Chapter 1

Informal Analysis

Most professional observation and analysis of teaching are done informally. Observers often simply "sit in on a class" and watch what goes on. There is no advance planning. They carry no rating scales or coding forms. They see what they choose to see from their own professional viewpoint and remember (or record) the things that strike them as significant. Student teachers, for example, spend much of their time informally observing cooperating teachers; novice teachers learn the ropes by informally watching their experienced colleagues; department chairs and supervisors often "drop in" to see how things are going. Indeed, the careers of most experienced professionals are replete with hundreds or even thousands of hours of informal observation and analysis.

Unquestionably, this form of observation and analysis has a profound impact on professional thought and practice. Our sense of what's going on in our field is shaped by it. Our conception of effective and ineffective practices, as well as notions about needed improvements, stem primarily from such observations.

When informal analysis is viewed as including self-analysis—those occasions when teachers casually recollect what happened in their classes—its significance looms even larger. Most of their decisions about how to improve their teaching hinge on informal perceptions of what happened last period, or yesterday, or last semester. Indeed, teachers' very growth as professionals over the years is contingent upon the persistence and quality of their attempts at informal self-analysis.

Given the likelihood that most of your past and future analyses of teaching have been and will be of the informal variety, it seems appropriate to start this consideration of various analytic approaches by first concentrating on informal analysis. This is an opportunity to reexamine your normal mode of looking at teaching, identify some of its distinctive characteristics, and provide a jumping-off point for subsequent explorations of other approaches. Please stop here and complete Clinical Tasks 1 and 2 before reading further.

Characteristics of Informal Analysis

Although informal analyses differ substantially from one another in form, content, and quality, most of these analyses share certain common characteristics, some of which this chapter discusses briefly. It should be interesting to examine the extent to which your own informal analyses (Tasks 1 and 2) contain these common characteristics.

CLINICAL TASK 1

Conducting Informal Professional Analysis

Informally, observe a physical education class (not your own), preferably for about 30 to 45 minutes. Take notes on what happens and be sure to include the most important aspects of the class. If possible, have a colleague observe and take notes on the same class so that you can compare and discuss the observations afterward.

Reflection

Summarize your observations in a paragraph or two. Include your reaction to what you learned about informally analyzing teaching in this clinical task.

CLINICAL TASK 2

Using Informal Self-Analysis

Use informal professional analysis to record and analyze a sample of your own teaching. Immediately after you have taught a class, use informal notes to record what happened. Be sure to include the most important aspects of the class. If possible, have a colleague (or cooperating teacher or supervisor) observe and take notes on the same class so that you can compare and discuss observations afterward.

Reflection

Summarize your observations in a paragraph or two. Describe your reaction to what you learned about informally analyzing teaching in this clinical task. Add a brief description of what you learned about your own teaching.

A Small Piece of the Action

Your analyses succeeded in capturing only a small part of what happened. In the face of numerous concurrent events, you saw and heard only one at a time. Further, you were able to recollect and/or record only a small part of what you saw and heard. Think for a moment about the fragmentary nature of your notes and recollections in comparison to the rich and complete network of interconnecting events that actually transpired in reality. In fact, if the lesson you observed was on videotape and you observed it again on two or three occasions, you would be surprised to discover the number of new things you see with each review.

Of course, the fragmentary nature of observation and analysis is not unique to the informal approach. All forms of observation and analysis of teaching are, by necessity, fragmentary. None of them begins to capture the full reality of a gymnasium in which 30 or more human beings continually interact. This fact should become more and more evident as you proceed through the analytic tasks contained in the remainder of this book.

A Personal Perspective

Much of your record of events was determined by what actually happened (i.e., the occurrence of the event dictated your recording of it and your reaction to it). In another sense, however, you did *choose* to record some happenings and not others, to make some evaluative judgments and not others, and to describe those happenings and judgments in a particular way. In all likelihood, many of your choices were based on your own concept of teaching (i.e., those aspects of teaching that you have come to believe are most crucial). For example, you may have noted the affective tone of the teacher's interaction with students (e.g., "supportive," "positive," "harsh," or "critical") because of the importance you attribute to this dimension of classroom climate, or you may have noted the prevailing skill practice conditions (e.g., "inadequate number of practice trials for students," "teacher gave frequent corrective feedback") because you believe the facilitation of skill acquisition is one of the teacher's principal roles; and so on.

Thus, the focal points for informal analysis are, in large part, subjectively determined. It should not surprise you, then, that the points emphasized in one informal analysis differ from those emphasized in another, even when the analyses pertain to the same lesson.

