

Observing Student Behaviors

Anecdotal notes are frequent written descriptions of observations while students are working. They provide a way to record aspects of students' learning that might not be identified by other techniques, such as physical behaviors and attitudes. Anecdotal notes should be taken on all students, although some students may warrant more entries than others.

Observe students while they are working in groups, at locations in the classroom specifically designated for assessment tasks, or while completing parts of a project. Objectively record what students say and do. The notes should serve as a reference to observed behaviors, attitudes, skills, concepts, processes, misconceptions, or insights students exhibit while working. The notes can also be used as a cross-check for student's logs or journals.

It is helpful to have specific ideas about what to look for in the observations: levels of understanding, strategies and abilities, or types of thinking. Observe and make notes on group work during a problem-solving activity or investigation. Circulate from group-to-group as the students work and listen to their conversations, make notes on what they understand, what they are having difficulty with, and how they are processing the information. Review the notes and look for patterns. The anecdotal notes may start to show that a student is consistently losing focus during group work. The notes may also show that the same question or misunderstanding keeps arising. Once again, use the recorded information to determine what may need clarifying or how to modify instruction to best meet the learning needs of the students.

Taking frequent observational notes can be a challenge for secondary teachers with large classes and limited time with their students. Careful planning can make it possible to collect anecdotal information even under these difficult circumstances. To make the best use of this strategy, teachers can

- Precisely identify and describe anticipated behaviors before taking notes so they can be recorded in as few words as possible.
- Develop a shorthand system that fits your needs and subject area.
- Use customized checklists of frequently observable behaviors whenever possible.
- Create a schedule for observing students, allowing more time for students who will need more feedback and support.
- Use technology to record, save, and organize your notes.

After a project has been completed, the sequence of dated anecdotes can serve as a record of students' development. Because anecdotal notes concentrate on describing student performance over a period of time, use them to assess long-term goals such as self-concept, collaborative group work, strategies development, work habits, knowledge attainment, and interests or attitudes.