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Teachers Observing Teachers: A Professional Development Tool for Every School

Typically evaluative by nature, teacher observation is usually linked to classroom performance. More and more schools, however, are using observation -- teachers observing teachers -- as a form of professional development that improves teaching practices and student performance. In this article, Education World's Michele Israel talks with experts about the benefits of this emerging professional development strategy. Included: The benefits of learning by observing -- for the teacher, administrator, and school, *plus* five observation models.



Being observed in the classroom can rattle any teacher's nerves. But, teacher observations that serve as vehicles for professional growth rather than performance evaluations have multiple benefits -- for teachers, administrators, and the school. [See sidebar.]

More and more, administrators and teachers are viewing peer observation as a form of collaborative professional development. This kind of observation can yield its greatest benefits when used as a means of sharing instructional techniques and ideologies between and among teachers.

"The intention of teacher-to-teacher observation is that it be a tool for professional development and, in turn, for student learning," Colleen Meaney, dean of faculty at [Souhegan High School](#) in Amherst, New Hampshire, told Education World.

LEARNING FROM COLLEAGUES

Teacher observation is one model of professional learning that "is key to supporting a new vision for professional development," explained Stephanie Hirsh, deputy executive director of the [National Staff Development Council \(NSDC\)](#). The new vision, according to Hirsh, involves teacher teams that meet daily to study standards, plan joint lessons, examine student work, and solve common problems. Team members then apply that learning in the classroom, watching each other teach and providing regular feedback.

Administrators

benefit from:

- * the opportunity for reflective dialogue with and among teachers.
- * an increased sense of shared responsibility.

"The most positive benefit of teacher-to-teacher observation," said Hirsh, "is that it makes teaching a public rather than a private act."

Cristi Alberino echoed those thoughts. Teachers should "use one another for professional development," said Alberino, a researcher at the [University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education](#) and a former New York City teacher. For example, she notes, a teacher struggling with classroom management can improve his or her skills by observing a peer in a safe and inclusive learning environment. Being observed by the same peer leads to suggestions about how to handle behavior problems, as well as opportunities to share successful teaching approaches with the observer.

Teacher observation often has been built into familiar activities, such as mentoring, noted Trish Brasslow, a media specialist and mentor at Fred C. Wescott Junior High School in Westbrook, Maine. "Being a mentor and observing my peers is truly enlightening," Brasslow told Education World. "I see many different learning styles and I love watching student/teacher interactions. I learn a lot about teaching and what makes for a successful teacher."

"This, to me, is a very important form of professional development," emphasized Brasslow.

ESTABLISHING A CULTURE

It is essential to effective use of the "teachers observing teachers" strategies that school administrators enable a culture that nurtures a collegial exchange of ideas and promotes a certain level of trust, explained Dennis Sparks, NSDC's executive director. That culture is often absent when observation is associated with performance rather than professional growth.

"It's a risky thing to have your professional practice scrutinized by colleagues," said Sparks. "A teacher needs to have some level of trust in [the observer's] motives trust that the purpose of the observation is not to make the teacher look bad or to place blame, but to help."

Most important to effective teacher observation is that it be student-focused. The emphasis needs to be on how things can be done differently in the classroom to ensure that students succeed academically, added Sparks.

Souhegan High School is an environment where a teachers-observing-teachers strategy thrives. A culture exists "where people report with pride that they push' one another professionally," according to Meaney. Both new and veteran teachers "value

- * an increased focus on student achievement.
- * an increased trust and collegiality among staff.
- * participation in a professional and collaborative learning community.
- * a cadre of self-reliant, confident teachers who love teaching.
- * enriched teacher efficacy
- * participation in a professional and collaborative learning community.

Teachers benefit from:

- * an opportunity to engage in reflective dialogue about their work.
- * the focused classroom support.
- * improvement of classroom practices.
- * support from an "expert" (peer) who understands the daily demands of the classroom.
- * satisfaction with one's work.
- * reduced job stress, especially for the new teacher.
- * a welcoming atmosphere for new teachers.
- * the comfort of knowing that someone is available to help, explain, and assist.

The school benefits from:

- * increased collaboration

collegial relationships as a means to professional development," she said.

EXTENDED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Teacher observation should be part of a pool of professional development opportunities, Sparks told Education World. One way in which peer observation can be very effective is when teachers acquire new skills or ideas at conferences and then model those new approaches for their colleagues. That is best done through observation, said Sparks, who advocates learning in the school, rather than through "pull-out" training, such as workshops. Professional development should be job-embedded, he emphasized. That is one of the greatest benefits of teachers observing other teachers.

