Observations in the Classroom

RANDY KOCH AND ALLEN WISEMAN

Springboarding off the summer institute practice of teacher demonstrations, Randy Koch and Allen Wiseman enter into a classroom observation project that puts Wiseman in Koch's college English classroom twice a week for a semester. Although the project began as an extension of ideas—and a rapport—generated by the South Texas Writing Project Summer Institute the two shared, the success of their efforts far exceeded their expectations, much to the benefit of both the observed and the observer.

Randy Koch (RK): I feel bad saying this, but I rarely read the student evaluations I receive each year. Those forms provide responses to items that have been designed by people who supposedly know how to quantify my ability to teach students to write. What bothers me is that the students are far too subjective; one or two of them, disgruntled with the grades they received or the difficulty of my assignments, can—out of ignorance or revenge (they can now be as critical of my teaching as I've been of their writing)—give me bad scores that make me feel guilty, inadequate, incompetent, or victimized.

The inverse is also true: a colleague who has been getting pressure from the administration to do something about her drop rate and to give more A's and B's and fewer C's and D's and who is also soon eligible for tenure said that she plans to give administrators exactly what they want—for one year—by making her classes easy to pass. This will probably also result in high scores on her student evaluations. This is one of those games played in higher education that is intended to give the appearance of helping teachers with their "professional development" but which mostly results in keeping a handful of computer operators busy and adds to the ever-deepening stack of paper on our desks. So when Allen Wiseman, an English professor at Texas A&M International University (TAMIU) in Laredo and a fellow participant in the South Texas Writing Project Summer Institute 2000, asked if he could sit in on my Tuesday/Thursday freshman composition class across town at Laredo Community College, I jumped at the chance to have an informed, objective observer tell me what he thinks about what I do in the classroom.

Allen Wiseman (AW): I came to teaching late in life. Five years ago, after getting my master's degree at age forty-five, I began teaching English composition at Oklahoma City Community College and the following semester also at Oklahoma State University, Oklahoma City, as an adjunct. Twenty-five years had passed since I took English composition, but the textbook was easy to follow, so I basically taught from it. Quickly, however, I intuited that there was a better way to teach. Many of my professors in graduate school taught directly from books, but the best seldom used a textbook. Finally, after four years of teaching, even though I had always received good student and peer evaluations, I began to feel I could gain a lot by observing another instructor's class.

The idea came together after moving to Laredo, Texas, where, as a participant in the South Texas Writing Project Summer Institute, I met Randy Koch, whose style and personality are similar to my own. Randy, who was co-director of the 2000 summer institute, is affable, humorous, and friendly. In his demonstration lesson, he made learning fun. So, prior to the 2001 spring semester, I approached him with the idea of sitting in on his freshman English composition class and observing his teaching techniques.

RK: Our routine for the fifteen-week spring semester was simple. Each Tuesday and Thursday, Allen attended my English 1301
class from 9:30 a.m. until 10:50 a.m., taking a seat in the back row. We had agreed before classes started that he should be as unobtrusive as possible because his interacting with students could change the class dynamics and that was something we really didn’t want since we were both interested in his seeing what typically happens in one of my freshman composition classes. Consequently, he sat quietly, taking notes about what material was covered, how it was presented, how students responded, and his reactions and opinions of what took place. When the period ended, we often went back to my office and talked about what had happened, discussed how to evaluate students’ papers, and exchanged ideas for assignments. Sometimes, we continued our conversation at Logan’s, a local steakhouse we eat at so often that we were on a first-name basis with Sylvia, the hostess, and George, the waiter. On days when the class did not meet, Allen typed up the notes he had taken and modified some of my handouts for use in his own 1301 class at TAMU.

