

Youth Must Be Served, So Teachers Must Be Observed

toolkits

Peer Observation in Professional Learning Communities

Observing, reflecting on, and even outright stealing another colleague's strategies and techniques has inspired many teachers to make steady improvements in their practice. One of the many great aspects of peer observation is that—at no cost but time—a teacher can see all sorts of different teaching techniques in action, and see how they could possibly fit for him or her. The observed teacher, in exchange, receives valuable feedback.

In a professional learning community (PLC), teachers cover classes for each other, and after observing with a focusing question in mind, the teacher sits down informally to debrief. The team reflects on the observation together and discusses strategies they might use. It's a simple way to de-privatize teaching. And while a single observation might not make a profound difference for the observer or the observed on its own, PLC teachers and coaches say that steady, seemingly inconsequential steps toward improvement over time make it possible to apply new learning to their own classrooms. Critical structures for this learning include peer observation, lab classrooms, teaching teams, in-house coaches, and inquiry groups coupled with time for reflection.

Through ongoing collaboration with peers, each teacher has the opportunity to continuously improve instruction for all students. These teacher-to-teacher, day-to-day formats for improving instruction offer liberating strategies for reducing the isolation that is such a part of traditional schooling.

A New Kind of Professional Development

The typical workshop format of professional development leaves teachers inspired intellectually at best and, at worst, overwhelmed and disillusioned about how far they need to go. Back in the classroom, without meaningful follow-up conversation, nothing changes. With this in mind, numerous researchers advocate team-based cycles that concentrate on actual, in-the-trenches teaching and learning, with teachers becoming active practitioners in their professional development and collaboratively implementing, assessing, and adjusting instruction as it happens. This kind of focused, school-based professional development fosters continuous improvement of instruction, and has the power to strengthen and change practice.

The process begins with the teaching staff building community; working together in teams, content areas, and grade levels; and openly talking to each other. Next, they enter each other's classes with the purpose of learning in mind as opposed to critiquing. The experience forces teachers to think about the "whys" of what they are doing in their classrooms.

The Rewards of Risk

Teams must feel secure examining student work, discussing curriculum and expectations, and expressing their thoughts and feelings. As teachers feel more comfortable, they become willing to try new strategies. Ideally, a colleague is there to help in the revision process. This aspect provides accountability for peer observation, because the group is expecting you to come back with results.

Teachers need time and support to talk about teaching, reflect, and observe one another's classrooms on a weekly, if not daily basis, if they are to make lasting changes in their classroom practice. Everyone improves with reflection, and the insights can be startling. Carefully structured and facilitated teaching teams improve instruction because they allow teachers the opportunity to engage in tangible, detailed, and goal-oriented discussions about their practice on an ongoing basis.

But time, unfortunately, is the biggest obstacle to the success of school-based professional development. Yet, with a little creativity, teachers can squeeze in the time to observe and debrief, especially when they begin to see how the process affects the way teachers look at themselves and their teaching methods. Helping to frame the process into some sort of schedule can help make the effort seem more attainable.

A Structure For Peer Observation¹

Steps (Times are flexible and can be adjusted according to needs.):

1. **Pre-Observation Conference** (approx. 20 min):
Teacher gives context for the visit and frames the issue or question that he or she wants considered.
2. **Classroom Visit** (30–60 minutes): Visitors observe and take notes related to the teacher's question.
3. **Debriefing Conference** (45–60 minutes): Visitors share observations, questions, and constructive suggestions.

Debrief Guidelines

- Begin with positive impressions that are specific and concrete.
- Focus as much as possible on the teacher's identified issue.
- Frame critical observations constructively. Involve the teacher in creating solutions and determining what kinds of suggestions would be most helpful.

Protocol

1. The teacher speaks first and gives a brief account of how he or she felt about the class, and invites the team's feedback on specific issues or questions.
2. Visitors discuss their impressions, and the teacher listens and takes notes without speaking.
3. The teacher responds to as many of the observations and questions as he or she chooses, and the visitors listen.
4. There is an open discussion, which includes identifying strategies and next steps for the teacher.

Having a structured observation protocol helps because the observing teacher understands the context of the classroom; actually seeing the practice in place can make all of the difference.

Teachers Learn Best From Each Other

This kind of rich, school-based learning requires a profound shift in a school's culture. But teachers must also be open to critical feedback. The key is to stay focused on the work and not to take things personally. This may involve changing lessons and teaching styles. Remember, just because we think we've developed a good lesson doesn't ensure that it's helping kids to meet standards. When you dig deeply into your teaching, you begin to see so much more that you could be doing, and that can be frustrating. But after a few sessions, teachers realize that to better reach all students they need to be more consistent as a team. Then the expectations for quality become more explicit, and the payoff—a critical change in expectations for students—becomes that much closer in reach.

¹ Mednick, A. (2004) Teachers Working Together to Improve Instruction. Conversations, Center for Collaborative Education