

Observations

Overview

Observations are a means of studying and gathering information on an activity: what happens, what someone does or how they behave. This technique can be best used to observe who is involved in an activity, and how, and should be undertaken during an activity.

Why use it?

Observations can be more direct than approaches that rely on what people say or think (i.e. in questionnaires or interviews) as it is also a record of what they do. For example the 'observer' can watch and note how an exhibition space is being used at different times of the day and on different days. For instance, observations can be useful to get an understanding of:

- who is taking part (e.g. number of children, adults, teenagers)
- how people are involved (e.g. sitting, talking)
- how / when a particular space is being used / not used
- an assessment of certain quality criteria (e.g. atmosphere, levels of interaction)

Completing several observations during the course of the project (e.g. during meetings, events) can provide a means of capturing and monitoring the activities taking place.

Instructions for use

Observations can be casual or structured, overt or covert, but whatever approach is adopted there are some general rules for using observations for evaluation:

- Structured observation entails the direct observation of activities, behaviour or places and the recording of that in terms of categories that have been devised prior to the start of data collection. A key risk with applying a structured observation approach is the potential of imposing an inappropriate or irrelevant framework to record observations. The categories devised for the recording the activity observed need to be carefully thought through to ensure that the appropriate information is captured and recorded.
- A template can be generated outlining the activities to be recorded. This observation framework can be adapted to fit with the aims of your activity.
- There is a need to decide on the timeslots during which you would like the observations to take place.
- Encourage the observer to keep clear observational field notes.

Who to use it with

Observations can be used on a range of activities, and undertaken by anyone involved in your activity, such as project partners, stakeholders or staff.

When to use it

During the project activity – this method is particularly useful for activities which have a spatial element, including festivals or exhibitions, as you can observe how people use or behave in certain spaces.

Limitations

The fundamental concern with undertaking observations is the subjectivity of and the reliance on the 'observer'. However, it is essential to note that 'generalisability', i.e. whether the results of the observation be applied more generally and more widely than the study itself, is not the purpose of this method - instead observations are useful to generate an in-depth, intensive examination of a setting or situation. If you want to make an effective comparison, you should undertake a few observations throughout the life of the project, or have a number of 'observers'.

Considerations

If the observations are open rather than covert, the project leader should inform all those involved in the activity that it is being observed.

Timing

It is best to undertake observations during the project. However, the timing ultimately depends upon the type of activities being undertaken.

Link with other methodologies

This is a useful tool to complement questionnaires, focus groups and/or interviews.

Further Reading

There are lots of articles and books on undertaking observations. If you are interested in finding out more, below are some examples covering both a background and application of the method:

- Bryman, A. (2004) Social Research Methods, Oxford University Press: Oxford
Denzin, N. K. and Lincoln, Y. S. (1994) Handbook of Qualitative Research, Sage: Thousand Oaks, CA
Whyte, W. (1980) The social life of small urban spaces, The Conservation Foundation: Washington, D.C.

Example 01

The template below is the observation schedule developed for observing a monthly public engagement entertainment event called Bright Club. Bright Club is a public engagement project organised by the UCL Public Engagement Unit, the project tests a different, new method for HEI public engagement, focused around entertainment. The schedule provided a guide for notes taken by an evaluator at each event.

Criteria	Notes
Date / Bright Club Theme	
Number of people attending	

Structure	
Established appropriate mood/climate	
Variety in presentations	
Timing (running time, length of sets)	
Content (raising awareness of science issues, explained usefulness of knowledge)	
Method of delivery (visual, examples, illustrations)	
Style of delivery	

Example 02

The template below is the observation schedule developed for capturing the experience of a whole host of public engagement activities undertaken at the Food Junctions Festival. Food Junctions was a collaborative, creative festival held in April-May 2010 in Kings Cross, organised by UCL students and staff, funded by the UCL Public Engagement Unit. The schedule provided a structure to capture observations of a range of activities, including talks, film screenings, wildlife workshops and wine tasting, taken by a 'participant observer' at each event.

To fit with the food theme of the festival, a sensory observation form was devised to capture the variety of experiences, from sight to taste.

Food Junctions: Sensory Observation Form

We wish to capture and understand all the events happening within the Food Junctions programme. As our eyes and ears, we are asking all participants-observers to keep a log of each of the events/activities you attend so that we have a record of how each one is experienced. Either during or immediately after the event/activity please complete this sheet; you can use the questions below to help guide your observations if you wish...

Sight

How would you describe the look? Are there any significant visual experiences?

Describe the audience - is it mostly families, young people, a mixture?

Are people sitting through the whole event or coming and going?

Sound

How would you describe the sound of the event? Are there any significant sounds?

Is the lecturer engaging with the audience? Can they be heard?

Did the speaker have a clear message about their subject?

Was this successfully communicated to the audience?

Is there audience interaction? How much?

Touch

How would you describe the feel? Are there any significant associations with your sense of touch or how you feel?

Was the event hands-on? How many of the audience are actively participating?

What are people doing?

Taste

How would you describe the taste of the event? Are there any significant associations with your sense of taste? Or taste can refer to culture, good/bad taste

Are people sampling the food/drink? How many people?

Smell

How would you describe the smell of the event? Is there any significant smells?

