



Ethics for Field Observations

To the pre-service teacher:

There are times when the most effective way for you gain necessary insight is to go into the 'field' and observe the interactions between teachers and students first-hand. We, the authors, believe that in person observation is essential for pre-service music educators to build a context for the concepts addressed in this text. There are many ways to structure field observations. Often, course instructors will set up times with local music educators for the members of an entire university course to observe a class at a local school en masse. At other times, instructors will make arrangements so that class members can contact local music educators and schedule a visitation time. Without either of these structures in place, individual music education majors may take it upon themselves to contact local music educators and get permission to visit their classrooms. In each of these structures there is a code of ethics that should be followed so that professional courtesy is extended to those in the field and that certain educational laws are not broken. The following is a list of items you should consider as you go into the field for observations.

Prior to Observations

Many schools require that anyone visiting campus on a regular basis and has access to children must have a background check completed prior to their arrival on campus. Check with your course instructor about the requirements in your area. If a background check is required, most schools will provide you with the necessary forms. There is often a charge for the background check. Be prepared for this expense.

General observation guidelines for observations arranged by the instructor

- Dress professionally for the visit. You need to set yourself apart from the students you are observing. Look like a professional music educator.
- If you are transporting yourself to the site, make sure you have clear directions and know where you should park once on campus.
- Follow your instructor's directions about signing in at the site. If you are not sure, check in the main office about the need to sign in. Many schools now have automated systems to check the backgrounds of visitors. You will likely need a photo ID to use in these machines. School safety is very important, so follow all directions including wearing identification while on site.
- Once in the classroom, quickly find the place that the teacher has designated for you to observe the class. We suggest that you take handwritten notes

during your observation because laptops or tablets can be very distracting to the students in the classroom.

- Maintain a professional decorum while in the classroom. With several observers in the classroom it is not possible to go unnoticed, but you should work to be as minimally distractive as possible.
- Avoid reactions, positive or negative, to things you see and hear in the classroom. These can often be misinterpreted by students and by the cooperating teacher, causing issues that can damage your professionalism.
- At the conclusion of the class period there may be time for you to ask questions of the cooperating teacher concerning the observations you made. Your course instructor may set this up as part of the experience. This is the time for you to ask carefully worded questions to get clarifications about what you observed. Avoid saying things like “that’s not the way my teacher(s) did this.” The goal of this interaction time is for you to gain clarity about your observation, not challenge the teacher about his or her instructional decisions. If a question and answer time has not been set up prior to your visit, there may not be time for you to ask questions. Do not monopolize the teacher’s time after class because he or she may need to be getting ready for the next class to enter the room or have duties elsewhere on campus. You may need to check and see if you can contact the teacher at another time concerning questions you have about your observation.
- At the conclusion of the observation, make sure you thank the cooperating teacher for his or her time and willingness to open the classroom to you.
- As you leave the building, make sure you follow procedures to sign out.

Additional information for setting up a visitation with instructor help

- If your course instructor has gotten approval from a local music teacher for you to set up your own individual observation times, be sure to contact the teacher in the manner he or she wishes to be contacted. Some prefer email while other prefer phone. We suggest that texting is not appropriate for this type of communication.
- Make sure all your communication is professional. Use proper salutations and check your emails carefully for spelling. These documents represent you as a professional.
- Check with your cooperating teacher to see if you need to complete a background check prior to your visit. If this is a requirement, complete the paperwork early, as these can take time to process.
- Once you have agreed on a time for your visit, make sure you leave ample time in your schedule for travel to the site. Traffic can be unpredictable.
- Should an emergency arise and you are not able to attend your observation time as scheduled, contact your cooperating teacher immediately. If necessary, you may need to call the school’s main office and have a note sent to the teacher. Simply failing to show up is very unprofessional. Music teachers often know many other music teachers in the community. Word can get around quickly that you are not dependable. This can even affect your career options when it comes time for interviews.

Setting up an observation on your own

- Begin by getting information about music teachers in the local schools. You may have older colleagues in your program that have had the opportunity to observe teachers. Their impressions would be helpful to you. Some professors on your campus may have information that is helpful to you. Even the proprietors of local music stores may have some information that would help you know who to contact.
- Once you have a list, contact the teacher(s) you would like to observe. Email may be your best option at this time so that the teacher(s) can respond when he or she has the time.
- In your communication with the potential cooperating teacher you may want to note that you are a music education major looking for an opportunity to observe effective music teaching. You should also note that you got their name by recommendation of others.
- Once you have gotten a reply from the teacher(s) follow the suggestions above for setting up a time and following through with your visit.

A few legal considerations

Although most cooperating teachers will be very helpful in making sure that you are not put in a compromising legal position, the following are few guidelines you may want to observe:

- Do not allow yourself to be in a secluded area one-on-one with a student. This can be a problem when giving a lesson. If this situation arises, ask your cooperating teacher for suggestions about how to manage this correctly.
- Never have a student in your car. The liability is very high and can cost you a degree, a career, or more.
- Student records (i.e. grades) are protected by law. You should not have access to any of those records. Should you come across student records in the process of your visit, close them and return them to your cooperating teacher, if possible.
- You may hear some exchanges between other teachers concerning students. You are advised not to share any information you may hear with anyone else. Word can travel quickly and can affect your professional future.
- Make sure you wear all necessary identification while on campus. This is for your safety and the safety of the students in the school.
- Should a student share with you any evidence of abuse or harassment (physical or sexual), you are obligated under Title IX to report this to an authority.