

Notes for AVATAR Project evaluators on taking field notes

If you are attending an AVATAR training session as an evaluator, please take notes that record as many of your impressions as possible. If forced to choose, focus on the responses and behavior of the participants rather than the facilitators. The curriculum for the training is prepared in advance, so we have other ways of guessing the facilitator did, but this is not so true for the students.

When you arrive, be sure to let the participants know your role, a member of the project evaluation team that is working to make the training as helpful as possible. If you tape record the session, be sure to ask for the consent of the participants. This is evaluation, not research, so we are not seeking informed consent and will not use these data in research. As the session proceeds, your role is observer. You are not a participant except maybe over lunch or during a break, so do not get involved in the substantive discussion of the group. If asked, say your role is observer.

Be sure to note the location of your evaluation, the date, and the beginning and ending time. When I observe, I usually note the time about every 15 minutes. Draw a little picture of the classroom and how it is set up. You might also note the location of the presenter and how he/she moves around.

I suggest taking notes in a two-column format. In the left column, I write what is going on, the environment, activities, interactions, transitions, tone, and atmosphere. I also note statements made by the participants, writing them word for word if possible. In the right column, I write my own reactions to what is going on. How is the process going? How are participants responding? Is the facilitation on target? Is there friction or lack of understanding? Do some participants seem to be more engaged than others? Can you see a reason for this?

Be sure to note the time you leave and to offer unobtrusive thanks.

If you took notes in longhand, transcribe them to computer as soon afterward as possible. If you took notes on the computer in the first place, round them out as soon as possible. Make your description as thick as possible. If you have suggestions for the training, please do include them maybe in a different font on at the end so we know what is descriptive and what is commentary.

Send your field notes to Mary Harris mary.harris@unt.edu as soon after the observation as possible.