Teachers as Walk-Through Partners

By developing a collegial walk-through model, this school made teacher evaluation a valuable tool for improving professional practice.

James Bushman

Several years ago, as an assistant high school principal, I used to observe my veteran teachers twice a year as part of their evaluations. After years of following this traditional observation and evaluation model, I realized that it did not truly help teachers become reflective and improve their practice.

Then I stumbled onto a new model. Instead of being observed and evaluated in isolation by a single administrator, teachers agreed to walk with me through their colleagues' classrooms and then meet with the teachers we visited to collegially discuss what we had observed. Teachers embraced this model, which cost nothing and led to dramatic changes in our collective understanding of instructional practice. As one teacher said,

The process that we are now using has encouraged teachers to reflect and share. Teachers who have said little or nothing in department meetings are now expressing their thoughts on teaching. Evaluation for me will never be the same.

How the Change Got Started

In 2002, I attended a workshop titled Principal's Walk-Through for Reflective Inquiry. In the workshop, I learned to step into a classroom and quickly identify the teacher's instructional objective, the instructional decisions being made, and the level of cognition being asked of the students (Downey, Steffy, English, Frase, & Poston, 2004). For the next several months, back at my high school, I visited classrooms daily using this model. What I saw reaffirmed that we had some problems common in many schools. Teachers were teaching around the standards, not to them; teachers were not asking students to write regularly; and overall, classroom activities were not challenging for all students.

My observations led me to ask, How could I get teachers to see what I saw daily? If we were going to implement sustained school improvement, teachers had to acknowledge these problems and take responsibility for resolving them.
The traditional teacher observation model did not help. In this model, teachers prepare a lesson for an observer in a three-step process that usually includes a pre-conference, an observation, and a post-conference in which the administrator sits down with the teacher to share his or her observations of the lesson. I found myself seated next to many long-time teacher colleagues trying to discuss their lessons, knowing that their ability to think reflectively was hampered by their defensiveness and skepticism.

I also knew that the entire evaluation process was a bit of a sham. Most of my teachers were tenured veterans, and none of them would ever get fired because of the quality of their teaching, which reflected the usual level of instruction one finds in high schools. In the end, we would both sign their evaluation forms, and the teachers' only question would be whether their evaluations generally spoke positively or negatively about their performance.

Starting With Math and Science Teachers

In an effort to create a more effective role for teacher evaluation, I made a deal with the math and science department teachers: If they agreed to walk with me through one another’s classrooms and then come to an after-school meeting with members of their departments to talk about what they had seen, then I would use the drop-in observations I had already conducted to fill out their evaluation forms. They would not have to go through the formal observation process.

All but one teacher in both departments quickly agreed. In spring 2003, I scheduled each teacher for a walk-through session, and the process began. Alone or in pairs, the math and science teachers came into my office during their preparation periods. I quickly introduced them to the walk-through observation process I had learned, and we spent the remainder of the period conducting walk-throughs of 8–10 classrooms together. We stayed in each classroom for only a few minutes—long enough to identify the objective of the lesson, the instructional methodology used, the level of mental engagement required of the students, and the evidence of instructional support on the classroom walls. When we left each classroom, we chatted about what the teachers had observed in relation to these four points, how it compared with their own teaching, and what insights they had gleaned from their observations.

For example, after we viewed a teacher in a math class standing at the chalkboard using direct instruction, I might ask,

- How would you rate the level of mental engagement of the students?
- Are there other ways this lesson could be presented that would increase student engagement?
- How do you decide what methodology to use to teach a given math concept?
- What kinds of things do teachers have in their rooms to facilitate student learning (standards posted, student work, plan for the week, homework assignments)?
- Is one questioning technique better than another for getting students to think?

During the walk-through, I had teachers' undivided attention to discuss instruction in a
nonthreatening way, using other teachers as models. My goal was to help teachers become reflective and see examples of practices they could emulate or question.

After the walk-throughs were completed, the science and math departments each met after school at their respective department chair’s home, sharing refreshments and talking informally. At these meetings, we discussed classroom instruction in the department, and I led the teachers through group exercises to foster reflection.

The teachers’ observations were enlightening. After viewing all the classrooms in the math department, one teacher noted that they required only the lowest levels of student engagement on Bloom’s Taxonomy (1956), an observation consistent with the findings of Stigler and Hiebert (2004). “Gosh,” the teacher said, “as a department, we are good at teaching students to solve problems but not at teaching them how to problem-solve. I need to teach my students to be better thinkers.” This was the kind of epiphany I had hoped teachers would have. Such insights are hard to come by, but they are important for facilitating instructional change.

These post–walk-through meetings gave me a further opportunity to promote reflection. At the end of the meeting, I handed each teacher his or her evaluation form, which I had filled out on the basis of my informal observations.

**Bringing Two Departments Together**

The following fall, I went back to the veteran, tenured math and science teachers and offered them the same deal with a twist: The math and science departments would walk through each other’s classes—math teachers viewing science teachers and vice versa—and then meet collectively. Every teacher agreed.

This time, I asked teachers to look for specific issues related to their departments. For example, I asked math teachers to note when science teachers used math or talked about math.

