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| Description:            | Structured Observation is a kind of qualitative, ethnographic research that aims to measure certain actions or behaviours. The observer records these systematically and the data can then be analysed later to understand trends or draw conclusions/make recommendations for improvements. The observer might take part as a participant but is usually observing from the sidelines.  |
| Application:            | When thinking about outcomes Observation links to process evaluation and assessing factors such as engagement and enjoyment in any type of activity. Potentially it also links to phases of the NERUPI Framework that are focused on helping participants to demonstrate skills and understanding.   |
| Type of evidence:       | Quantitative and qualitative. OfS Type 2 (pre/post)  |
| Strengths:              | Observational studies are relatively straightforward as they involve recording, classifying, counting and analysing something which is already taking place.   |
|                         | The researchers are in a good position to understand the viewpoint and experiences of the people they are studying because they are a part of the group. In participant observation, the researcher inserts themselves as a member of a group and therefore gets to observe behavior that otherwise would not be accessible, and because the observation is taking place 'in situ' there is high external validity.  |
| Weaknesses:             | <p>In observational studies the researcher usually has no control over what happens and merely observes the process and immediate outcomes. Observation can work well if participants talk out loud about their experiences while the observer interacts with them (i.e. an accompanied experience) but otherwise it relies on inferences from other types of verbal and non-verbal clues.</p> <p>Observational research is non-experimental (nothing is manipulated or controlled) and it does not establish causal conclusions. It is mainly used to describe something rather than to establish the reasons (although it could be followed up by different types of research).</p> <p>If people know they are being observed, their behaviour may be affected (the Hawthorn effect). Plus, if the researcher associates themselves with the group, they may become less objective resulting in further experimenter bias.</p> |
| Mixed Methods:          | Observation combines well with a range of other methods as part of holistic assessment of an activity.   |
| Expertise:              | Medium   |
| Requirements:           | This method requires objectivity, and a structured process agreed in advance, to guide the observation and recording of what happened – in order to make inferences.   |
| Ethical considerations: | Ethical issues for consideration in observational research centres on questions related to anonymity, the vulnerability of participants/level of intrusiveness, the feasibility of getting informed consent and the practicalities of allowing individuals to choose not to participate or have their data withdrawn once they know about the study. Depending on the context you might also need to think about the safety of the researcher during the fieldwork.  |
|                         | Guidance on doing research with children on ethics, safety and avoiding harm is available at:<br><a href="https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/briefings/research-with-children-ethics-safety-avoiding-harm">https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/briefings/research-with-children-ethics-safety-avoiding-harm</a>   |
| Work planning:          | <p>Steps in conducting participant observation studies are:</p> <p>Deciding on the observer's role and their relationship with the participants (they could take part in the activity or observe at a distance). Either way, there needs to be protocols about behaviour to minimize changing the dynamics involved. The participants need to be informed of, and consent to, the study and have the opportunity to withdraw consent.</p> <p>Usually observation research involves more than just observing what happens. So, you need to decide if there are specific things that you want to find out in advance. It is important to be clear about the purpose, scope and focus of the study. This could include identifying the theory that drives the research.</p>   |

You also need to decide how the observer will record the data. This could be just notes but having a structure, for example a list of categories of behavior to be noted, can be helpful, especially if the research question is already defined. An example is given in Annex A (although the categories should be flexible and modifiable during the observation). The purpose of taking notes is to ensure that the data collection is systematic, open to interpretation and capable of being verified by others if required. Systematic recording helps to show the patterns of behaviour and outliers.

Usually there is more than one observer, if feasible, and the observers should have training, so they observe the same things. You can pilot the data collection format by getting two people to observe the same group and complete an observation. If there is a lot of difference, then further clarification of the tool is probably required.

Having a debrief session is useful if feasible, and you might need to have a procedure in place (agreed in advance) in case something is observed that gives cause for concern.

#### Analysis:

Analysing and reporting data usually involves synthesising and interpreting the data. The researcher reviews what was witnessed and recorded, and it can be helpful to include the observations and words of the participants themselves (with permission). Usually the goal is for a report that helps to develop understanding individual and group behaviour. Information should include any theories that guided the research and any biases or personal theories that came into play. Ideally when writing their report, the observer will let the reader know the point of view of the observer.

