



ENHANCING PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

Building Trust With Teachers
Facilitated by: Dr. Shelly Arneson



It's Not What You Say;

It's How You Say It

What are the primary goals of an evaluation process?



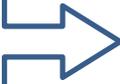
Conversations with Teachers

1. What might you consider changing?
2. How might you say things differently?
3. What might be some strategies you might add to your repertoire?

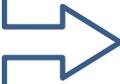
APPLICATION AND PRACTICE

Frame suggestions as questions:

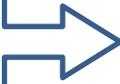
Try calling on
genders equally.



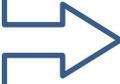
Make sure all students
are paying attention.



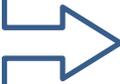
Make sure your
assessment actually
matches the learning
goals.



You need to pose more
higher-order questions.



Too many students
were talking or texting.



IMPROVING TEACHING

One Conversation at a Time

Teacher evaluation conferences become more effective when we shift the focus from inspection to reflection.

Shelly Arneson

Speak in such a way that others love to listen to you. Listen in such a way that others love to speak to you.” As this anonymous quotation implies, both speaking and listening are essential to effective communication. It’s unfortunate, then, that meaningful two-way exchanges are largely absent from teacher observation and evaluation conferences. Here are some suggestions for how school leaders can make conversations about improving professional practice more collaborative, shifting the focus from inspection to reflection.

Talk *With* Teachers, Not *To* Them

As I work with schools across the United States, many teachers tell me that they

feel the observation and evaluation process is something that is done *to* them. Even if an administrator has only glowing things to say about a classroom lesson, the post-observation meeting is often one-sided, sounding like this: “I thought it was great. I liked the way you grouped the students. Any questions before you sign to acknowledge you received this?” Even if the teacher wanted to talk about the lesson, this type of introduction shuts that door.

Teachers need to believe administrators have their best interest—as well as the best interest of students—at heart.

Why is this practice still in existence? There are two main reasons:

- *Time constraints.* Teachers and administrators simply don't feel they have the time to engage in professional dialogue about teaching practice. Some administrators even admit to skipping the post-observation conference altogether, saying that “it takes so long to do the observations that we don't have time to meet afterward.”

- *Fear of the unknown.* If we open up the observation conference to talk more deeply about teaching practice, we might reveal that we don't know all the answers. It seems safer to keep the meeting on a surface level. This fear, by the way, is not one-sided. I hear teachers say, “My principal doesn't want to talk to me,” but I also hear principals say, “Even if I open up the conversation, some of my teachers won't talk to me.”

In many districts and schools, doing



evaluations “to” teachers is simply the way business has always been conducted, and nobody seems to know how to break the pattern. Educators realize the futility of talking about superficial issues, but if you don't have

a purposeful plan, you will wind up talking about a whole lot of nothing. To shift from a culture of inspection to one of reflection, you need to address the barriers and move toward solutions.



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Notice how much more efficient the second scenario is in steering the conversation toward a practice that the teacher can work on. Although it may seem that it doesn't take long to ask a teacher how the lesson went, the answer is likely to lead you down multiple rabbit holes with no rabbit to show for it. The second scenario uses the time much more wisely, and it's much more likely to result in improved teacher practice.

Overcoming Fear of the Unknown

Principals who want to talk *with* teachers need to overcome their fear of not having all the answers. Their attitude should be, “we’re going to learn and grow together.” In one study (Arneson, 2012), I wanted to find out which factor was more important in determining whether teachers trusted their school leader—character or competence. A common feeling among the more than 500 teachers participating in the study was, “I don’t mind if you don’t know all the answers. Just be honest with me about that. I need to know I can trust you.”

When you admit you don’t have all the answers, the dialogue often becomes more reciprocal. As a school leader, you have some information that you can share with the teacher about best practices you’ve seen in many different classrooms. But you need to remember that the teacher knows his or her students and classroom better than anyone and likely has some valuable thoughts about how to improve learning for the students. The conference then becomes

Making Better Use of Time

One of the best strategies for reducing the time necessary for reflection conferences is narrowing the topic. Instead of trying to talk about everything, focus on a couple of key practices. Then you can spend less time addressing the question, “How did you feel the lesson went?” (which, by the way, was how I began conferences for many years as a principal). This question feels safe to school leaders—and to teachers—but it can take up an inordinate amount of time.