Instead of meeting after school, we held the joint department meeting for several hours during a staff development day, the only time when we could get the 27 teachers together. I put the teachers in mixed groups and asked them to discuss questions like “How are science and math interrelated, and should students understand the connection?”, and “Do math and science teachers use technical words that have a joint connotation?” In addition, I asked teachers to discuss how their colleagues in the other subject area could support some of the specific lessons they taught in their own classrooms. This joint department meeting to discuss instruction was the first such meeting many of the teachers had ever attended, even though they had taught with one another for years.

This second walk-through evaluation worked even better than the first. Teachers confessed that they found it easier to observe objectively when they were not viewing their own subject matter. They had also become more familiar with the process. As one commented,

Last year doing the walk-through, I was not convinced that much could be learned about a class in a five-minute visit. This time around, I am realizing that a significant
amount of information can be determined. It simply requires me to be a more focused observer during the limited time.

It was eye-opening for math teachers to observe in science classes and for science teachers to observe in math classes. Some of their comments were,

I don't envy my math colleagues; it sure seems like they have a tough job to do. For me as a science teacher, I only use math as a tool. It isn't the finished product. I don't have to teach a math concept and stop—I get to show students where it can take them. Maybe that means math and science education at the high school level shouldn't be departmentalized. We should all teach both.

Math and science share a common vocabulary. I see now that more connection could be made for students to aid their development of this vocabulary and enhance understanding on a grand scale.

Connections need to be made to students' prior experiences and knowledge. These experiences may be academic as well as real-world. Both connections are necessary. Science and math teachers get so caught up in their own subject matter that they forget to bring students into their world through enticement that is of interest to the students themselves.

**Expanding to Other Departments**

By spring 2004, I was joined by my fellow assistant principal, who supervised the social science, special education, and English departments, and we added teachers in these departments to the walk-through process. Although the basic activity of teachers viewing teachers while supervised by an administrator remained the same, we modified the process each time we used it in response to teachers' needs. In spring 2004, for example, some of the math teachers asked to travel to our feeder middle school during their preparation period to walk through math teachers' classrooms there. The middle school teachers, with whom I set up the process in advance, were pleased to see their high school colleagues. The process was rewarding for both sets of teachers.

The rest of the teachers opted to observe teachers in other departments within our own school. This time, teachers visited their colleagues' classrooms in small groups. Using a list of effective instructional strategies from *Classroom Instruction That Works: Research-Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement* (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001, p. 7), they went on a treasure hunt to spot strategies proven to raise student achievement. We steered teachers to the classrooms of our master teachers.

My colleague and I accompanied the teacher walk-through groups. Sometimes we caught master teachers in the middle of a great lesson, but in every case we could point out and talk about some instructional practice—the teacher's use of graphic organizers, ways the teacher reaffirmed student work, the kind of notes that students were taking, or the materials displayed in the classroom. When the process was over, teachers met with their own departments after school. I ended each of these meetings by giving teachers the blank
evaluation form used by the district. I asked them to assess themselves and return the form to me. I later tabulated teacher and department results so that we could have follow-up discussions about the areas that the teachers believed needed work in their departments.

**Evaluation Transformed**

By the time the 2004 school year had ended, the observation and evaluation process at my high school was different from the process that most schools use. Together, the teachers and I had made observation and evaluation into a deeply reflective learning process that had begun to bear results.

We began to notice that teachers talked to one another more about instruction and that teachers had an easier time seeing the logic for pursuing reform. Teachers came to the school administrators to show us how they had added or modified lessons to make them more engaging or challenging for kids. We found that our process gave teachers the opportunities they had craved to visit other classrooms and see what other teachers were doing, as well as guidance in knowing what to look for. Students enjoyed seeing their teachers come into their classrooms, and teachers enjoyed it as well. Two typical comments were,

> It was beneficial for me to see students of mine in other classes. I was able to compare how they acted in these classes with their behavior in my class. Sometimes they seemed much more engaged, which makes me ask myself, How can I create the same engagement?

> I liked seeing my kids in other classes. It helped me realize that students have a lot of rules and curriculum to go through in one day. I forgot how long a day is for kids.

For the first time, teachers from different departments could understand what instruction looked like in departments other than their own. Perhaps most important, teachers and administrators could talk to one another about instruction, knowing they had common understandings.

**Challenges**

Although the walk-through model improved the way we worked, it is not appropriate for everyone. The school continued to provide the traditional observation and evaluation model for new teachers, who need the one-on-one time that this model provides. Some veterans also like the traditional structure. By 2004, some of the teachers were ready to go back to a traditional model because they cherished the chance to talk with an administrator about their teaching practices.

Moreover, the walk-through model I have described is demanding. To use it, administrators must understand instruction on more than just a cursory level. The process also requires administrators to be creative and know how to find talking points about the lesson they observe. Most important, the model requires administrators to engage and question teachers without being critical or demeaning to the teacher being observed.

Education literature is replete with reform ideas that can boost student achievement. But the
key to making these ideas work is helping the teaching staff see the need for change. Whether you engage in the same model that our school developed or create your own evaluation variation, don't discount the value of using the observation and evaluation process as a school reform tool.

References


James Bushman is an educational researcher and Principal of Redwood High School, 1001 West Main St., Visalia, CA 93291; 559-730-7700; jbushman@visalia.k12.ca.us.

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