Focus on the Teacher

When done by professionals, informal analyses have a tendency to focus on the actions of the teacher or the interactions between the teacher and selected students. Perhaps this is because as professionalswe can empathize more readily with the teacher; or perhaps it's a function of the dominant role that so many teachers play in most classes. In any event, the teacher typically gets a disproportionate share of the observer's attention, given the fact that he or she is only one of 30 or more important human beings in the educational setting. Of course, we also watch individual students when, for one reason or another, they attract attention. But more often than not, we come away with a general impression of what "most of the students" were doing at various points in time.

An Inclination to Evaluate

Most informal observers have a propensity for making immediate value judgments about what they see. (Notice the judgments in your own record—despite the fact that you were instructed only to "observe" and "keep notes on what happened.") When left to their own devices, professional observers have a natural tendency to describe things in terms of how well they are working or whether the teacher is doing the right thing. Indeed, in many instances, the informal record is a chronicle of the things the teacher didn't do or events that should have but didn't occur. It's as though the professional observer, immediately upon encountering a class, constructs a set of expectations about what *should happen*, and thereafter fixates on whether or not these expectations are fulfilled.

Self-Analysis: Intentions, Thoughts, and Reality

When you complete an informal self-analysis (Task 2), you will find that many of the preceding characteristics apply equally well to that self-analysis. In addition, your self-analysis is likely to focus on the match between your intentions and what happened in reality. If your plan for the class centers on providing a good skill demonstration or handling a certain kind of behavioral problem that frequently arises in the class, the chances are that your recollections and record account for whether these plans were fulfilled. Or, at any moment, if you were trying to do something that didn't pan out (such as get the students' attention or spend more time with Jane, who needs your help), you are likely to remember these momentary discrepancies between intentions and actions. Also, your self-analytic record is likely to contain some references to your thoughts and feelings during the class. Perhaps you "couldn't think of that student's name" or you "got angry at Johnny for not paying attention."

If you were fortunate enough to have a colleague observe your class (Task 2) and she or he was not privy to your plans, in all likelihood, the record does not focus on the important elements of your plan. Furthermore, your colleague's perceptions and recollections are likely to account for none of your thoughts and feelings.

The Enduring Observation Record

A few weeks or months after the observation and analysis, the only real enduring record of what happened in the class is the written words and the associated memories they conjure up—most other recollections fade. The informal record is likely to have personal meaning for the observer because it focuses on events that are important to the observer and uses certain favorite terms to describe those events. On the other hand, the words used to describe events have no agreed-upon or standardized definitions. So, for instance, an entry indicating that the teacher "disciplined" a student may mean one thing to the observer and something quite different to someone else who tries to interpret the record. Indeed, the observer's conception of what "discipline" means may change over time, and thus the interpretation of the record may change in retrospect.

Furthermore, no rules bound the method of informal observation. And so, among other things, the scope and context of the record are not discernible. For example, a record might indicate that "the teacher didn't interact with individual students." Because you don't know the method of observation that was used, you have no way of knowing whether the entry was based on one incident or many, whether the teacher didn't interact with individuals on 80%, 90%, or 100% of the observed occasions, or indeed whether the observer kept any sort of continuous count of the type of teacher–student interaction. Hence, you know very little about the raw data on which the entry is based.

High-Inference vs. Low-Inference Instruments

Teacher observations are sometimes documented through rating scales, which are *high-inference measures*. This phrase describes instruments that require that the rater make a judgment about instructional skill, supposedly based on the teacher's behavior, but with no record of what the teacher did or did not do that led the rater to rate the teacher's skill. these instruments also do not indicate how the teacher's behavior would need to change to get a higher rating the next time. Ratings are really not measures. Remember that teacher rating scales "reflect the beliefs of the rater about the nature of competent teacher performance rather than the actual competence of the performance" (Medley, Coker, & Soar, 1984, p. 49).

A more accurate and complete observational record is a type of *low-inference measure*. A structured observation schedule contains items that define a specific behavior (or category of behaviors) that the recorder looks for and records when seen. The record that is made is a record of behaviors; the judgments or high inferences that lead to a score are made beforehand and incorporated into a scoring key that is applied to the record after it is complete.

Informal Analysis: An Assessment

By this time, you may conclude that your authors don't think too highly of informal analysis. Please reconsider. Informal analysis has been, is, and will continue to be an important approach to analyzing teaching. This is as it should be.