Instead, focus on the data you collected in the observation. Pick one or two key areas in the teacher’s practice that will have the most effect on student learning, and start there. This might sound like, “In what ways did your questioning techniques in this lesson invite students to participate in the discussion?” This shift does not require more time, but rather a better use of time.

Here’s how an inspection-based conversation and a reflection-based conversation might differ.

Inspection

PRINCIPAL: So, how did you feel the lesson went?

TEACHER: I guess their behavior was pretty good, except for Joseph falling asleep. He’s had problems with that. Have you talked with his mom at all?

PRINCIPAL: I haven’t, really, but that sure was an issue. Other than that, how did you feel the lesson went?

TEACHER: I liked the lesson plan. Mrs. Schwab is going to use it for her class, I think.

PRINCIPAL: Well, that’s good. What else?

Reflection

PRINCIPAL: Let’s take a look at the data from the observation, particularly the transitions.

TEACHER: The evidence you collected, especially the time stamps that showed how many minutes it took my students to do certain things, really helped me see that my transition times are too long, which decreases the level of engagement.

PRINCIPAL: I noticed that, too. How could you shorten the transition times to increase engagement?

one of sharing, not one of telling.

I knew a counseling professor who said, “Trust the process.” He meant that we can’t go into a counseling session (or in this case, a conversation with a teacher about teaching) with a set agenda. Some administrators have told me that the practice in their district is to show up at every post-observation conference with the same nine questions. Such a routine doesn’t allow for the give and take of ideas. Instead, school leaders and teachers need to practice the craft of listening with an open mind.

Here’s an example that shows the difference between an “I know more than you do” inspection mode and one that invites introspection and reflection.

Inspection

TEACHER: I feel like you don’t know what I teach in band. How are you going to accurately assess me?

PRINCIPAL: I don’t need to know anything about musical instruments.

Reflection

PRINCIPAL: Tell me a little bit about what I will be seeing when I come in to watch you teach your chorus lesson. I admit music is not my strong suit, but I look forward to watching your engagement strategies.

TEACHER: One of the things you’ll see is when the altos are practicing their part, students in the other three parts are marking with their pencils where they’ll be taking breaths or writing the pronunciations of the German under the notes.

PRINCIPAL: Thank you for telling me what to watch for.

The shift from inspection to reflection honors the notion that although neither the teacher nor the principal has all the answers, both are willing to hear what the other has to say.

Although these sample snippets of conversation might not be as messy as those we often encounter in

conferences with teachers, the point is that administrators have a responsibility to hone and focus conversation through purposeful dialogue. The more actively engaged teachers are in the professional learning process, the more likely they are to improve their practice (Lipton & Wellman, 2013).

The Importance of Communication Skills

A second important insight about improving teaching through conversation is simply the importance of communication. My study focusing on character and competence (Arneson, 2012) also asked teachers to define

Teaching represents the complexity of teaching through four domains and 22 components. At a given time and for a given individual, teaching practice may be rock-solid in some areas but less than proficient in other areas.

We sometimes hear educators refer to *teachers* instead of addressing *teaching practice*. For example, some will say, “That teacher is proficient.” Or “My principal said I was ‘developing.’” It is not simply a matter of semantics; it’s a matter of precision. Even if we wanted to, we couldn’t expect to capture the essence of a teacher in a 15-minute observation. But we *can* begin to notice patterns

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trust-building behaviors their principals either did or did not do. The number one trust builder was, not surprisingly, communication.

As I worked with principals in one district, we were discussing the notion that a teacher’s practice is multifaceted, with strengths in some areas and room for growth in other areas. One principal shook her head and said, “But what do you do if the teacher’s lesson just sucks?” I was horrified. If we want our teachers to talk respectfully with students, and we want students to talk respectfully with teachers and other students, shouldn’t we expect the same of ourselves?