By the semester’s end, although we had begun this project to give Allen a clearer idea of how I teach English 1301, we both found other benefits in doing it—benefits that went beyond those gained by participating in a summer institute. The obvious difference between the two situations is that in the summer institute, lessons are presented to other teachers playing the role of students—an idealized simulation of what we all face in the classroom. This situation gives us the advantage of getting feedback from a large group of teachers, but it lacks the realism of a classroom setting and its challenges. What Allen and I did offered the opposite: I was receiving feedback from only one instructor, not a group, but we had a genuine classroom situation and real students. As a result, we were able to examine and address a variety of issues related to teaching writing, among them designing and presenting daily lessons and evaluating student work. In the following examples of what Allen found most valuable during the fifteen-week semester, you will first find a description of what I do and my rationale and then Allen’s reaction to it. Our purpose here is to demonstrate how much both the observer and the observed can gain when a teacher observes another writing teacher in his or her classroom.

**Daily Lesson: Using Action Verbs**

**RK:** I’ve used the action verb chart in my freshman composition classes for several years to help students understand the importance of verb choice. Most students tend to use helping or linking verbs, which can make writing mundane and flat. To encourage creativity in the selection of verbs, I hand out the chart pictured in Figure 1.

The idea is to get the students to think of specific verbs that convey the emotion or condition listed at the top without naming that emotion or condition. Before breaking the class into smaller groups, we do one row together, with me asking questions such as: “How might you go to the door if you’re happy?” Students don’t always respond, so sometimes I have to demonstrate by skipping, dancing, or floating across the room. This usually provokes laughter, but they get the idea, and suddenly they realize that sad people plod or trudge, drunks stagger or crawl, and sexy people strut or sway. I emphasize the importance of the students’ physical reaction—their laughter—to the verbs since readers are also more likely to continue reading their essays if they’re reacting and enjoying themselves.

After this, I give each group one row to fill in and ask them to list at least two verbs in each box. Each group brainstorms ideas—sometimes gathering them from a dictionary or thesaurus—and then reports its verbs to the class. The class helps groups that get stuck, and I encourage everyone to fill in the chart’s boxes during the discussion. I always enjoy doing this activity early in the semester because (1) it gives students one specific technique that will help them improve their writing, (2) it gets them to interact and get better acquainted with one another, and (3) it lets them laugh and discover that writing and learning about writing can be fun.

**AW:** I’ve never been able to fully comprehend other professors’ chagrin when they

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>scared</th>
<th>angry</th>
<th>happy</th>
<th>drunk</th>
<th>sexy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>went to the door</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>swayed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>closed or pushed the door shut</td>
<td></td>
<td>slammed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>said, &quot;I have to leave.&quot;</td>
<td>hissed</td>
<td>giggled</td>
<td></td>
<td>purred</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sat in the chair</td>
<td>sank</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>fell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>got out of bed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>stormed</td>
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*Figure 1*
Observations in the Classroom

speak of students nodding off in class—mainly because I've never experienced it. I've taught 7 A.M. classes and classes that have lasted until 10:00 P.M. No one's ever nodded off.

The same is true for this class. Randy, who's very animated, goes to great effort to keep the students involved. The physical antics of skipping and dancing across the room get laughs, but, more importantly, such antics teach on two levels. First, they keep the interest level in the classroom high: it's hard for students to nod off when others around them are laughing and involved. Secondly, they show students how important the reader's reaction is for the writer. Most non-English majors at this level still think of writing as something to get through. This demonstrates that when the writer paints word pictures using action verbs, it really is more fun for both the writer and the reader.

Randy's self-deprecating actions also make the students feel more comfortable, which helps when it's their turn to add to the discussion. I've adapted this idea for use as an icebreaker each semester. During the first class, I have students read aloud from overhead transparencies of "student bloopers" gleaned from Richard Lederer's books, Anguished English and More Anguished English. Starting with "Last year many lives were caused by accidents," I'll make a comment like, "How does that happen? Did the condom break?" Any students who veered away during the introduction to the syllabus spring right back at the sound of laughter. When a student reads, "It's impolite to break your bread and roll in your soup," I'll pantomime breaking off a piece of bread and spin in place while saying, "Yeah, when you 'break your bread and roll in your soup' in a restaurant, the manager's gonna ask you to leave every time." This five-minute introduction sets the mood for the semester, helping students feel freer about adding to the classroom discussion. And when the students are at ease, they are more likely to learn.

