Teacher Observation: High-Tech or Low-Tech?

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As short, frequent, unannounced classroom visits become more common in American schools, principals have significant choices on how and when to use laptop computers, tablet devices, and smartphones as part of this teacher-evaluation technique. Lots of commercial software products are designed to streamline the process of gathering information on classroom observations and giving feedback to teachers, but is technology always the best tool? From my years as a principal in Boston and a coach of school leaders in other cities, I've become convinced that there is a time for high-tech and a time for low-tech in evaluating teachers, and the choices we make in this area really matter.

When a principal, assistant principal, or department head evaluates a teacher's classroom performance, there are four steps to that process: (a) attaining some knowledge of what's being taught; (b) making the actual classroom visit; (c) giving immediate feedback to the teacher; and (d) documenting the administrator's feedback. Here's my take on where high-tech works—and where low-tech works better.

Learning about the curriculum: Before a classroom visit, it's important for the administrator to know the broader context, especially the curriculum unit's big ideas, essential questions, skill and knowledge objectives, and planned assessments. The most efficient way to get this information is for the teaching team to share each unit plan in electronic form—perhaps in an easily accessible online document—so the administrator can comment and contribute. With this background information, it should be obvious within a minute of walking into a classroom how the lesson fits into the broader instructional plan.

Visiting the classroom: "You can observe a lot by watching," said Yogi Berra, and I think that's the best credo for principals visiting classrooms. Take a deep breath, slow yourself down, stroll around looking over students' shoulders to check out the instructional task. Ask yourself whether the task is appropriately rigorous and on target for the unit and lesson objectives. In addition, quietly chat with a couple of students ("What are you working on?" is a great open-ended question that tells whether there is, in fact, a lesson objective); and, of course, assess what the teacher is saying and doing.

I've made thousands of short, unannounced classroom visits, and virtually every time I'm struck by a few things within the first five minutes—something to praise, a question, a concern. The administrator's dilemma is how to record these insights, and my strong belief is that low-tech is best—jotting thoughts on a notepad, index card, or sheet of paper. Using a laptop or tablet makes it much more difficult to walk around and is disconcerting to many teachers and students (What's he writing? Is she checking e-mail? Is this being sent to the superintendent?).

What's especially ineffective, I believe, is trying to fill out a checklist or rubric during a classroom observation, especially if it's on an electronic device. This doubly distracts the administrator from being a good observer, imposing a long list of criteria onto a fluid, highly complex situation that requires fully focused powers of observation, mobility, wisdom, and differentiation for each teacher's background and unique classroom situation. When it comes to classroom observations, principals are paid to use their judgment, not fill out forms, and any principal who can't formulate a couple of pertinent teaching points during a short classroom observation needs some serious professional development. As professionals, school leaders should push back against attempts to "principal-proof" the observation process, and teachers should raise concerns when administrators bring technology, checklists, and rubrics into their classrooms.

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It is important that teachers know what their supervisors are looking for, and I suggest that school staffs collaboratively formulate a short mental checklist of elements that should be evident in any K-12 classroom. My suggestion: SOTEL, or safety, objectives, teaching, engagement, and learning. Having this list in the back of their minds can help administrators as they decide on one or two areas that particularly need affirmation or improvement.

Giving immediate feedback to teachers: School administrators are incredibly busy and really want to take care of each new item as quickly as possible. Some send the teacher an email before leaving the classroom; others send an email, electronic checklist, or rubric later in the day. Good research on the efficacy of different approaches hasn't been done yet, but my strong hunch is that researchers will find that teachers slough off or ignore 95 percent of electronic feedback, especially checklists or narratives giving micro-feedback on their actions during a short observation.

If a principal wants to make a difference in teaching and learning (rather than fulfilling a bureaucratic requirement), the best way to give feedback to teachers is face to face, ideally within 24 hours of the visit and, if possible, in the teacher's classroom when students aren't there. Chatting on the teacher's home turf is an important gesture and can take advantage of props, student work, and visual cues in the classroom. Most teachers find evaluation visits nervous-making, and by far the best way to reduce anxiety is to give teachers the opportunity, every time, to explain the context and tell a little about what was going on before and after the visit. These feedback conversations, which usually take less than five minutes, are wonderful opportunities for appreciation, coaching, exchange of ideas, instructional improvement—and the ongoing pedagogical education of principals. Face-to-face talks are the drivers of change.

Documenting findings for the record: As short, unannounced classroom visits become accepted as a legitimate form of supervision and evaluation, it's clear that they need to be documented in some fashion. Superintendents, school board members, and the public are not going to be satisfied with assurances that lots of wonderful conversations are going on every week between principals and teachers. It's also helpful for the principal and the teacher to be able to access a written summary of the feedback after a classroom visit and post-observation conversation.

In this domain, using technology is the most efficient and effective way for administrators to keep track of their observations and document their impressions. The ideal software has lists of teachers and makes it easy, after a classroom visit, to record the date of the visit; the time of day; the curriculum unit; whether the visit took place at the beginning, middle, or end of the lesson; when each follow-up chat took place; a brief summary of the feedback after the chat (perhaps limited to 1,000 characters); and any response from the teacher. At least one software product allows for all of this, and some include summative rubrics so administrators can pull together the year's classroom observations and other data, compare scores with teachers' self-assessments, and finalize each teacher's end-of-year evaluation.

In sum, I believe that with the four steps in teacher observation and feedback, high-tech/low-tech/low-tech/high-tech is the best way for administrators to focus on what's happening in classrooms and give thoughtful, effective feedback that will make a genuine contribution to improving the quality of teaching and learning.

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