

Book Review

*Observing in Schools:*

*A Guide for Students in Teacher Education*

By Eugene F. Provenzo, Jr. & William E. Blanton

Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2005

**Reviewed by Carol Zitzer-Comfort**

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Most, if not all, teacher education programs require students to do some level of classroom observation. I was eager to read Provenzo and Blanton's *Observing in Schools* after teaching a course that required junior-level students to spend 40 hours in local classrooms. While I was using *Kidwatching: Documentary Children's Literacy Development* (Gretchen Owocki & Yetta M. Goodman: Heinemann 2002), a text that gave students a framework through which to discuss their observations of children, I soon found that my students also needed such framework for discussing observations of teachers. My students were quick to point out what they "liked" or didn't like about teachers; however, they lacked a formal structure for engaging in the kind of serious observation and reflection that is discussed in *Observing in Schools*.

Provenzo and Blanton, both from the University of Miami's School of Education, begin the text by providing background information on "Anthropology and Traditions of Observing." They provide a useful discussion on the purposes of observing, the language of observing, and the "non-neutrality of the observer" (p. 17). I was impressed with the level of discussion and found their analogy of observers as "border crossers" helpful to the overall discussion of classroom observation. Their theoretical approach is "based on well-established traditions of anthropology and sociology, as well as more recent models from the field of cultural studies"

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(p. ix). They draw on the works of Henry Giroux as they note that “as ‘border crossers,’ teachers need to think more like anthropologists than scientists, more like explorers than technicians. There are many skills necessary to be a border crosser. You must learn to carefully observe. You must learn to listen. You must reflect on what you see” (p. ix). The authors provide enough examples and worksheets for students to learn how to utilize “border crossing” strategies.

Provenzo and Blanton move quickly from theoretical discussions of observing to very practical, hands-on strategies. I think students would benefit significantly from their section on writing field notes. The authors provide detailed descriptions of what field notes should include and ways to go about writing such notes and then reflecting on them. In keeping with their anthropological and sociological framework, the authors point out that “among the most powerful research tools of anthropologists and sociologists is *participant observation*. As a participant observer, you take notes and observe what you are doing. To some extent, participant observation can be thought of as a self-monitoring process in which you carefully observe and collect data on your personal activities” (p. 29). Their discussion of field work, in Part I of the text, is followed by Observation Instruments in Part II.

The bulk of the text is devoted to Observation Instruments and includes page after page of “observation schedules,” including “Summary of Observation,” “Looking for Root Metaphors in the Classroom,” “Observing an Individual Student,” and “Observing Discussion of Text Read.” While these schedules are comprehensive and undoubtedly would be helpful, an instructor using this book would, of course, want to tailor the schedules according to the needs of the class. It would be intimidating, and probably unrealistic, to assume that students would use all of the observation schedules that are included.

My only concern with the book is that it looks rather sophomoric. It is a large textbook (since it has 8 ½x11-inch pull-out sheets) and has the look of being less sophisticated than it really is. The chapters in Part I of the book are well done but are short and appear, at first glance, to be undeveloped. These are, however, minor criticisms, and I anticipate ordering this text the next time I teach a course requiring an observation component. Because of its overview of observation as a classroom tool and its hands-on materials, I would recommend the book to any instructor who is looking for a way to bring a theoretical framework and guiding templates to the fieldwork experience of a course.