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Personalizing Instructional Supervision Systems

Five years after individualizing a "packaged" system, administrators at Loveland, Colorado, High School see greater teacher autonomy with increased student learning and experience more positive relationships with teachers.

Photographs by Larry Schultz

A View of Change from the Practitioner's Corner

Five years ago the administrative team at Loveland High School, Colorado, shopped the educational marketplace for an instructional supervision system that would provide for better teaching, resulting in increased student learning. Because we believe the most important factor affecting student achievement to be the quality of the instructional staff, we looked for a model that would help us design and implement instructional training to increase teacher effectiveness. We hoped to find a system that would function within our existing organization, without upsetting the good teaching practices already in use.

What we found were several "packaged" systems that taught us how to identify, coach, and reinforce specific instructional behaviors that reportedly increase student achievement. Each system offered observation and conference techniques to diagnose and prescribe remedies for deficient instructional strategies. Unfortunately, we soon discovered that our use of a "packaged" system did not ensure the use of desired techniques by our

Classroom observation validates instructional system. Coprincipals Wenger and June observe Marian Kolstoe in class at Loveland, Colorado, High School.

teachers. Perhaps the reason our staff didn't voluntarily implement the recommended practices is that the structured system provided only superficial skills for implementation.

Teachers need to be able to adapt and adopt instructional strategies, making their own judgments where appropriate; the process of making those judgments characterizes the teaching act. We agree with Costa and Garmston (1985) that the aim of supervision should be to help teachers make better decisions about instruction. However, most of the packaged systems we saw emphasize teaching and supervisory practices that expect and reinforce routinized performance. Our staff prefers a highly individualized and personalized approach. Yet no single supervisory process provides enough flexibility to accommodate the many teaching styles in our high school.

Personalizing a Packaged System

By modifying a packaged system, we have been able to provide what our staff wants: an individualized approach to instructional supervision. We formulated and implemented a plan that is characterized by four steps.

Step 1: set a goal. First we set a goal that we hoped to accomplish within five years: to enable teachers to teach themselves to teach. We wanted teachers to acquire the skills necessary for correcting their own miscalculations (Sergiovanni 1984). By increasing their repertoire of instructional strategies, we hoped that our staff would be able to choose appropriate instructional techniques from an array of options. We called this goal *creating the autonomous teacher*.

The implied intent of our goal is that autonomous teachers will increase students' awareness of their own learning processes. We wanted students to look for the objective in a lesson and to seek an understanding of why they are doing a particular activity. We called this implied goal *creating the autonomous learner*. Our administrative team then made public our five-year goal: autonomous teachers creating autonomous learners.

Step 2: create a vision. Next we needed to establish an attitude conducive to change: a belief that change would be rewarded with success. Recent research has shown that teachers' attitudes change with their behavior as they begin to experience success (Guskey 1985). However, we had problems getting teachers to that point. Our philosophy is a radical departure from traditional practice; high schools have not been organized for close scrutiny of instructional practices. Firestone and Herriott (1982) have described the constraints of large staff size, departmentalization, and diverse staff goals, which inhibit secondary administrators' influence on instructional improvement.

Realizing these constraints, we addressed the problem of a large staff first by dividing all administrative duties into thirds. This means that each administrator evaluates one-third (approximately 25) of the teachers. The concept of a *coprincipalship* began to evolve.

Second, we broke down the walls of departmentalization. We have found that we don't need to understand physics, for example, to understand good teaching. Our acceptance by the departments is better when we focus on specific teaching acts. No longer do we need to feel inadequate in a class we personally have never taught.

Third, we attempted to unify staff goals by publishing our yearly objectives, sharing our five-year plan, and modeling good teaching practices. Departments have begun to adopt goals that are similar, if not identical, to building goals.

Pat Klump uses well-designed lesson plan to increase student learning.

Step 3: provide support. Attitudes conducive to advancement are not created by simply announcing that expectation. Not only have we declared instruction as our priority, but we also make all our decisions in support of these efforts. We speak of "advancement" in teaching, as opposed to "improvement," which implies remediation of a deficiency. We have furnished the necessary resources and opportunities to foster professional growth. These resources take the form of inservice taught by our administrators (together with the district teachers) and formal college courses taught by our staff for our staff. We also share the latest research on teaching and learning through informal but regular study groups composed of teachers and administrators. Through these efforts, instructional supervision has become one component of a staff development program.

