about my interactions with the students? What about my use of the many forms of communication in instruction? I was a bit disappointed, and felt quite disillusioned by the flimsy process of “teacher evaluation” that I had experienced. The other extreme was different, in that the observer (also a principal) had made so many observations of my teaching that I didn’t know how to begin deciphering them into anything useful to me (as a teacher). One of my goals for this year’s experience as a Field Instructor has been to find a way to match observation reports with the needs of the teacher observed.

The intern that I selected as my focal intern is a cheerful, secondary chemistry and biology teacher-candidate, whom I will call “Shelly”, and her mentor will be referred to as “Karl”. Both have been very communicative, positive, and open to suggestions and ideas since the first time I met them – probably the largest reason for my selecting them. The school where they teach is rural and follows a block schedule (only 4 distinct classes per semester, meeting every day). Shelly’s focus class is biology (4th block) and she also works with chemistry (3rd block). Shelly, having a great deal of experience with the physiology of livestock and poultry from veterinary classes and her own agrarian-
upbringing, volunteered to help Karl with his 2nd block (25 students) physiology class’s unit on the muscular system. As a result of the added input, Karl (who has never taught an advanced biology before this year) decided to have a special Meat Lab activity to end the unit.

The lesson that Shelly and I observed was a laboratory, of sorts, in that students were encouraged (though not required) to bring in any cut of meat (beef, pork, poultry, etc.) they wanted, describe the relation of the cut’s name to the location, name and purpose of the muscle on the animal and any bones to which it is connected. After this, they would cook the meat, eat it, and then describe the taste and texture. Since 2nd block meets from about 9:30 until 11:00 am, it might seem odd to imagine grilling steak and pork chops so early in the day, but Shelly said that the students were excited by the idea when it was first proposed. Though there were only 10 students who chose to bring in meat, the number of grills (some outdoors, others within the laboratory room) was just right. The other, non-meat-eating students had homework activities that they worked on quietly within the classroom.

Shelly’s and my role was not so much one of silent observers, but more of roaming participators. Though I took many notes, Shelly only had a chance to write a few things down – mostly because she was helping students use grills while Karl was working with other students. We had discussed a brief list of things to think about while observing, and we spoke immediately after class about what we observed – both of which contributed to a more thorough observation. Karl was not able to join in on the conversation, but I did communicate with him via email later on that evening.

**Discussing the Observation**

After the observation had ended, Shelly and I went into the laboratory room to discuss what we saw, while Karl taught his 3rd block chemistry class. For the first several minutes, we talked about the purpose of the lesson from our perspective, as well as Karl’s. We both agreed that, from our
perspective, it was an application lesson, though Shelly was reluctant to think more about how she perceived it versus what Karl had planned. I mentioned that it seemed more like a lesson I would expect to see at the beginning of the unit (to stimulate interest) and Shelly simply told me that this was the end of the unit. I persisted with a thought experiment: what if I dropped you into the lesson and you knew nothing about what he had already covered, and what he was going to cover? What would you think about what we saw? She thought about it, and agreed that it was lacking in any student-directed discussion or synthesis (things she admittedly was not looking at while observing), and went on to say that Karl had intended it as a “fading” activity but it wound up being one about “coaching”. The students were simply answering repetitive questions from Karl, and avoiding any questions of depth – and Karl was facilitating this through short wait-times on questions he asked and not pushing students to extrapolate from their previous experiences and knowledge. Later, via email, Karl stated that this lesson was about reviewing the material they had already learned. Though he did explicitly not refer to an assessment of this previous learning, it seemed as though he was confident of their pre-existing understanding.

We also spoke about the goals, or objectives, of the lesson – again from our viewpoints, and what we perceived Karl’s would have been. This time, her ability to remove herself, in an objective way was improved. She first suggested that the primary objective of the lesson was to “Review muscle types,” though she quickly changed that to be what Karl would have suggested the objective was. She went on to say that the objectives were apparently that “Meat is muscle,” and “Students should understand what they eat.” Both of which I said were good observations, given the format of the lesson. I went on to suggest that Karl’s apparent goal for the lesson was for students to have fun with the material, to which Shelly looked confused. She was unsure whether I meant this as a denouncement of his teaching. I explained that allowing students to enjoy and have fun with a lesson is not a bad thing at all, provided that it is not the only objective for every lesson. This suggestion,
perhaps coming from me, seemed to startle her. In our outside conversation, Karl stated that this was, indeed, his main objective.

