

## **Observation and Field Notes**

Observational data refer to the raw materials an observer collects from observations, interviews, and materials, such as reports, that others have created. Data may be recorded in several ways: written notes, sketches, tape recordings, photographs, and videotapes. The purpose for observing a system being used is to obtain in a limited amount of time relevant data needed to change and/or improve the system.

### **What to look for when doing observation?**

1. Physical setting.
2. Activities.
3. Human, social environment. The way in which human beings interact within the environment. This includes patterns of interactions, frequency of interactions, direction of communication patterns, decision-making patterns.
4. Formal interactions.
5. Informal interactions and unplanned activities.
6. Nonverbal communication.
7. Observing what does not happen.

### **What are field notes?**

Field notes refer to transcribed notes or the written account derived from data collected during observations and interviews. There are many styles of field notes, but all field notes generally consist of two parts: descriptive in which the observer attempts to capture a word-picture of the setting, actions and conversations; and reflective in which the observer records thoughts, ideas, questions and concerns based on the observations and interviews.

Field notes should be written as soon as possible after the observation and/or interviews. The original data may be recorded in cryptic form, and unless they are fleshed out as soon as possible after the observation, important details may be forgotten and not appear in the field notes. Field notes are used to "broaden your range of vision" and produce data that will be of use in later stages of the system design.

### **Characteristics of field notes**

1. Accurate.
2. Detailed, but not cluttered with irrelevant trivia.
3. Extensive to permit reader to understand the situation described. Use descriptive words to describe rather than interpretive words. E.g. "comfortable", "beautiful" are examples of interpretive words. "The building was welcoming" is interpretive. Descriptive means supplying enough detail so the reader does not have to guess what the writer means or supply a great deal of additional information to interpret the description. "A room painted dark green with a whiteboard on one end" or dimensions of a room or purpose of a room are descriptive.

4. Data may provide an overview of a culture or setting. Include greatest detail on aspects of particular interest.
5. The observer should do more than simply record a setting. Observer's insights and thoughts about what has been observed are important. These comments should be included in a separate, reflective part of the field notes, not in the descriptive part of the filed notes.

### **Guidelines for content part of field notes**

1. Describe the setting. This may include pencil drawings of the space and furniture arrangement.
2. Describe the activities that took place in that setting. Reproduce the sequence of actions and behaviors.
3. Describe the people who took part in the activities and their roles in the activities.
4. Describe the meaning of what was observed from the perspective of the participants.
5. Record exact quotes or close approximations of comments that relate directly to the observation activity.
6. Describe any impact you might have had on the situation you observed.

### **Guidelines for reflective part of field notes**

1. Include sentences and paragraphs that are subjective. These include a more personal description of what you observed.
2. Emphasizes ideas, hunches, impressions, etc.
3. Includes unanswered questions that have arisen from reflecting on the observation data as well as ideas for future action.
4. Clarify points and correct mistakes and misunderstandings in other parts of field notes.
5. Include insights or speculation about what you are observing.

### **Format of field notes**

Include a first page on which you include information on the observation, such as: name of observer, location of observation, date, and time. A short title can be helpful in identifying the purpose of the observation. Number individual sets of field notes if there will be follow-up observations at this site.

Large margins on the left side of each page leave space for notations and coding.

Field notes are easier to read if they are written using many small paragraphs, which reflect changes in activities, who is talking, etc.

There is no one format for field notes. Three possible formats are:

1. Save content part of field notes and reflective part of field notes in separate files.

2. Use two columns. The column on the right contains the content portion of field notes, with reflective comments relating to particular parts of the content part, written in the left column.
3. Use wide left margin. Body of file contains content part, with the observer's comments written in parentheses and indented under related paragraphs.