In addition to announcing and supporting our expectations, we began using a lesson plan format that incorporates the instructional strategies we adopted from packaged systems. The strategies we selected are: (1) a perceivable objective, (2) clear purpose and relevance, (3) an established and maintained learning set, (4)) learning activities congruent with objectives, (5) modeling that provided an example of the behavior or content desired, (6) informal checks for student understanding, (7) guided practice of content and behavior, and (8) an evaluation plan for measuring attainment of objectives. We periodically collect and read lesson plans, giving individual teachers written feedback. As a result, our staff members display increasingly effective levels of competence in applying these techniques.

We modified the content of our packaged system by requiring appropriate use of these instructional strategies as the *minimal* expectation for all teaching plans; every element is not needed for every lesson. As teachers master these techniques, they request additional strategies. We have added other elements, such as internal bridges, external bridges, closure, and rehearsal techniques (Stahl 1983), which have been used and shared by teachers able to tackle more sophisticated practices.

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We reinforce these strategies by using them in planning the inservice courses that we teach. Faculty meetings are an opportunity to practice what we preach. We model these behaviors in our own presentations, conveying the notion that skillful planning is indeed a high priority.

Step 4: reinforce. An intensive observation/feedback cycle is the single most powerful tool we use to encourage our staff to translate the teaching-learning research into practice. We adapted the structure of our cycle (fig. 1) from the supervision model constructed by Dornbusch and Scott (1975). Teachers understand the process of our cycle; they know the criteria we will be looking for prior to an observation.

Our supervision process is characterized by a four-day observation cycle. Each teacher is visited by the same administrator on four consecutive days, during the same class, for the entire period. We set this repeated sampling as a norm because, like Darling-Hammond and Wise (1983), we believe that administrators cannot adequately assess teaching performance based on only a few minutes in a classroom. Also, as Hunter (1985) has pointed out, many lessons incorporate only a few elements; an appropriate strategy one day may not be appropriate the next. We want to see if teachers can judge when and how a particular technique is appropriate.

With a staff of approximately 75 teachers, our supervisory schedule results in each administrator visiting at least 100 classrooms per year. This number increases for our nontenured teachers, who are observed during two separate cycles each year. Every teacher receives oral and written feedback about the four observations during one-hour conferences with the administrator.

In addition to establishing a supervision cycle, we model our belief that instruction is important by enforcing two rules. First, if an unforeseen event interrupts our schedule, we will start the four-day cycle over again. Second, we will allow no interruptions (that we can control) in our schedule of observation.

When a crisis occurs during a period when an observation is scheduled, the coprincipalship concept enables another administrator to address the problem. By consistently announcing and following this procedure, we show teachers, parents, and district personnel that we recognize and support the importance of instructional supervision. The coprincipalship approach has enabled us to modify the cursory nature of a packaged supervision system.

What Came from Our Modified Plan

One consistent outcome of our personalized plan for instructional supervision is the development of a positive relationship between administrators and teachers, which we believe has been fostered by three circumstances. First, our approach to supervision is flexible in that we share techniques we have learned from other teachers. Our allowance for variation stimulates teachers to become more adaptable in what they will accept and implement.

Second, our own administrative failures seem to work in our favor. For instance, we sometimes expect too much too soon, have our own teacher

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favorites, and unintentionally alienate some teachers. We deal with our mistakes by admitting them, soliciting teachers' input for an analysis of why we failed, and continuing to work toward our goal.

Third, our conscious and persistent effort to build trust helps foster a positive relationship between administrators and staff. While an atmosphere of trust encourages teachers to take risks and share new behaviors, trying to create it is complex—not a procedure to be obtained easily from a packaged system. We try to build trust by being predictable in our expectations and actions. Once teachers know how we will react (as coach, not judge), they are free to try new techniques with confidence in an atmosphere conducive to experimentation.

We are now in the fifth year of our five-year plan. We have seen our teachers become more autonomous in their teaching; they are better able to make correct judgments and appropriate decisions at "teachable moments." After years of experimentation, we believe that our personalized approach to instructional supervision is best for a complex organization. Before you buy a packaged system, consider modifying one. It worked for us.