Primarily, I teach a junior level composition course at the university. It amazes me how most of these students have gotten that far writing dry, lifeless prose. During the semester I spent with Randy, I introduced the action verb chart to my juniors. Using a paragraph from a student paper, I created an overhead transparency. I copied the original paragraph on the left side of the sheet, and on the right side, I rewrote the paragraph substituting active verbs for dead verbs. When I presented the chart to the class, I got smiles and nods and saw lightbulbs going on over many heads. Although some of those students' papers improved momentarily and then fell into remission, many continued to improve right through the final.

A new attitude about group class work was another benefit of my work with Randy's class. My own experience with it had never been favorable; within any group, there were always students who sat like lumps in a bowl of mashed potatoes while one or two members actually worked. But the dynamics of this class and Randy's style of asking questions that pointed students in the right direction kept nearly everyone involved. Once, when questioned by a member of a group, Randy turned and asked the least vocal member of that group for his take on the issue. When the student gave his opinion, the person who originally asked the question gasped, "Why didn't you say that before?" To which the "quiet student" replied, "Never got a chance." Randy laughed and left, saying, "Looks like you've got a handle on that." I watched that group after Randy left. After some perfunctory finger pointing, they worked together, waiting for the less vocal to chime in or directly asking for his opinion.

Shortly after this, I decided to try a group session. To involve students in a critical thinking exercise, I typed the following four situations on pieces of paper before class:

1. Our group is alone in the desert when an alien spacecraft lands and an alien gets out. The being tells us that Earth is going to be invaded tomorrow, and it is certain all human life will be destroyed. It then offers us sanctuary with him, but we all have to go or no one can, and we have to leave now. What would we do? Why?

2. If suddenly all the people on Earth vanished—except for those in our group—what role would we each play in the new world and why?

3. If irrefutable evidence that intelligent life existed on another planet (i.e., a UFO landed on the front lawn of the White House), what three things do you think would change the most on Earth and how would they change?

4. If our group could go back in time and could collectively take any three physical items we wanted, what would they be and to what time period would we go? Explain.

In class, I divided the students into four groups, mixing academically strong students with weaker ones. Then, handing one piece of paper to a weak member of each group, I instructed each to read the situation aloud to the group and come up with answers in about ten minutes. As they worked, I walked the room, as Randy had, fielding or asking questions whenever I could. When the groups announced their tasks and answers, other groups were allowed to ask questions to aid in everyone's critical thinking. The exercise was a great
success, and when the semester was over, many students told me that this was one of the best days in class. That’s one exercise that’s staying in my class preparations.

**Daily Lesson:**
**Showing Rather than Telling**

RK: One of the techniques I require students to employ in their narrative essays is showing rather than telling. *Telling* is what students will almost always do because it’s how they relate events in conversation and because they usually haven’t been taught any other way to do it. *Showing*, however, is how scenes are presented in most published short stories, novels, and personal narratives. My goal in teaching this is simple: I want students to be able to recognize specific differences between showing and telling so they will be able to *show* in at least some parts of their own narrative essays.

Here’s the process I use. First, I hand out two different versions of the same event, one shown and one told, but I don’t tell the students which is which. Next, I read each version aloud and ask them which one they think is shown and why. Students sometimes disagree, so to help them think about it, I suggest we look at the differences and similarities in the two versions. I draw a chart on the board. With my students’ help, I fill in the blank boxes in the chart with some explanations (see Figure 2); however, we usually discuss the examples orally.

Once students understand the differences between showing and telling in these two versions, I write a telling sentence on the board, something that contains one or two generalizations such as: “The old man was crazy.” Then, I explain that with the students’ help, we’ll create a scene that *shows* that the man is old and crazy without using either of those two words, i.e., without telling. The rules are simple: I do the writing, the students tell me what to write, and they cannot use the words “old” or “crazy” or any synonyms for them. To get them started, I ask questions: “What’s his name?” “Where might he be?” “What kind of things might a ‘crazy’ person do?”