Joellen Killion, NSDC's director of special projects, added that a solid repertoire of professional learning is focused on student results -- standards-based, school-based, and content-specific -- and includes training, study groups, action research, and observation. "Any program dependent on one delivery mode alone is not likely to produce long-term results," she explained.

"The professional development that a teacher values depends on what he or she needs at any given time," said Meaney. "Generally," she added, "newcomers report greater value in peer observation than do more experienced teachers."

"I think that I learn more from observation than from any other kind of professional development," added Alberino, noting that reading about a particular instructional theory does not mean it can be easily applied. Observation brings actual practice to the forefront.

Dr. William Roberson, co-director of the [Center of Effective Teaching and Learning](#) concurred: "Easily, peer observation is more valuable than other forms of professional development, if the proper context is created. If done well, it is carried out in a real, practical, immediately relevant situation. Compare that to attending workshops or conferences in which participants remain at a certain level of abstraction from their own classrooms."

There is no one right approach to teacher observation but, according to Dr. Sally Blake, professor of teacher education at the [University of Texas at El Paso](#), teacher observation is most successful when the teacher and observer work together and reflect on the teaching behavior. Teacher observation is least successful when the observer spends hours watching without analysis or dialogue with the teacher. Blake suggested the following sequence of events for effective teachers-

among teachers.

- * the establishment of a professional learning community.
- * an increased focus on student achievement.
- * enthusiasm for the teaching profession.
- * Ensuring school leaders advocate and support teacher observation as a valid form of professional development
- * Building a community of trust among faculty
- * Establishing a school-wide commitment to the approach
- * Separating observation from the teacher evaluation process
- * Declaring the purpose for teacher observation and a commitment to its outcomes
- * Inviting teachers to first participate in the process as volunteers
- * Inviting teachers to first participate in the process as volunteers
- * Inviting teachers to first participate in the process as volunteers
- * Allowing *time* for teachers to observe other teachers

observing-teachers programs:

- *Overview.* A simple overview of the program with a focus on what the main point of observation will be.
 - *Observation.* A short observation sequence.
 - *Discussion.* Immediate discussion concerning the observation.
 - *Reflection.* Reflection concerning how information from the sequence may be used by the observer.
 - *Application.* Application of the behavior by the observer in a classroom with feedback from the teacher.
- * Organizing scheduled meetings, coaching sessions, and follow-up conversations
 - * Creating teams that share students
 - * Selecting specific strategies and skills on which to focus during an observation session
 - * Instituting a way to measure the impact of observation

NSDC's Hirsh agrees that there is no single approach to teacher observation, but, says that it is least successful when a peer observes a struggling teacher who doesn't know how to benefit from the process, especially if the observer isn't adept at identifying his or her colleagues' needs. Teacher observation works best when expectations are clear and participants understand how to use and benefit from the process, she added.

A variety of approaches to teacher observation support professional growth and student achievement. The following are several of those methods:

Lesson Study -- In this three-pronged approach designed by Japanese educators, teachers collaboratively develop a lesson, observe it being taught to students, and then discuss and refine it.

Peer Coaching -- In this non-evaluative professional development strategy, educators work together to discuss and share teaching practices, observe each other's classrooms, provide mutual support, and, in the end, enhance teaching to enrich student learning.

Cognitive Coaching -- Teachers are taught specific skills that involve asking questions so that the teacher observed is given the opportunity to process learning associated with teaching the lesson.

Critical Friends Group (CFG) -- This program provides time and structure in a teacher's schedule for professional growth linked to student learning. Each CFG is composed of eight to 12 teachers and administrators, under the guidance of at least one coach, who meet regularly to develop collaborative skills, reflect on their teaching practices, and look at student work. [See an Education World article, [Critical Friends Groups: Catalysts for School Change.](#)]

Learning Walk -- [The Learning Walk](#), created by the Institute for Learning at the University of Pittsburgh, is a process that invites participants to visit several classrooms to look at student work and classroom artifacts and to talk with students and teachers. Participants then review what they have learned in the classroom by making factual statements and posing questions about the observations. The end result is that teachers become more reflective about their teaching practices. Professional development is always linked to The Learning Walks.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Teacher Mentoring as Professional Development](#)
- [Research for Better Schools: Lesson Study](#)
- [The Houston A+ Challenge: Critical Friends Group](#)
- [Funderstanding: Cognitive Coaching](#)

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