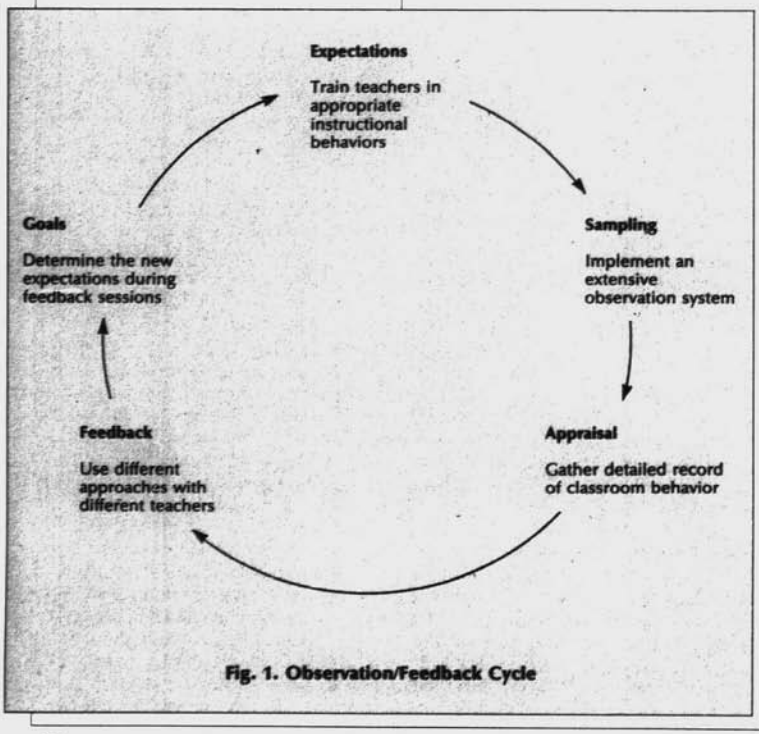

Fig. 1. Observation/Feedback Cycle

A View of Change from the Researcher's Corner

Some of us who have taught instructional supervision nearby at the University of Colorado–Boulder were able to study the Loveland High School administrative team's efforts. We spent countless hours observing their staff development practices and interviewing teachers and administrators. We can certainly document and elaborate on the process they have reported. Beyond that, however, we wanted to know how far they had come toward reaching their goal. Had they developed autonomous teachers and students?

Our graduate students and the literature also stimulated questions. Research tells us that teacher evaluation is not commonly used for instructional improvement; it is unusual to find instructional supervision embedded in an administrator-conducted staff development effort (Wise and Darling-Hammond 1984, Guzzetti and Martin 1986). Therefore, we wanted to know if results had been worth the expended resources (time, dollars, and effort). Our graduate students asked how teachers reacted to such close scrutiny. What was the effect of a rigorous supervisory cycle?

Our queries concerned the effects of changing teachers' attitudes and behaviors. We focused on the consequences of implementation and reinforcement (supervision) of that implementation. Had changes in teacher behavior affected student performance? Was the assumption that improved instruction would result in improved learning a logical one?

How Can We Examine Effects?

Our first thought was to determine effects by comparing achievement test scores. However, since Loveland was a high-achieving school before the staff development effort and had continued to maintain that record, this strategy did not prove useful. We were familiar with statistical peculiarities (regression effects) when attempting to show statistically significant growth with ex-

"We speak of 'advancement' in teaching, as opposed to 'improvement,' which implies remediation of a deficiency."

treme groups. Instead, we chose to use naturalistic techniques to identify differences that would indicate practical significance.

One researcher conducted audiorecorded, semistructured interviews in a private setting with selected teachers. We used a purposive sampling procedure to identify a range of informants—from teachers who had been enthusiastic to those who, in one administrator's words, were "not exactly our fans." We asked teachers to describe benefits and drawbacks of implementing new teaching strategies, to identify any differences in students' performance or awareness of the learning process, and to appraise the usefulness of their supervision.

We also conducted audiotaped interviews with small groups of students in a private setting, asking them to talk about their teachers' instruction and their own awareness of the teaching-learning process. Had they noticed teachers using instructional techniques that helped them learn? If so, had these techniques made them more aware of how to learn? And, finally, had the teaching made a difference in their grades?

The Teachers' Report

The teachers described three benefits resulting from the implementation and supervision of new teaching strategies.