Teaching students to show rather than tell by using these two activities accomplishes several things: (1) it improves the quality of their narratives, (2) it encourages them to have fun with their writing, (3) it gives students a lot to say, (4) it teaches the conventions needed when writing from sources (especially quotation marks and commas), and (5) it builds student confidence.

AW: This was a great refresher. When I first started teaching, right out of graduate school, I told my first freshman composition class that the textbook for nearly every writing class I took was either titled *Show! Don’t Tell* or contained a chapter with that title. It’s an important concept, and I had forgotten how essential and fun it could be.

One of the problems with the student’s writing at the junior level is that they have

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Showing</th>
<th>Telling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uses dialogue. Ex.: Jose cried, “Go home, Juan!”</td>
<td>Uses indirect discourse. Ex.: Jose told Juan to go home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How characters speak</td>
<td>Verbs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses primarily specific, interesting action verbs. Ex.: leap, cry,</td>
<td>Uses primarily weak, inactive helping and linking verbs. Ex.: forms of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>snore, sprawl, explode, fall, plunge, cackle, sneeze, cringe, hammer,</td>
<td>“to be,” would, should, have, had, can, will, does, seems, appears,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>punch, embrace, collapse, etc.</td>
<td>may, looks, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses precise, specific names for people, places, and things and</td>
<td>Descriptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>things and gives details that appeal to the reader’s senses. Ex.:</td>
<td>More likely to use vague, general labels for people, places, and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah, his five-year-old sister; Nixon High School; the corner of</td>
<td>things and less likely to appeal to the reader’s senses. Ex.: the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saunders and Arkansas; a Corvette; a poodle;wire rims with bifocals,</td>
<td>girl, a school, an intersection, a car, a dog, glasses, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>etc.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presents events moment by moment. It takes approximately the same</td>
<td>Passage of time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>amount of time to read about the event as it did for the actual</td>
<td>Doesn’t focus on a single event but generalizes about several similar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>event to occur.</td>
<td>events by using words such as always, often, usually, frequently, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allows the reader to interpret and make judgments about characters</td>
<td>Reader’s responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and events. Ex.: Ken’s voice sounded funny because he was going</td>
<td>Tells the reader what to think about characters and events. Ex.: Ken’s</td>
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<td>through puberty.</td>
<td>voice sounded funny because he was going through puberty.</td>
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Figure 2
Observations in the Classroom

been writing research papers for other classes that require them to simply regurgitate data gleaned from library sources—in their own words, of course. They have not been expected to enliven their prose. In fact, I imagine they fear that anything non-academic sounding might cost them points. As well, the idea still exists in college that education is boring, something one has to go through to get a job that pays more than minimum wage. These realizations made me reflect on my students—nearly all older and Mexican—and on teaching on the border. I tried to picture my students having fun writing. I could see the young ones enjoying writing, but I couldn’t see that in the older faces, those with years of hard times and hard physical outdoor work—in Laredo where the temperature exceeds the century mark a hundred days out of the year. These older folks, although they had realized the importance of an education and were now attending college, still seemed to have a grim and serious view of anything scholarly.

This reflection changed my Writing for Professions class, where the emphasis is on writing the short argumentative essay. That semester, what nearly all my students shared was a lack of specific detail. So shortly after Randy’s “Show! Don’t Tell” class, I began a class by writing “The old man was crazy” on the board.

“What old man?” finally issued up from the sea of blinking eyes.

“Exactly!” I congratulated the student. Furrowed brows joined blinking eyes. “The reader doesn’t know. You have to show him to the reader. So tell me about him.” Unsure, the students began the silence game again. I held my ground.

“The guy was nuts?” someone asked.

“What makes you think he’s nuts?” Silence. “It’s your guy,” a voice complained.

“Now he’s your guy,” I said and repeated the question.