The fact is, the notion that teaching is one-dimensional and that a lesson “just sucks” is preposterous. Charlotte Danielson’s (2007) Framework for

of teaching practice in that time—and even better in several 15-minute blocks of time throughout the year.

Recognizing the multidimensional and complex nature of teaching is half the battle. How school leaders communicate with teachers is the other, and perhaps more important, piece. One of my favorite quotes says, “They won’t care how much you know unless they know how much you care.” This doesn’t mean that everyone has to love one another and hold hands while singing “Kumbaya.” It means that teachers need to believe administrators have their best interest—as well as the best interest of students—at heart.

If we focus on what we believe we need to say *to* someone—thinking “Well, they need to hear it. It’s for their own good”—but we express it

in a way that's not palatable to hear, we defeat our own purpose. The other person is simply going to build up a wall that prevents them from hearing what we had to say. The question is, do we want to be right, or do we want to grow teaching practice? If the answer is the latter, then we have to focus on our own communication skills. These are some important ones:

■ *Listen at least as much as you speak.* Recognize that the teacher likely has ideas about how to improve the lesson, and encourage him or her to process those thoughts. "Since you started using academic conversation cards, what have you observed? What are your thoughts about how you'll refine this strategy?" is infinitely more powerful than, "I'm glad you decided to use those academic conversation cards." The first phrasing honors the fact that the teacher has some thoughts about improving the strategy and invites that teacher to share.

■ *Be aware of body language.* Leaning in and nodding, sitting next to someone instead of across from him or her—these simple moves invite conversation that might otherwise be stilted. The first thing I did when I became principal was to get rid of the enormous desk in my office that was as deep as it was long. I substituted a round table at which I could sit with teachers when discussing their evaluations and goals for the year. Sitting next to someone reduces the barrier between you. Nodding as a teacher shares strategies lets the teacher know that you value the important work he or she is doing.

■ *Craft feedback that invites dialogue instead of shutting it down.* In many cases, it's helpful to substitute questions for statements. Consider the power of "Given your knowledge of your students' varied skill levels, how do you plan your groups?" versus "I don't think you should group your students that way." A caution, though:

Be careful of "Why" questions ("Why do you do that?"), which can make the teacher feel defensive. "How" questions invite more rigorous thinking about the topic. So instead of "Why didn't you tell that student to stop texting?" say "How do you usually address texting in class?" Instead of "Why did you use exit cards?" say "How do you use the information you obtain through exit cards to plan future instruction?"

■ *Ask open-ended questions that will allow for future learning, not just questions that are lesson-specific.* A question

mattered to them when their principal asked about their family, their terminally ill grandmother, or their broken-down car. This support paved the way for richer and more meaningful conversations about teaching.

Empowering Teachers to Improve

Teachers and administrators are exploring new territory every day as we learn how to talk more collaboratively about rigorous content, the classroom environment, and how to improve student achievement. If we

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like "Will you use more academic conversation skills the next time you teach that lesson?" only allows a yes-or-no response, and it's only focused on that particular lesson. In contrast, the question, "How might you use academic conversation skills in the future?" is more open-ended and broadens the teacher's reflection. In the most successful conversations, teachers will leave with some new generalizations or big ideas that will influence their future lessons and learning.

■ *Understand that relationships matter.* Teachers and administrators who have a trusting working relationship will find that communication is easier and more productive. If we don't have to walk on eggshells around one another and if I am not fearful that you will use what I say against me, the dialogue is much more likely to have a profound effect on teacher growth. In my research (Arneson, 2012), many teachers said it

are willing to work together, using communication skills that build trust rather than break it down, we will find that all stakeholders will benefit—and teachers, in particular, will be better advocates for their own practice and growth. ■

References

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NEXT STEPS

IN LIGHT OF TODAY'S LEARNING

WHAT GREW YOUR PRACTICE?

WHAT WAS CONFIRMED ABOUT YOUR PRACTICE?

WHAT ARE YOUR NEXT STEPS?



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