1. *Increased student learning.* When asked if student performance had changed as a result of particular instructional methods, teachers responded that they believe that their students are learning more, but not necessarily earning better grades. (Interviews with students reinforced this perception.) Teachers did report improved student performance on informal measures, such as essays, assignments, and pre- and postunit tests.

Teachers also related that students are more aware of the teaching-learning process. One English teacher in the building for nine years noted:

> Students seem to expect to accomplish more now. Once a few teachers establish practices like stating objectives, the kids look for it in other classes. It's a subtle process; teachers don't say, "Now we're going to do guided practice." Yet the students are very critical of classes where they don't feel a sense of structure.

2. *Established teacher autonomy.* Teachers, speaking of standards for their own performance, felt that establishing a repertoire of instructional strategies increases their awareness of what constitutes good teaching. They have increased their accountability for learning through continuous monitoring of student progress and have engaged in substantive conversations about instruction with their colleagues. They have become attuned to the craft of teaching. An English teacher in the building for eight years explained:

> Teachers are aware of those who put thought and effort into their preparation. The status quo has become following the elements of instruction toward specific outcomes, whereas before the status quo was each to his own. Before, if someone didn't give much thought to teaching, no one would know the difference. Now it's different, and I don't mean bad.

3. *Improved attitudes toward supervision.* Teachers were unanimous in their appreciation of the observation/feedback cycle. They described this intense scrutiny (four consecutive days) as uncomfortable but necessary. One teacher related the act of watching teaching to watching a movie; she explained that it is more difficult to

watch several 15-minute segments of a film and try to piece it together than it is to watch the whole two-hour movie and understand it. The intensive observation system enables the administrator to see the whole movie.

Teachers also attributed their administrative team's approach to observation as a factor that fosters positive attitudes. Administrators' acceptance of variation in implementation and teaching style prompts teachers to willingly try new methods. Other teachers spoke of the observation-supervision process as a professional growth effort for both administrators and teachers.

> The attitude the administrator displays is one of coeducator, like we're all in this together. The attitude is, "We're here to help you out; we're not out to get you."

As a result, teachers have come to expect and respect their administrators' knowledge about the teaching-learning process:

> I can ask them an educational question, and they can give me ten articles on that. They're "educator-administrators," not "administrator-educators."

The Students' Report

Students articulately identified teachers' behaviors that have helped them become autonomous learners. We identified three propositions from the students' taped interviews.

1. *Students are aware of teachers' instructional practices.* Students were able to identify specific teaching strategies that they find beneficial, although no effort had been made to train students in the language of instruction. They didn't know labels like "closure" or "guided practice," yet they were able to describe these techniques. For example, one senior explained "purpose and relevance" as used by his physics teacher:

> The best teacher I have applies the lesson to something you do everyday. My physics teacher installs experiments along the way and gives examples while he's lecturing. A lot of teachers relate the topic to other experiences.

Students reported how many of their teachers gave objectives for the day and the percentage of those who used "purpose and relevance." Their comments reveal uneven degrees of implementation (or degrees of effectiveness) among teachers.

"Once teachers know how we will react (as coach, not judge), they are free to try new techniques with confidence. . . ."

2. *Students benefit from teachers' organizational patterns.* The imagery students used when talking about the benefits of teachers' organizational practices is particularly powerful and illuminating. They spoke of the "tools" they were given to learn with and the "atmosphere" teachers set for learning. One senior stated:

> Almost all my classes have a "game plan." That's very helpful because it sets boundaries. The teacher lets you know what you'll be doing, why you're doing it, and how you're going to be doing it.

3. *Students believe good instruction affects their learning.* Students distinguished between learning more and earning better grades. They believe that teachers who are implementing the strategies they described are causing them to learn more; however, better grades are not necessarily an end product. In one junior's words:

> I can't say I get better grades because of a teacher's teaching. Their teaching does affect how easy it is to get that grade. It's hard to teach yourself. It's easier if they give it to you to take than if you have to pull it out.

What Can Research Learn from Practice?

Researchers, practitioners, and trainers can be encouraged by these findings. The Loveland administrative team's efforts have shown that secondary administrators can overcome organizational constraints to directly effect instructional improvement. That is, "packaged" supervision systems can work if we open the packages and use the contents in creative ways.□

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