Out of desperation, a student stabbed the silence, “Well, he runs around the neighborhood in his underwear.” Snickers followed.

“Good! That’s something a person who’s nuts might do. What else?”

We spent thirty minutes inventing Juan Garcia, an eighty-year-old WWII vet who earned three Purple Hearts and the Bronze Star. He was hit in the head by flying shrapnel and received a medical discharge. Now, he forgets where he is when he wakes up, and some mornings he gets out of bed, forgets to put on clothes, and searches the neighborhood for his war buddies.

The rest of the semester, I encouraged more specific details in all their essays. I began saying “Show me” instead of “Give me” an example, and many of the students responded outstandingly. When the pendulum swung too far in the other direction, I had to define what in an essay needs to be specific and what doesn’t. Eventually, however, the students ended up right where they needed to be: giving details that supported their ideas.

And I finally saw in the older students’ faces that they were having fun writing.

Daily Lesson:
Using Sample Student Sentences

RK: When my students turn in the first essay, a descriptive paper, I watch for specific things that inexperienced writers do that can be easily corrected—repeating words or phrases, drawing excessive attention to themselves in their work, making basic errors in sentence structure, and being excessively wordy. Although we work on correcting these problems the first three weeks of the semester, I know it will take more time than this for the students to put their new habits into practice as consistently as they should. So, to help them, I find sentences that contain these kinds of problems, and later, when I have finished grading the entire set of essays, I type up a list of these sentences—one from each paper. While I always try to include some particularly good ones, I focus mostly on those that contain easily identified and corrected problems. Here are some samples from the first essay written by students in the class Allen attended:

1. The pillows looked so cushionable and flat. The pillows were also in the shape of clouds. (repetition and an opportunity for sentence combining)

2. My ceiling is a cathedral ceiling it goes up like a triangle it does not stay flat like a tortilla like at the trailer. (repetition and run-on but an excellent simile)

3. I could hear how the wind was moving the grass and smell the hummed ground. (excessive attention drawn to the writer and spelling)

4. He is wearing some red shorts that go above the knees with a red and white strip shirt. (wordy, especially verb form, and, again, spelling)

5. I recently visited my grandparent’s house this past weekend. (redundancy)
6. One of them comes barging in through the door and Blanca with him because she's afraid. Afraid of the firecrackers being popped and the annoying noise made by the passing train. (repetition and fragment but some nice details and sensory appeals and an opportunity for sentence combining)

On the day that I return their essays, I also pass out copies of the list of sentences, and we go through them one at a time. For each one, I ask questions: “What's awkward about this sentence?” “What's repeated in this sentence?” “Does it need to be repeated?” “What could you do to make this sentence better?” I don’t tell them what’s wrong, but through questions, get them to identify the problem or weakness and offer possible solutions or improvements.

AW: This was great! In the past, I had made transparencies of a few poorly written papers to show the class how I looked at their papers and how they should look at them, too. We'd spend the entire class time trying to find and fix the imperfections.

After the “Using Sample Student Sentences” class, I tried a new approach. For class, I copied the thesis statement and several topic sentences from each student’s paper. I passed this list to the class, and we went over each example, with me asking, “Does this answer the prompt?” “Is this thesis statement the author’s opinion?” Unfortunately, most of the answers were “no.” To start a discussion, I asked, “What does the author need to do to make this right?” I was amazed at all the immediate good responses—even from students I knew had written poor thesis statements. By the next essay, nearly all the thesis statements answered the prompt and were written as the author’s opinion.

When I first began teaching, I was stunned by how far the students’ abilities were from my expectations. But I had just spent five years peer-reading other graduate students’ papers and sitting in on writers groups where we exchanged manuscripts every couple of weeks. The papers I had been reading and those I now received from freshmen were years apart. My expectations plummeted.