#### Reporting:

Observation itself can provide significant learning opportunities for the Praxis Team – particularly when it is part of a collaborative approach to continuous improvement. Observation feedback is useful for all interested parties, although the method of reporting would be different. For formal reports and presentations, an explanation about why the method was chosen along with a summary of key findings is likely to be most appropriate.

#### Useful Link(s):

The SAGE Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Methods: Structured Observation.  
<https://methods.sagepub.com/reference/the-sage-encyclopedia-of-social-science-research-methods/n983.xml>

## Structured Observation: Practice example

The partners in the Wessex Inspiration Network (WIN) have used observation as a way of assuring the quality of experiences for those engaging in WP programmes, as well as offering feedback and career development for those delivering programmes. The design was conceived as a “strengths-based process” which could be used to identify and promote staff strengths, and through this the student experience. The three stages in the process were:

Firstly, there was a pre-observation stage in which the people doing the observation were consulted to develop a shared focus. Discussions were held with each observee to establish what they felt it would be beneficial to obtain feedback on. Gaining consensus on what would be looked at, and why, was considered important in order that the observation process became interactive and personally meaningful. Most people wanted to find out whether the sessions they had developed were effective and use the observer as a sounding board for reflective discussion. Those consulted were asked to choose 1-3 student outcomes from the NERUPI framework for consideration in the observation.

The Observation itself included the observer making a narrative description, with reference to what the observee was doing, how effective the resources employed were in supporting this and how various learners in the room responded (with a note on the timings of when things occurred in the margin). Notes on how learners responded focused on peer-to-peer, peer-to-tutor and peer-to-observee actions. CAST's (2018) Universal Design for Learning Guidelines (see <http://udlguidelines.cast.org>) were used as a basis for observing whether the session would be supportive of all learners from an accessibility perspective.

A reflective discussion was held between the observer and the observee immediately after the observation session. This allowed the observer to see what had been captured and led to reflections being shared about good classroom practices. The observee was asked to comment on how effectively they felt they had met the student outcomes for the session, what had worked well and whether there was anything they would change. The discussion approach helped to identify areas of good practice and allowed observees to identify potentially more effective approaches, if appropriate.

This research has allowed good practices to be established, which has been shared informally among the delivery team as part of a shared community of practice, and formally through training days. Examples of good practice in relation to the CAST framework were also disseminated in a research report.

### References:

Sally Tazewell (2020) Observation processes for professionals working in WP outreach: A strengths-based approach. University Centre Weston and WIN March 2020

## **Annex A: Indicative Peer Reviewer Observation Format**

This forms part of the research to xxx (e.g. understand how the activity is engaging young people and delivering a high quality experience). Please use your own judgement and experience in observation of the way others around or with you responded. If your views are based on the behaviour or comments of others, please record these to give examples.

Please respond to the questions below and include a score if you can. You can use a paper version to make notes during the observation session. You may not be able to comment on each aspect completely. If you feel unable to comment, please note this and it is helpful to give a reason.

Activity/event: .....

Date: .....

| Examples of Indicative Question   | Score 0-10 (where 0 is not at all and 10 is very much/excellently) | Comments |
|---|--|----------|
| Is the content relevant to those taking part and at the right time?   |  |          |
| Does it have relevance and meaning for people taking part or attending?   |  |          |
| Are those taking part or attending sufficiently challenged with this work?  |  |          |
| How well does the process work? Is the right amount of time given to the delivery process?  |  |          |
| What is the level of engagement of those participating or attending? Does it generate interest or curiosity amongst those taking part or attending? |  |          |
| Is the delivery of a high standard?   |  |          |
| Are any materials or resources of a high standard?  |  |          |
| Is there an aspiration for further engagement? Are any next steps clear for people taking part?   |  |          |
| Is any development needed in any area?  |  |          |
| Should it be repeated/continued in future? Can it be replicated in other contexts?  |  |          |
| How enjoyable was the activity/event for you?   |  |          |
| And other observations or comments:   |  |          |

Reviewer Name: .....