

13 TEACHERS TEACHING TEACHERS™

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF TEACHER LEADERS



BY KELLY LOCK

School coaches can help alleviate the isolation teachers often feel, differentiate professional development for teachers, and bring about changes that enhance student learning by engaging teachers in collegial visits.

A collegial visit that becomes an

Dear colleague, please come for a visit

THE COLLEGIAL VISIT PROVIDES
A STRUCTURED OPPORTUNITY
TO LEARN FROM EACH OTHER

opportunity for professional learning is much more than walking across the hall to watch another teacher's classroom. Though such visits can be beneficial, and I encourage them, quality collegial visits that transfer to meaningful and long-lasting job-embedded professional development are carefully planned classroom visits that have a clear focus, administrative participation, and an opportunity for reflection and application of newfound learning.

Why visit?

There are many reasons that a teacher may want or need to visit another classroom: garner teaching strategies, learn a new teaching model, understand expecta-

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NSDC profile

Diana Lee pioneered the



school-based coach position at her school.

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tions across curricular areas and/or across grade levels, or analyze classroom procedures. The reason for the visit is established based on the observing teacher’s needs. Because these visits cost money and time, it is critical for the visit facilitator — principal, coordinator, or instructional coach — to analyze the motivation for these requests. There may be reasons for discouraging such visits — because of a teacher’s inability to understand the importance of confidentiality, an unwillingness to try new things, and/or because it will make the observing teacher feel inadequate. But if we hold to the belief that teachers, like our students, have the capacity for growth, then as long as the collegial visit is well organized, professional learning will occur.

Inviting teachers to observe

If collegial visits are new in your district, the first step will be inviting teachers to consider the opportunity. This can be broached in a number of ways. First, during a coaching situation, when a teacher seems at a loss or unsure of strategies, ask if she would like to see another teacher using strategies that might be helpful. Second, a teacher might comment that she knows she should be using a particular strategy as another colleague does, but doesn’t know how to begin. In this situation, ask the teacher if she wants to see this or another colleague in action and volunteer to set up the visit. The third way the invitation might be presented is through the principal. However, this must not be a way for the principal to remediate teachers. It must come about from an authentic discussion that shows the principal wants to support the teacher by differentiating her staff’s professional development, and it should be an opportunity offered to all teachers who want to take advantage of it.

Planning the purpose of the visit

Once a teacher expresses an interest in observing, the next step is identifying the purpose of the visit.

The observation must focus on one or two specific things. For example, if a teacher is struggling with how to teach reading strategies in her class, then as she observes, she should focus solely on what strategies the other teacher is

using, how the strategies are taught and how students apply the strategies. Everything else should be filtered out, which is difficult, but discussion during the pre-visit planning can ensure this happens.

To determine the focus, the visit facilitator should ask a teacher:

- What is your specific need?
- What do you need to see happening?
- How will you know when something is working?
- How will you know that students are learning and applying what they learn?
- Why is observing another teacher more helpful than reading about it in a journal or book?
- How will you use the information garnered?
- What do you do that already works?
- What is your timeline for implementing any new information gathered?

Once the focus is determined, it needs to be written on the observation sheet as a constant reminder of the visit’s purpose. This will prove helpful later during the actual visit should other factors begin to interfere. This focus should be shared with the teacher to be observed so that she knows exactly what the focus is as well. It can be unsettling to a teacher to have visitors furiously taking notes and not know what is being analyzed.

In addition, several other considerations should be made. First, since time constraints are an issue and money for substitutes may be at a premium, the length of the observation is important to establish. In some cases, it may be important for a teacher to spend a half or full day observing other classrooms and schools, which gives a teacher a chance to see multiple teachers and students and/or grade levels. A substitute may not be an option, and in some situations, it may prove necessary that a teacher visit during her planning period over several days or only visit once while another teacher or administrator covers her class.

Second, though the focus may center on content strategies, observing teachers outside one’s own content area is helpful. A math teacher who wants to do more group activities can find great benefit in watching a science teacher’s class-

THREE WAYS TO GET STARTED

1. During a coaching situation, ask if the teacher would like to see another teacher using strategies that might be helpful.



2. If a teacher comments that she knows she should be using a particular strategy, ask the teacher if she wants to see a colleague in action and volunteer to set up the visit.