I had not realized how far those expectations had fallen until Randy and I were talking at one of our lunches after class. I commented on how he liked to ask a lot of questions. He said he likes students to discover an answer instead of spoon-feeding it to them. “Students will remember things they discover far more than things that are handed to them,” he said. “Think back to when you were a kid. Did you ever go exploring in a wooded area? Remember the excitement when you discovered an arrowhead or a long-abandoned campsite? Remember how wonderful it was finding a small pebble that resembled Abe Lincoln’s face? Small discoveries stay with you.” He was right. Sadly, I had forgotten. But equally sad, I discovered I had not given the students credit for having the ability to figure out things. And I remembered how the energy in the class fell when I lectured and spoon-fed. Now I keep the energy level in the class high by asking questions and allowing the students to be explorers and discover treasure in the classroom.

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Evaluating Student Work: Grading Papers

RK: The first time I see a student’s essay, I read it straight through before writing comments or suggestions about content. I may, however, mark prominent mechanical errors as I notice them, but I don’t get so caught up in marking spelling or punctuation errors that I lose track of what the writer is saying. Here is the process I use when responding to a student’s essay after I've completed the initial read:

- Before commenting on what the piece says, I ask these questions:
  - Am I confused by the content of the piece?
  - Am I interested in the content of the piece?
  - Am I satisfied by the content of the piece when I finish it?
  - Why or why not?

- I use blue or black ink instead of red, which is too reminiscent of blood, too traumatic.

- I begin marking the paper as I reread it.

- Rather than telling the student what to write, I ask questions that help her understand where important details or information are missing and let the student decide what to add. For example, if the mother is an important character in a personal narrative but the writer provides little if any description of her, I ask, “What color are her eyes and hair? What was she wearing the day this happened?” Or, if the writer has not given details of where or when an event occurs, I might ask, “What time of the day is it?” “Where in the kitchen were you when this happened—sitting at the table, standing near the door, leaning over the stove? Be specific.

- If I make a broad generalization about a part of the piece (weak introduction, dull description, vague conclusion, unconvincing dialogue), I explain specifically why I made that generalization. Unless the student knows why its weak, dull, vague, or unconvincing, he probably will not know what to do to improve it.
I point out why the piece did or did not confuse, interest, or satisfy me by focusing on matters of content:

- organization
- effectiveness of the lead
- development and use of details that appeal to the readers’ senses
- attention to use of action verbs rather than weak helping or linking verbs
- showing rather than telling where appropriate and necessary
- sufficient support of the main point of the piece
- logical transitions
- narrow focus and inclusion of material relevant to the point of the piece
- effectiveness of the ending.

After addressing the overall effectiveness of the content of the piece, I look at smaller stylistic choices:

- variety in sentence length
- variety in sentence structure
- diction that is appropriate for the subject and the intended audience
- use of figurative language, especially similes and metaphors
- syntax.

Finally, I mark mechanical errors on part of the paper, maybe one or two paragraphs or a full page if the piece is more than two pages long. I focus on specific types of problems:

- clutter—using brackets helps students see what they wrote and how words, phrases, even sentences and paragraphs can sometimes be cut without harming the overall effect of the piece
- basic sentence structure errors, such as fragments, comma splices, run-ons, dangling modifiers—these I usually mark with an X in the margin next to the line where the error occurs and an abbreviation identifying the type: frag. for fragment, C.S. for comma splice, R.O. for run-ons
- punctuation errors
- spelling errors
- capitalization errors
- subject-verb agreement errors
- verb tense consistency errors—this type of error is particularly common in personal narratives and in short fiction
- preposition errors—this type of error is particularly common in the writing of students who have grown up along the border and learned English as a second language.

I always find something positive to say about a paper, even if it’s small. I point out a nice simile, an effective use of a colon, or an attempt to use dialogue. Be sure the writer knows she did some things well.

I address the writer by name to make it clear that I know the writer and that I’m responding specifically to his work rather than writing generic comments that might appear on many students’ papers (even though they often do).

If the paper has a number of major problems, I focus the writer’s attention on no more than three, in a note at the end of the paper. I make it clear that I don’t expect the student to fix everything in the paper but select the things that are most prominent and which, after being changed, will most improve the writing.

