

Let's Eliminate the Preobservation Conference

Preobservation conferences can build bias and undermine trust, while skillful observation of teaching combined with analytical feedback can increase teaching effectiveness.

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The preobservation conference is a vestigial organ remaining from the days when observation of teaching was a "fuzzy" activity, dependent on the intuition or bias of the supervisor. A teacher was left uncertain as to what was being observed, how that observation was being interpreted, and what to expect as a result of the ambiguity and anxiety associated with supervision. The purpose of an observation was further contaminated by the teacher's knowledge that observations had been mandated (and unfortunately in some cases still are) to secure evidence and support for "retain or fire" decisions by administrators.

Today, with our knowledge of cause-effect relationships between teaching and learning and of the way formative evaluation increases teaching effectiveness, it is time to discard the time-consuming preobservation conference.

A conference before observing in a classroom is supposed to develop trust and rapport with the teacher, identify agreed-upon objectives, and prepare both teacher and observer for a productive postobservation conference. In reality, that preobservation conference is not only a waste of time but it can create bias in both observer and teacher which interferes with objective observation of teacher performance and results in a less productive postobservation conference. Strong words that need to be defended! In defense, I offer the following five assumptions.

1. *Teachers should know at the beginning of the year that the purpose of observation is to promote constantly escalating instructional effectiveness.* An observer's stance is analytical, not critical. Observations can be introduced efficiently and effectively through inservice or staff meetings that enable participants to discuss teaching and learning, analyze films on teaching, identify productive teaching behaviors, and learn about the research that supports those behaviors.

2. *Trust and support result from what happens in the postobservation conference.* The observer who shows empathy for the teacher—by understanding the tremendous complexity of successful teaching, seeking the teacher's reasons for actions rather than proceeding on unfounded assumptions, appreciating and identifying productive teaching skills, refraining from imposing his or her own style on the teacher, and enabling the teacher to continue to grow in teaching effectiveness—will be welcomed back to that teacher's classroom.

No amount of skill in building rapport will support an unsuccessful postobservation conference. Therefore, time is better spent after than before an observation in building the belief that observation and feedback facilitate teaching excellence.

3. *An observation requires interpretation of each part of a lesson in relation to preceding and subsequent parts, each behavior in terms of prior*

and subsequent behaviors. Therefore, while the teacher and observer may be interested in developing or polishing a particular skill or technique, the observer's focus must include all other aspects of a teacher's performance. Viewed in isolation, no technique can be interpreted as productive or destructive. *There are no absolutes in teaching.* While observer and teacher may agree in advance to focus on and discuss one skill in depth, they cannot isolate it from all else that occurs. There is also the danger that a teacher who knows that a certain technique is being observed will use it in excess. Consequently the observer will see a lot of what possibly shouldn't be there.

4. *The preobservation conference builds bias in both teacher and observer.* Having already told the observer the plan, the teacher may proceed to develop it even when data emerging from the class indicate a change should be made. Teachers typically comment, "I realized when I got into the lesson that many students had forgotten from last week, but I told the principal that I was going to work with mixed fractions so I went ahead with them."

Bias also can exist in the mind of the observer. Knowing what is supposed to happen can cause "seeing it happen" to the exclusion of what really is happening. I suspect that many observers depend on the preobservation conference as a crutch to make up for their lack of training in capturing "script tapes" what is really happen-

ing. Training in observation and interpretation can eliminate the need for such a crutch.

5. *The time required for the preconference reduces by one-third the time available for observation and conferences.* Three observations and conferences can be conducted in the same amount of time required for two when the preobservation conference is eliminated. Increasing supervisory time by 50 percent is an important achievement when it can be accomplished by eliminating an unnecessary procedure.

A *planning conference* is not considered to be a preobservation conference. In a planning conference the

observer and teacher collaborate in the design of a lesson, which the teacher subsequently teaches, but responsibility for successful learning outcomes is jointly shared. Planning conferences are excellent opportunities for the teacher to experience the stimulation of team planning. The observer, in turn, accepts part of the teacher's daily responsibility for planning, teaching, and evaluating countless lessons and experiences the fact that "it ain't all that easy."

Coming to grips with the interaction between teachers, particular students, and specific content is growth-promoting and long overdue in education. Platitudes, vague generalizations, and admonitions have dominated the su-

pervision of teachers in the past. Now, accurate observations enable us to recognize specific cause-effect relationships in teaching and learning. Through commonly shared experiences, coaching for increasingly effective and artistic teaching can become a reality.

Let's discard the preobservation conference, a practice no longer needed, and focus our time and energies on what we now know about accelerating teaching excellence through observation and analysis. □

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In Defense of the Preobservation Conference

Preobservation conferences place teaching episodes in context and enhance the supervisor's supportive role.

JOHN LORDON

Madeline Hunter and others who advocate elimination of the preobservation conference argue that such conferences are too time consuming, that they create both supervisor and teacher bias, and that, contrary to popular beliefs, they do not really build rapport between teacher and supervisor. Such rapport, they claim, can only be built through a successful *postobservation* conference.

Hunter's arguments have some validity if we see supervision as limited to the analysis of isolated classroom episodes. However, there are some equally compelling reasons that support the preobservation conference. For instance:

1. *Orientation.* While the typical orientation is to the lesson to be taught, thoughtful supervisors also examine how lessons fit into long-range plans.

It may be possible to do this as part of a postobservation conference, but it is unlikely since teachers then look primarily for feedback on the immediate teaching episode.

2. *Written planning.* Most school districts require written evidence that teachers have completed daily and long-range plans. Not only is the pre-visit conference the logical time to examine such plans, it can help orient the supervisor and lead to discussion about important curriculum decisions. Skilled observers can tell in a short time how thoroughly a teacher has planned, and there is no need to examine written plans. It is important, nevertheless, to scrutinize more than the immediate teaching episode if curriculum is an important concern.

3. *Pupil evaluation.* The preobservation conference provides an opportunity to discuss how the teacher eval-

uates pupils and uses the results of evaluation. It can also be useful to have the teacher provide copies of quizzes and tests, which may be jointly examined and discussed. The whole area of evaluation, feedback to pupils, diagnosis, and remediation is frequently overlooked in the supervisory process. Including pupil evaluation on the agenda of the preobservation conference can lead to positive results, not the least of which may be an improvement in the quality of written tests.

4. *Pupils.* It is most useful for supervisors to know about the pupils in the classes they observe. It is also helpful for teachers to discuss pupil problems with another knowledgeable person. Classes vary considerably in nature. Each one has a different character and a unique quality. Good supervisors want to know as much as possible

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