As a responsible, independent professional, you must be free to encounter teaching from your own perspective, focus on things that you feel are important, evaluate events using your own criteria for good teaching, and use your own judgment to isolate critical problems and suggest solutions. It's through such experiences that the analysis of teaching takes on personal meaning: You come to learn better what you value, where you stand, and what you know you should do. On the contrary, to be continuously constrained to use someone else's rating scale, or check list, or coding system is an exercise in self-denial.

Another virtue of informal analysis is that it leaves you free to react spontaneously to significant but unforeseen events. When those decisive events occur (e.g., the teacher seizes on a teachable moment, reacts humanely to a distraught student, or loses control of the class), you can dwell on them, examine and reexamine them, and forget about the surrounding trivia. In contrast, a carefully planned analysis sometimes precludes the consideration of such events by coercing observers into rating or coding prescribed events at fixed intervals—with the result that the record often misses the forest for the trees.

Yet, as you engage in informal analysis, recognize it for what it is—don't operate under the impression that you are doing something you're not. Recognize that it is subjective and not objective; that is, you see what you choose to see and judge things as you choose to judge them, which is not the same as others see and judge them. Realize that your observations lack reliability in the sense that what you see on one occasion is not the same as what you would see if given an opportunity to reobserve the same class. Understand that your record is fragmentary, not comprehensive, and is subject to various interpretations. And finally, recognize that you may have jumped into making value judgments without fully appreciating the teacher's intentions and the past history of the class and without being keenly aware of the data on which your judgments are based.

You must gauge the value of any approach to the analysis of teaching in relation to the purpose for which it is used and compare its appropriateness to other approaches available for accomplishing the same purpose. Informal analysis is no exception. It effectively accomplishes some purposes but is comparatively inappropriate for accomplishing others, for example:

- In many circumstances, informal self-analysis may be the only practicable approach to collecting information for use in making day-to-day decisions about alterations in teaching strategies.
- Informal analysis of selected problem areas in an inexperienced colleague's teaching performance may be the only way to get at the solution to those problems and at the same time maintain a friendship.
- Informal analysis and evaluation of a teacher's performance, when that analysis will be used to make decisions about the teacher's tenure or retention on the staff, are likely to be grossly arbitrary and unfair.
- When student teacher supervisors rely primarily on informal analysis to evaluate performance—especially when the student teacher does not know the supervisor's personal criteria in advance—the analysis may produce frustration and an inaccurate representation of the student teacher's effectiveness.
- Informal analysis may not be the best way to provide evidence of student learning to a school board.

Making Changes

The ultimate reason for engaging in most analyses of teaching is to improve teaching. To complete an analysis and then simply file it away is an unconscionable waste of time. Clinical Task 3 encourages you to use the informal analysis of your teaching (Task 2) as a basis for deciding on and instituting improvements. Task 3 could also be a follow-up to Task 1, provided the teacher you observed is willing to work with you to change some aspect of teaching.

The first step in the procedures outlined in Task 3 is to examine the informal analytic record and identify needed changes. In most instances, the record contains evaluative judgments that imply logical changes. If not, you can use the record to jog your memory with respect to needed changes. In either case, recognize that although an identified problem or deficiency may suggest the direction for the needed change, you can usually address a problem in several alternative ways. Survey the alternative corrective actions before choosing the one you pursue.

If you can find no needed changes, fine. Perhaps it was a very good class. How about analyzing another one or two or three of your classes until you find something that needs

CLINICAL TASK 3

Using Informal Analysis as a Basis for Changing Teaching

Using your own and/or an observer's informal analysis of your teaching (Task 2), complete the following:

1. Review the record yourself or together with the observer, and write out the following:
    a. Which changes would yield improvement (Compose a list.)
    b. Which of the changes in the list are immediately feasible
    c. Which one or two of the feasible changes are most important
2. Write out the changes you identified in item c in question 1; include a brief description of any actions you will have to take as a teacher to implement these changes.
3. Reteach the lesson or a similar lesson, concentrating on the intended changes.
4. If possible, have a colleague watch you reteach the lesson, concentrating on whether you successfully institute the change. Otherwise, take notes yourself immediately after the class indicating whether you made the changes.
5. Discuss the results with your observer or another colleague.

Reflection

Write about your reaction to the changes that you made and what you learned about the use of informal analysis to change your teaching in this clinical task. Discuss the impact of the change(s) on the lesson and the students.

improvement? If you do so and still can't locate any needed improvements, hurry back to the bookstore and try to get a refund on this book.