Beware of writing more on students’ papers than they will read. I write considerably more on papers written by creative writing students than I do on those written by my freshman composition students, and I write more on my 1301 students’ papers than I do on my developmental English students’ papers.

Always consider how much they’re willing and able to do with a piece before spending a lot of time marking it.

AW: Going over Randy’s grading technique, I realized that teachers like me who are not highly confident about their teaching try to view their students’ work in a more objective way. It’s not hard to grade an objective test, and the answer to any question a student might have about our grading can be readily found in a textbook or a writer’s handbook. It takes confidence to grade subjectively and to answer questions about our grading without feeling defensive or insecure. Teachers need to know how to improve a piece of writing. We can’t hide our warts when we’re teaching.

I’ve begun a list that looks much like Randy’s above. When I read an essay, I check off things as I identify and evaluate them: Is it organized? Is the lead effective? Does it have details? Does it show more than tell? How are the transitions? Sentence variety, diction, syntax? At first, it took longer to grade a paper, but now I can zip through the list in no time. I feel more confident about my grading and more able to answer students’ inquiries about how I critique and how they can improve their essays. By this time next year, my list will be a mental one, like Randy’s.

Conclusions

RK: Now that the semester is over and Allen and I have had several opportunities to discuss what we’ve done, we realize that the consequences for us and for our students have been diverse and wide-ranging. This research project affected me and my teaching in several ways. First and foremost, it made me much more aware of successful, effective, and important things I do in the classroom—things that I had begun to take for granted—and encouraged me to
continue doing them. I will, as a result of this experience, keep asking students questions to get them involved and keep writing the assignments along with students so that they can see how my drafts develop from rough to polished.

It also made me aware of habits that I had developed, some of which I need to change, such as too often holding students past the time when class is supposed to be dismissed. These are habits that are not usually noticed by department chairs or deans during a single annual classroom visit or by a summer-institute colleague evaluating a lesson. Through daily or regular observations by another teacher, my habits, which have been established over the ten years during which I’ve been teaching community college English, were identified and drawn to my attention so that I can now make the changes that are needed.

Two other important things that resulted from this experience were that I realized that I needed to modify or change some of my writing assignments. For example, for the past three years I have been asking students to summarize an article from our text for the third paper. However, as a result of my conversations with Allen, I decided to revert to an assignment I had used years earlier, one which is more in keeping with the goals of the assignments that precede and follow it: a paper in which students evaluate an argument from the text. I also made a much more conscious effort to make each class something approaching a model lesson. I know that as my students and I get deeper into a semester, our enthusiasm and energy gradually wane, but because I wanted Allen to see me and my students at our best, I made a more concerted effort to maintain the energy and excitement of the first two weeks throughout the semester. The “pressure” of having a supportive colleague in the classroom pushed me to keep my standards for daily classroom activities and assignments high and has, again, become a habit.

Allen and I were also interested in the students’ opinions of having another instructor observe the class, so at the end of the semester we designed a short questionnaire. Students were asked, among other things, “Early in the semester, how distracted were you by Mr. Wiseman’s presence?” On a scale from 1 (very distracted) to 5 (not distracted), all students said they were “not distracted.” Likewise, we asked them, “At the end of the semester, how distracted were you by Mr. Wiseman’s presence?” Again, all students answered that they were “not distracted.” Allen had, in the eyes of the students, become a regular part of the class, unobtrusive and not distracting, something that rarely happens when a department chair or dean makes a spot visit to my class. Because Allen and I also wanted to know if students perceived that their performance in the class was affected by Allen even though we both made a conscious effort not to draw attention to him during the semester, we also asked students, “How was your performance in this class affected by Mr. Wiseman’s presence?” On a scale of 1 (very positively affected) to 3 (not affected) to 5 (very negatively affected), 86 percent said they were “not affected,” and 14 percent said they were “very positively affected.” Obviously, many variables contribute to the students’ responses, but the key here for both of us is that with this small sample, the experiment was a success, not only in our eyes but in the eyes of the students.