The structure and pace of the lesson were our next topics of conversation. Shelly and I agreed completely in our observations of Karl’s excellent use of time (the activity worked out perfectly with the schedule), and his ability to transition from one part to the next. Shelly went on to question his use of side-conversations with students, after he had encouraged them to get to work. As I discovered through discussing this topic with her, Karl will tell his students to “get busy” on an activity, and then proceed to chitchat with several individuals along the way – distracting them from their work. In looking over my notes and memory, I concede that he did do this on several occasions during the block. Shelly, being more organized and authoritarian than Karl, sees this as a major flaw in his teaching style. I agreed that it could be interpreted as “confusing” to the students, but encouraged her to think of different styles of teaching, rather than ‘correct’ ways. Karl felt that the entire lesson was too rushed, and that he didn’t have enough time to “tie all of the loose ends” together. When pressed, he implied that there were some students that he felt could have benefited from more discussion.

Another aspect of the lesson that, until I raised the issue Shelly made no mention or comment upon, was that of student participation and “on-task” behavior. Those students who were cooking the meat were discussing the types of meat, cooking directions, types of muscle, taste differences, and things very related to the perceived objectives. Those students who were inside doing homework in their anatomical coloring book were silent and not working on anything related to the lesson. I pointed this out to Shelly, and she was amazed that there were “actually two lessons going on today! One about the meat-muscle issue, and the other about just getting their homework done.” Her astute observation surprised me, but I think that she was beginning to see the idea of observation as an almost deductive process. We also discussed the interesting gender-breakdown of those in each “sub-lesson”. Not surprising to her, nearly all the students cooking meat were males, and those working quietly were almost all females. Shelly had quite a bit to say about the role of gender in the
classroom, so this took up most of the remaining discussion time. I think that as a female and a scientist, Shelly feels very strongly about the favoritism that teachers often show to males over females. In approaching this lesson as a relaxed review, Karl felt that those who did not directly participate were well within their rights to do so. Furthermore, he made no mention of the gender differences.

Our last, and shortest, topic was that of assessment – how could we tell the students were “getting” what Karl wanted them to get? Shelly suggested that this communal list they made together as a class, which all students turned in at the end of the hour, was the only assessment. After thinking about the role of the students’ discussions while cooking, she changed her mind to include those as well. We both agreed that the majority of the students (who did not participate in the cooking) only went through the motions to turn in a lab sheet at the end of class. If Karl thought that this was the primary assessment, we decided, over half the students could not have been accurately assessed. When I asked him about assessment, Karl simply replied that, other than the simple list he collected from them, the students really weren’t assessed. Falling back to his main purpose, that of an “optional review day”, he felt that assessment was not an issue.

Lessons Learned

Overall, Shelly was more observant than I had expected – especially regarding the finer details of management and assessment. Her inexperience with teaching is a hindrance to her thinking about goals, purposes and structures, but she definitely began to see how these things could be observed, inferred and critiqued. At one point, she made a comment about how I seemed to have “eyes an an eagle in the back of [my] head”, which I took to be a complement, but I think there was a deeper appreciation there for how I was able to see deeper into things than her and how I was able to look at things from different angles. At the very least, having had this opportunity afforded me the luxury of
detailing what she caught and missed during the lesson, and realizing those areas where she needs to be more introspective – oddly enough, the areas where her observations were the most shallow.

The one major misconception that bothered me the most is her view of the relationship between learning and fun. I think, given enough time and opportunity to try out ideas during the internship, Shelly will come to a conclusion about students enjoying what they learn that is closer to what Karl thinks. I also made a point of letting her know that the things we looked for and talked about were the same types of things that I will look for in her lessons. With that, I think she might come to view observations in a more positive and constructive light.

Karl’s answers to my questions were not as insightful, though I am not surprised. His duties and interests, like those of most teachers, do not allow him the time or space to be as reflective as possible. In one of his responses, he congratulated me on asking such deep and thoughtful questions and then gave his reply – the reply was roughly half the length of the congratulation. I found it interesting that both Shelly and I had such similar ideas for what we perceived the purpose and goals to be, while Karl’s were much more simplistic. He did not seem very interested in any formalization of a lesson plan, in the traditional sense, because this lesson was not one that he saw as having any major instructional value.

He was very interested, however, in how Shelly saw the lesson, and whether there were any specific points that I felt were “good models” for her. It is obvious that this man is intensely interested in helping her grow as a teacher, and wants to do the best job he can imagine in the time he is given. I would like to help him, in as hands-off a way as possible, to provide Shelly with the same kind of thoughtful responses and good models that he recognizes in others.

It is a tough job being a mentor, and I don’t envy him one bit. The rewards of a job well done, however, will likely stay with him (and, hopefully, the educational community) for generations.