Step 1b of the procedures for Clinical Task 3 suggests that you identify changes that are immediately feasible. These are the kinds of changes that could be readily made in a subsequent reteach lesson, such as changes in methodology, class organization, arrangement of equipment, and so forth. It is entirely possible that your analytic record also points to the need for other kinds of changes that require longer term solutions such as insufficient equipment, an overcrowded class, and so on. Needless to say, these may be important problems and you should attend to them. For now, however, don't let these long-term problems deter you from making immediately feasible changes. The procedures also suggest that you isolate one or two changes. Experience indicates it is difficult for teachers to concentrate on making more than two kinds of changes at once—especially when those changes represent departures from normal routines or behavioral patterns. Furthermore, by concentrating on *one or two* changes, you can analyze the execution of each change more thoroughly. Of course, if you have identified several needed changes and find it difficult to isolate one or two that are more important than others, there is nothing to stop you from doing several reteach lessons, concentrating on a different change in each one.

A Move Toward Structure

At this point, be aware of the fact that the analysis of the reteach lesson is more structured than your initial analysis (Tasks 1 and 2). You have planned the observation. Both the observation and analysis have a focus: the intended changes. What you have done is to move one step away from the completely informal approach, which was devoid of preplanning and preestablished focus. You are no longer free to look for whatever you choose; you've made a prior commitment to search out preselected events. Realize that, as a result of this structure, you will probably see those events more clearly and overlook other events not within the focus.

Informal Analysis by Students

Up to this point, this chapter concentrates on informal professional analysis (i.e., analysis done by trained teachers), which tends to focus on features of classes that have natural interest and value for professionals. There is another potentially valuable source of feedback about teaching—the students. They can provide a somewhat different and yet remarkably insightful appraisal of classroom events. After all, they are the people for whom the whole educational process is designed, and it is the nature of their experiences that determines the success or failure of that process. It stands to reason that they are in a unique position to provide useful information about those experiences.

Consider the following excerpts from evaluations that were solicited from students in physical education classes. They constitute a very small and not particularly representative sample of comments collected from several different schools and grade levels, third through twelfth.

- I didn't like relay races because I've done a lot of it and it's kind of boring if you're never a winner.
- The best thing about today's class was wrestling Adler. I always wanted to kill him. I wish you would stop all the bull [meaning instruction] so we could play more.
- I liked playing the game much better than I liked the drills, but I know you wouldn't be able to do it without drills. So I suppose having the drills should be liked just as much as playing the game. So I liked them both.
- Stop picking on me.
- Our teacher is nice because she is fair.
- I didn't like playing crab soccer because the floor was too dirty.
- I think we are always learning things that we already know. It's a waste of time.
- I don't like when people cheat and move into somebody else's position when the person who was there can do the job fine.
- The class was fun today, I guess because everybody was friends and nobody got into fights; you know, just fooling around.
- I don't like gymnastics sometimes because I can hurt myself sometimes. It's embarrassing because I can't do it and everyone else is really good.
- I hate basketball. The only good thing about basketball is hitting some chick with the basketball.

Despite the logic of seeking student input on teaching, it seems to be done very rarely. Observations of and contacts with hundreds of experienced physical education teachers shows that virtually none has sought student opinions or judgments in any systematic or regular way. The only student input that does seem to surface with any degree of regularity is the occasional "complaint" lodged by the student who is courageous enough to register it.

So, at this point, consider providing an opportunity for the students in a class you are teaching to analyze that class informally. The method of collecting the information and the form in which it appears are not crucial, provided the students have a legitimate opportunity to choose the aspects of the class they feel are most important and describe or judge them in ways they feel are most appropriate. Try to give the students as much

CLINICAL TASK 4

Conducting Informal Analysis by Students

1. Be sure to include in your written summary some brief information about the class and number of students.
2. Select one of the classes you are teaching, and ask the students to write an evaluation (perhaps of the week's classes). Plan the "prompt" carefully to be sure you are asking the right question(s).
3. Study their written evaluations carefully. Identify some of the more common characteristics of these evaluations by sorting them into categories and tallying the number of comments in each category. Note the ways in which they tend to differ from prior professional analyses.
4. Select one or two changes that students have suggested or implied and that seem most reasonable to you. Try to implement those changes during subsequent class meetings. Then, write a summary of what you did or intended to do.