While Allen and I both admit that most teachers cannot commit as much time to attending another teacher’s classes as Allen did, we both emphatically agree that observing another instructor’s classes on a regular basis is much more helpful and accurate than the sporadic administrative visits that are a normal part of teacher evaluations and has benefits that supplement and go beyond those provided by participation in a summer institute. Teachers planning to observe another teacher’s class ideally should make a commitment to a minimum of two consecutive weeks of visits and preferably more. This prevents the typical situation of seeing only a “showcase” lesson and students on their best behavior because of a stranger in the room. Continuous attendance by an observer normalizes the situation for everyone and allows the observer to be of more help to the observed teacher since the observer can begin to see how continuity has or has not been established for students through lessons and assignments. In addition, recording what occurs in the classroom by having the observer take written notes is also far less intrusive and disruptive than either audio or video recording, both of which often make students and teacher alike self-conscious and unnatural.

This collaboration has prompted Allen and me to explore other opportunities to work together in each of our classrooms and to seek out other instructors who are also interested in giving and receiving an informed and beneficial critique of classroom performance. We expect this to be the beginning of equally useful collaborations with other Laredo teachers.

AW: For those who decide to attend another instructor’s class, I have one piece of advice, although it’s not based on any scientific means: choose the class of someone who has a similar style to yours. I’ve sat in on other classes for peer reviews and other various reasons, and I have often walked
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away thinking that even though they were good instructors, it would be more like work to benefit from the experience. With Randy, it was like watching a future me, a wiser me. The benefits came simply and immediately.

I've actually learned more ways to better my teaching than I can put to use the first semester after observing Randy's class. There's just too much. But I've copied all my notes into the computer, and occasionally, as I have done already, I will refer to them. As I become more proficient, I intend to look back at these notes and assimilate new things to add to my teaching skills.

To leave you with the true taste of this experience, I've decided to share a page from my notes. It was early in the semester, and Randy was talking about cutting clutter in the students' writing. It begins, of course, with Randy asking a question:

"What is clutter?"

No responses.

"Have you ever heard the word before?"

"Yeah."

"When?"

"When my mom walks into my bedroom."

Laughter.

"What is she talking about?"

"All the junk all over the place." Snickering and low talking.

"All the stuff taking up good floor space?"

"Yeah."

"Clutter is language that is just taking up space. It doesn't add anything."

 Writes on the board: Never start a sentence with "there."

"What word usually follows 'there'?"

"Is." "Are." "Were."

"Right. And what kind of words are these?"

"Helping verbs."

"Good. And what are we trying to use less of?"

"Helping verbs."

Writes on the board: "There are bleachers to the left of me."

"If you take out 'There are,' what's left?"

Uncertain mumbling.

"Is it a sentence?"

"No."

"No. The verb is gone. What action verb can we put here?"

No takers.

"What do bleachers do?"

Mumbling, laughter.

"Okay. What does this table do?" (He lifts small table off the floor.)

Still no suggestions.

"What are these things that go from the tabletop to the floor?"

"Legs."

And what do legs do?

"Stand."

"Right! Table—and bleachers, too—can stand!"

Replaces sentence with: Bleachers stand to my left.

"We've cut three words. Does it say the same thing?"

"No. It's better."

Questions. He kept asking questions, pointing them in the direction of the answer. The students were involved, entertained, and, most importantly, they were explorers discovering new things about writing. Granted, their discoveries weren't arrowheads or Lincoln-head pebbles, but these students will carry this treasure with them for the rest of their lives. And so will I.

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Allen Wiseman has held a number of jobs in his life: U.S. Air Force airman, photographer, mapmaker for the Union Pacific Railroad, and manuscript editor. But it wasn't until he completed his master's degree at the University of Central Oklahoma that he found what he really wanted to do in life—teach students to write. He is currently teaching at Texas A&M International University and is a teacher-consultant with the South Texas Writing Project.