

## Supervision

ANNE MEEK

### Whatever Happened to Good Vibrations?

I was halfway through the observation when I realized something was wrong. The lesson was unfolding precisely as indicated in the preobservation conference and duly recorded on the official form. The teacher was saying everything she ought to say—stating objectives, giving directions, monitoring practice exercises. She was moving through a nice variety of exercises at a good pace. There was no draggy down time with most students yawning and fidgeting while the teacher demonstrated the problem to those who missed it—quite an accomplishment in a math drill lesson. But something was wrong. The 4th graders moved like robots, as if they didn't know each other, as if they didn't know the teacher as a human being.

Were they paying attention? Yes. No one was off-task. Were they challenging the authority of the teacher? No. No one was misbehaving, nor disrespectful, nor cutting up. I continued to watch closely, take copious notes, and wonder.

I have come to realize that my presence alone can generate assorted fears, unnatural good manners, or the compulsive stiffness of people who are trying to do everything right. So maybe the robot quality was an effect of my presence.

Normally, the impact of an outsider fades in a few minutes. The teacher gets into the lesson, engages the students in the material, and quickly recovers from the stagefright brought on by being observed. On that day, though, the longer I was in the room, the more I felt the flat emotional tone. Was the tension merely lasting longer than usual, or was I sensing a deficiency beyond the scope of the checklist?

Maybe the teacher had rehearsed the lesson, choreographing student re-

sponses and promising extra time out of doors for good behavior. I usually detect this kind of preparation from the self-conscious actions of students. They glance up, see a stranger, and immediately ask, "Is that her?" Or they look searchingly at me, as if to locate my pitchfork. This time they seemed to be just going through their paces.

As the teacher monitored the practice session, I slowed down the note-taking (I had four legal-size pages already) and turned up my whole-brain radar to absorb, perceive, think, and feel.

What came to me was that I wouldn't want to be a student in that room. The teacher wasn't looking at her students as if they were important. She wasn't looking intently into their eyes or listening as if their comments were interesting. She wasn't talking to them as if math were useful or exciting or fun. Her only "hype" was for correct procedures, without a corresponding enthusiasm for how these math facts would expand recipes, balance checkbooks, or contribute to research in nuclear physics. There was little sense of community in the room—that precious togetherness where every student is valued and the teacher is confident that what she is doing is one of the most important jobs in the world. This teacher didn't love teaching.

The lesson wound down exactly as planned. After the allotted 45 minutes, I thanked the teacher and left the room with legal pad, coffee cup, and folder of forms in hand. I found a place to contemplate this recurrent problem in supervision—where the desirable behaviors on the checklist are present but the teaching performance is not exactly hurtful to students but an experience to be endured rather than an invitation to joyful learning.

I shuffled the forms—seven in all

with no space to say what needed to be said, no way to "weed out" this teacher. She was doing all the state required. Nevertheless I had to say something. Judgment is the crux of supervision; and, besides, if I don't deal with a problem that presents itself now, I can't bring it up later.

So I was confronted with another perennial problem: how to state the recommendations and plot out a strategy with some hope of leading the teacher to self-correction in a case where technique is not the problem, and how to divide up what to write on the official papers and what to say in the conference.

After all, I could hardly write "Put good vibrations into your teaching" on those bureaucratic forms, not if I expected to defend myself in court, if I should have to go. Mentally I sorted through the elements of emotion in a classroom: the teacher's voice, eye contact, active listening, pats on the back, and the like. Then I considered methods of increasing self-awareness: audio- and videotaping, and continuing dialogue with me. I weighed the positives and negatives. She had tried so hard, pacing the lesson to fit exactly between 10:00 and 10:45. She had studied the checklist and had planned the lesson according to its requirements. Her organization was excellent, her students were well-behaved. Since the checklist and the conference would reflect all these good points, she would feel a sense of accomplishment; and she should be able to accept the need for improvement. I couched the recommendations simply, one a simple behavioral directive; and the other, a process for self-evaluation.

My impressions, subjected to the scrutiny of the principal, coincided with those he had gleaned on a daily basis. The teacher had difficulties in human relationships. Parents request-

ed their children not be assigned to her. Other teachers formed their team partnerships without her. This confirmation meant that he and I must orchestrate a strategy with just the right balance of recommendations and sup-

port—just the right combination of rigor and empathy—to enable this teacher to learn to love teaching, to impart to students the importance of the content and the value of themselves, or to seek her own fulfillment

elsewhere. There's no official form in all the world that can do that. □

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## English

CHARLES SUHOR

### Delphi Study Probes Future of Technology in English Curriculum

A University of Connecticut study of the opinions of leading English educators in the United States, Canada, and England yielded some interesting predictions about the role of technology in English instruction. Researcher Betsy Barber used the Delphi Technique—in which successive rounds of queries reveal increasingly sharper consensus among experts—to get a projection of the content and methods in English programs by the year 2000.

The panel of experts was generally optimistic about technological changes, holding that teachers will take the leadership in channeling changes such as developing broadened concepts of literacy and making increased use of word processors, video, and information databases in the classroom. The familiar bogeymen of machine-dominated classes, poor drill-and-practice software, formulaic writing, and lack of student interaction were rejected by most of the experts. Instead, they predicted increased attention to oral language skills and writing process instruction (particularly revision) and greater concern with collaborative research and critical analysis of media (especially television).

Despite the tendency toward convergence inherent in the Delphi technique, at least a fourth of the panel maintained sharply opposing views. Unlike the majority, they viewed three obstacles to technological change—high costs, negative teacher attitudes, and poor software—as insurmount-

able. Although they acknowledged that technological change was possible, they viewed its consequences—dehumanized classrooms, the emphasis on format over substance and facts over interpretation—in a negative light.

Barber's report revealed some differences among American, Canadian, and English panelists. While the American group was more optimistic about overcoming financial barriers to technological changes, the English and Canadian experts expressed greater overall optimism about such change. They also were more positive in seeing teachers as active forces in effecting change.

### Grass Roots Excellence Identified in 150 Schools

A Centers of Excellence search conducted by the National Council of Teachers of English resulted in over 700 applications from elementary and secondary schools in the United States and Canada. One hundred fifty were selected as visitation sites after a task force reviewed curriculum descriptions and validators observed the finalists' programs in action.

Skip Nicholson of South Pasadena High School, chair of the task force, described commonalities in the programs, which span 38 states and embrace programs in English, reading, and journalism. All of the programs "enhance student learning—not merely by raising standardized test scores but by generating excitement about learning itself among students and teachers. They fit their communities because local teachers took a hand in developing them. They grow; they

adapt to changes in local circumstances. They accommodate the diversity of students they serve. They rest on sound theory and research." Additionally, the programs cited by the task force are adaptable to other locales so that schools in different parts of the country might benefit from examining program descriptions and visiting the Centers of Excellence sites.

Early in the development of the Centers of Excellence project, NCTE rejected the option of *creating* model programs and chose instead to *identify* existing programs. Nicholson explains this in terms of response to recent reports of educational reform, which have frequently suggested that models of excellence are lacking in American education. "Few of these are new programs...." according to Nicholson. "They've been around during all of the studies, all of the reports, all of the recent reforms. But they went unnoticed because so few people were asking the right questions of the right people.... Those who are trying to carry out reforms need to see examples of effective English programs."

For a list of names and addresses of schools with programs designated as Centers of Excellence, send a self-addressed, stamped (\$56) business envelope to Centers of Excellence, National Council of Teachers of English, 1111 Kenyon Rd., Urbana, IL 61801. □

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