Reflection

Summarize in a paragraph or two what you learned about analyzing teaching from this informal analysis by students. What did you learn about your teaching from the students' informal analysis?

freedom as you had in conducting your informal analysis. Clinical Task 4 outlines the steps to be taken in conducting this informal analysis by students. Feel free to interpret or restructure the task in ways that best suit your own circumstances.

You may find the following guides helpful in planning for Task 4—they stem from past experiences with informal analyses by students.

1. The student's analysis should be written, not oral. This allows for a more lasting record. More important, it is highly efficient. You can collect input from 30 or more students at once and you need only 10 minutes or so of class time to do it. In the elementary school, classroom teachers might even be asked to collect the information for you. Your authors' experience suggests that fourth- or fifth-grade children with average writing skills are old enough to provide useful written information.
2. You can write the prompt requesting students' input on the chalkboard or on the top of the students' response sheet.

3. Use a very general prompt so as not to restrict the students' choice of topic (see the following examples). Of course, if you want to channel their input to focus on teaching methods, or activities covered, or class organization, and so on, then put appropriate cue words in the prompt.
4. Encourage "evaluations," or "judgments," or "opinions" from students instead of mere "descriptions" or "accounts." Unlike professionals, most students do not know how to respond if requested to "keep a record" or "tell what happened."
5. Try not to give examples of what they might say or comment on, especially to younger children; they are likely to copy it. For instance, when the teacher augments her general prompt by saying, "For example, you might want to comment on the game we played today," 80% or 90% of the children are likely to do just that.
6. When asked to make judgments about physical education classes, students have a natural tendency to focus on subject matter activities—"I think that calisthenics stink," or "The soccer game was fun," and so on. If you want them to think beyond their reaction to specific activities, then encourage them to do so in the prompt.
7. If you want to obtain reasonably specific reactions that are tied to identifiable in-class events, then suggest that the students base their reactions on what happened in the last class or series of classes.
8. Use your own judgment to determine whether the students should sign their names to the written responses. As a general rule, anonymity allows for more free and honest responses.

Following are some examples of prompts that you might use for gathering student responses:

- Evaluate this physical education class (or the last three classes). Comment on anything you think is very important, such as teaching methods, activities, organization, and personal experiences you've had.
- In your opinion, what are some of the most important changes that could be made to improve this physical education class?
- What do you like best about physical education? Try to give specific examples of what you like.

Using the Results of Informal Analysis by Students

It's not easy to figure out what to do with 20 or 30 informal student analyses. After all, they do come from a variety of sources, vary considerably in quality, touch on an enormous variety of topics and issues, contradict one another, and, taken together, may not add up to anything or lead anywhere.

Perhaps the first thing to do is to read them over with the understanding that *each one represents the legitimate point of view of a very important person in that class—an individual student*. If this is all you ever do with them, it may have been worth the effort. Try not to discredit them for their inadequacies. Sure, they are subjective, biased, self-serving, fragmentary, and so on; but then so were the informal professional analyses you completed earlier.

Once you accept these evaluations for what they are, it might be helpful to ask yourself: In what ways do these students' perceptions of teaching and physical education tend to differ from professional perceptions? What kinds of things do they attend to that I haven't thought of before? Are there aspects of teaching that I regard as trivial but that they seem to regard as paramount? If you've never done this sort of thing before, serious pursuit of the answers to these questions should begin to lead you toward a broader awareness of teaching—an awareness that encompasses the perspective of the learner.

Finally, see whether you can use these student evaluations to prescribe and carry out selected changes (Task 4, step 4). In doing so, it is probably wise to start out by selecting those student-suggested changes with which you most strongly agree. That is, search for the points of agreement between yourself and students, and move on them. You can resolve the points of disagreement later on. If you proceed all the way to the point of implementing student-suggested changes, congratulate yourself. You can now be numbered among an elite group of exceptionally responsive teachers.

What Have You Done So Far?

If you have been able to complete the clinical tasks in this chapter, you've made a substantial start toward developing competence in the analysis of teaching. You used a variety of approaches to analyze teaching: informal analysis of others, informal self-analysis, informal analysis by students, and a more structured analysis of intended changes. You are aware of the characteristics of these approaches and appreciate their strengths and limitations. As a consequence, you can judge their appropriateness as tools for accomplishing various educational purposes. At this time, if someone asks you to analyze his or her class informally, you could do so with ease and with a realistic sense of what you are and are not doing.

Your awareness of your perspective on teaching has been enhanced. You know more clearly than before those elements of teaching that you tend to focus on and value. You are more attuned to how this perspective compares with the views of others, colleagues as well as students. In fact, exposure to these other points of view may have broadened your own perspective.