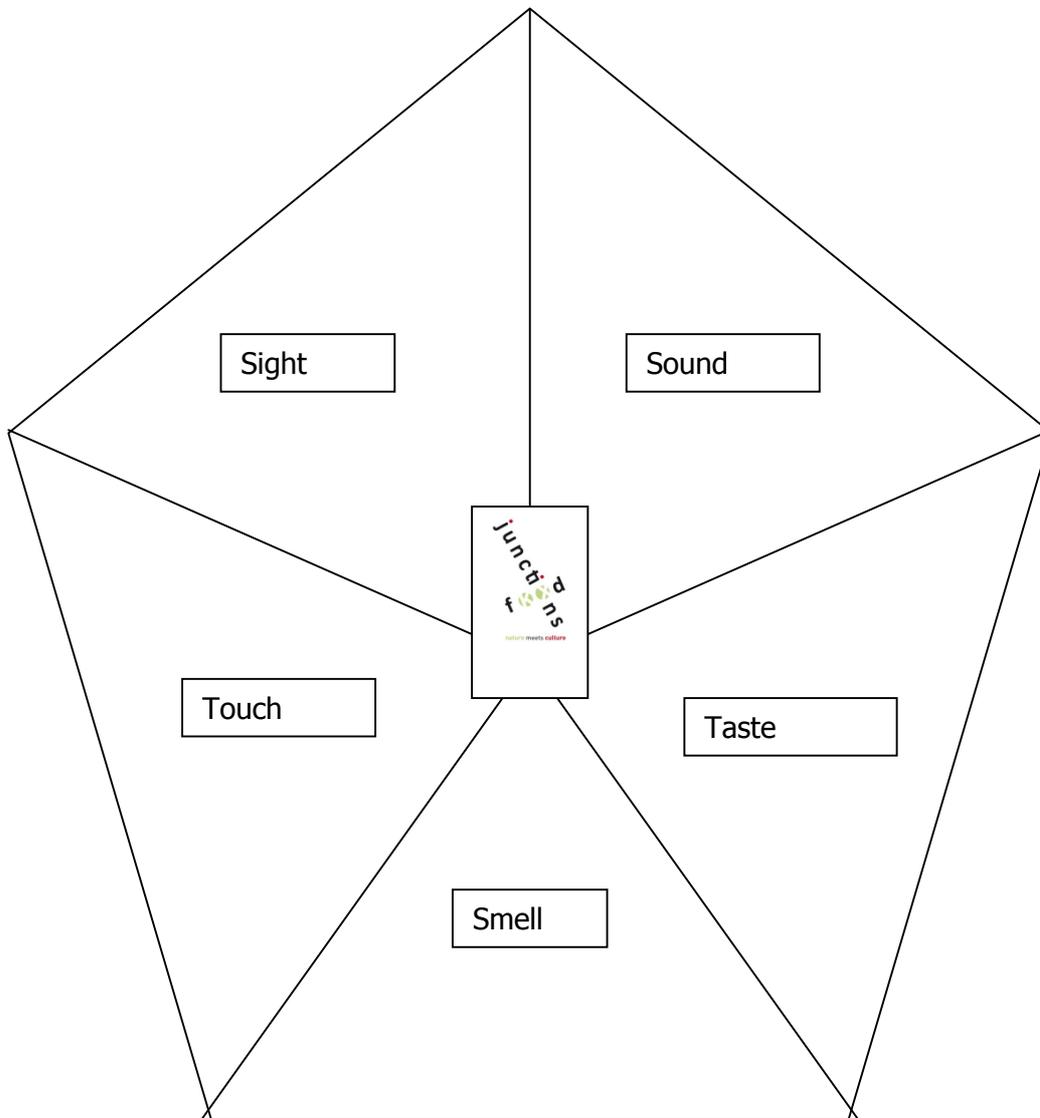
General Impressions...

What is your overall opinion of what's happening here? Is it worth doing?

Is it adding value to the overall Food Junctions programme?

Food Junctions: Sensory Observation Form

We are particularly interested in your experience of each event and we would like you to think about how all your senses experience these activities within the festival



Date:

Event Name:

No. of Plates given out:

No. of Participants:

No. of Plates returned:

Your Comments:

Participant-Observer Name:

Please return this sheet to the Living Kitchen when your event has finished, thanks!

Example 03

The template below is the observation schedule developed for capturing the experience of an evening event – Science Soirees. Science Soirees was funded under the UCL Public Engagement Unit Beacon Bursary small grant scheme. The project was six ‘cabaret-style’ evening events on five different cutting-edge chemistry topics at six different London schools. Topics included: ‘CO₂ The world’s deadliest molecule’, ‘Pattern formation in nature’, and ‘Fueling the vehicles of the future’. The audience of the events were parents and guardians of primary and secondary school students. Each event involved 10-25 parents/guardians.

**Chemistry Department Science Soiree
Wednesday 16th December
Holland Park School**

Observed by:

Topic: A date with Chemistry

- 1. How many different activities were there in the evening and what were they? (i.e. speaker talking, speaker demo, PRS survey, audience experiment, Q&A = 5)**
- 2. How effective was the change between activities? Did most/all participants realise the activity had changed? Was attention maintained well?**
- 3. How long did it take to change between activities? Please list each activity change with time taken to switch, if possible**
- 4. If there was a discussion section how many people were involved in asking questions/discussion?**
- 5. Was the discussion activity a group discussion or a more formal Q&A?**