You have used the information gleaned from informal analyses to plan and implement change. Furthermore, you have monitored the change to verify its viability and success. Don't overlook the fact that you have records of the entire undertaking, incomplete though they may be, records that can improve your recollections and enhance future applications. Finally, and by no means insignificantly, you may have improved one or more aspects of your teaching.

For the Enthusiast: Field Notes

If you see value in informal analysis but at the same time recognize a need to improve the process, try taking field notes, an observational and recording procedure used by researchers doing work in natural settings, such as schools (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). In essence, taking field notes is an observer's attempt to compile a more complete record of important events so that he or she has a reasonably valid basis for analyzing what happened. Some guides for taking field notes follow; they represent a modified version of the more exacting and time-consuming procedures normally employed by researchers:

1. Before observing a class, chat with the teacher about what she or he hopes to accomplish, the way the class will be organized and run, and anything else about the class the teacher thinks would be important for you to know in advance.
2. Before class begins, take notes about the setting (e.g., number of students, grade level, facilities, and any other important environmental conditions).
3. Be sure to date your field notes and, periodically, record the time down the left-hand margin.
4. During class, write notes that describe what happens chronologically. Try to account for what the teacher does, what the students do, and major aspects of class organization. Make sure you describe an event before you evaluate it or indicate what should have been done. *Keep evaluations separate from descriptions.* Don't get carried away and try to write down every little thing that happens. Three or four pages of notes are plenty for an average 40-minute class.
5. After class, read over the notes and fill in any major gaps in the narrative. Then, add important evaluative judgments that seem warranted, but be sure to keep them separate from the narrative.

You should end up with a reasonably thorough narrative description and evaluation of what happened that differs in some important ways from your initial informal analysis (Task 1). This record of events will be more complete and, hence, likely to be more meaningful and useful as a future reference. The bases on which you make your judgments should be clearer. And you will have made your observations and judgments with a better understanding of the teacher's intentions. Of course, despite these changes, recognize that the record is still quite subjective and fragmentary.

Having gone to all the trouble of taking field notes, you may want to share them with the teacher you observed—perhaps they contain some useful suggestions for improvement. Or you may have had enough of informal analysis for now. In either event, your experience in taking field notes is likely to influence the way you approach informal analysis in the future.

Critical Incidents

Most analyses of teaching deal with the observation and assessment of a continuous stream of events that occur during a class. Such analyses frequently allow the most critical events to become submerged in accounts of more trivial happenings. Often, it is not the stream of events but the one crucial event that makes the difference in a class. The impact of a single teacher–student interchange, for example, may be more decisive than everything else that happens to that student during a class or even during a semester.

You can use the *critical incident technique* to gather information about such critical events in teaching. Developed by John Flanagan (1954), educational research has used the technique extensively to identify critical components of the teaching–learning process. Essentially, it involves collecting relatively detailed descriptions of specific incidents, and then analyzing the crucial/common elements in the descriptions. Critical incidents are events that may be ordinary or commonplace, but they stand out for some reason. They may be problems, great successes, huge failures, or simply complex, confusing events.

Although colleagues, supervisors, or teachers themselves can record critical incidents, also consider collecting critical incidents from your students. Experience shows that students are capable of providing remarkably informative accounts of crucial events in class. Use an approach similar to the one used in "Conducting Informal Analyses by Students" (Task 4). Collect written descriptions of incidents from all students in your class, only this time use a prompt that encourages them to provide a description of an important incident that involved them—preferably an incident that decisively affected their learning or attitude. The idea is to elicit a specific account of what happened and why it is significant. (Students as young as fifth- and sixth-graders can provide adequate accounts.) An example of the kind of prompt that you might use is the following:

> Think of the experiences you have had in this class during the past week. Describe the one experience (or incident) that helped you most in learning (*name activity/skill*). *Be specific*; describe what was actually said or done by whom; and explain why it was helpful.

You can change the wording to have students focus on what the teacher said or did, on affective experiences, on harmful experiences, or some other type of incident.

Once you have collected the incidents, read them over and underline (or highlight in some other way) the most informative features of the descriptions. Search for commonalities among incidents that identify crucial aspects of your teaching or that suggest needed changes.

One final suggestion for the critical incident technique is to use it with student teachers if you are a cooperating teacher. Not only do critical incidents make powerful conversation starters, but they often provide teachers with new insights about their teaching.

More Readings for the Enthusiast

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