3. The principal can offer collegial visit opportunities to all teachers who want to take advantage of them.

room. The same is true for grade levels. In one of the most successful observations I conducted, a middle school teacher who was struggling with the implementation of a writer's workshop in a classroom where the students were functioning at 2nd and 3rd grade levels found that visiting students in several kindergarten through 3rd-grade classrooms was critical to revamping what she was doing so she could meet her students where they were. Similarly, another middle school teacher realized that she needed to make adjustments to her classroom to better prepare her student after observing honors and non-honors classes at a local high school.

If a teacher is taken out of her subject matter and/or grade level, the visit facilitator should discuss what differences might be seen and how that might affect the visit. Good teaching is universal, but discussions about how to adapt something learned from a 6th- to 9th-grade classroom or science to math classroom may be necessary.

Selecting the teacher to observe

Although it is helpful to visit teachers in one's own building, I believe it is more conducive to professional development to visit a classroom in another school. Teachers have relationships with teachers they work with daily. These relationships can interfere with authentic evaluation of instruction and can make the observed teacher especially unnerved by the process.

In addition, teachers often know the students in their own building. During collegial visits, the focus should not be based on pre-existing relationships and/or conceptions about students but, rather, instructional practices and how they affect students.

I also believe that removing a teacher from her environmental comfort zone makes it easier to concentrate on the predetermined focus, which is established in advance by the observing teacher and the visit facilitator.

In our school district, secondary instructional coaches teach at least one course in their content area. As a result, teachers can observe coaches in their teaching roles. However time constraints sometimes interfere. Because of relationships the coaches have built with teachers in their build-

ings, we use one another to connect throughout the district, and in some cases, the coach from the host building also participates in the observation.

Most importantly, teachers must agree to be observed. Though most are open to sharing ideas, it is critical to ask a teacher's permission to visit her room, the purpose must be clearly explained, and the teacher must have the option to say no, especially when this is a new process in your building. Despite the desire to share ideas, there is often fear and anxiety involved in opening one's classroom for scrutiny. If teachers say no to a visit, value their decision, but don't remove them from the list of potential classrooms to visit. Ultimately, the teachers you choose to approach for such visits are those who exhibit strengths in teaching strategies and building relationships with students, and they have valuable information about the profession to share with others. After they realize you aren't spying on them and/or the other teacher isn't there to criticize but learn, teachers may change their minds. This, in itself, can be valuable professional development.

The visit

By the time the visit takes place, the focus and length of stay should have been shared with all parties involved and e-mails sent as reminders. The visit facilitator should have an idea of what is happening in the class before the visit and he or she should know the expectations of the teacher to be observed. For instance, a teacher may be conducting writing conferences, which allows for more freedom in the class, and, as a result, will have prepped her class before the visit, telling students that visitors will be asking them questions. Another teacher may want visitors to sit quietly at a space she has for visitors while she conducts an experiment that demands the class's full attention.

The issue of confidentiality may be a concern for some teachers. It must be discussed thoroughly with all involved. Obviously, teachers know that the confidentiality of our students should never be compromised. As professionals, we must also honor the confidentiality of our colleagues. When an observing teacher returns to



Teachers to approach for collegial visits

- **Have strengths in teaching strategies.**
- **Are skilled in relationships with students.**
- **Have valuable information about the profession to share.**

her own building, it must be clear that she cannot complain about or criticize the observed teacher. The observing teacher should focus on her learning experiences and what she can use in her own classroom — not her colleague’s teaching. After all, the observed teacher deserves respect for opening her classroom. Criticism could cause other teachers to keep their doors closed.

The administrator needs to understand this is not time for an evaluation. Though an administrator might be present, she must take the role of supporter, showing all teachers involved appreciation for their willingness to share ideas to further student learning.

Arriving early at the school to stop by the office, sign in, receive visitor passes and conduct any other security process is critical so that all visitors are in the classroom before the start of class. Arriving after class has begun should not be an option unless the observed teacher has specifically asked that you arrive at that time so that they could tend to her students before visitors arrive.

The observing teacher should record her observations on the note-taking guide that’s been provided. (See tool on p. 6.) I also encourage the coach or visit facilitator to do the same.

First, teachers are asked to watch what students are doing. If possible, the observing teacher should sit or talk with students about the focus of the observation. This can be just as valuable as watching the teacher. For instance, when the middle school teacher mentioned earlier, observed a high school classroom, she had this experience, “The conversation with former students and even students from other middle schools has proven to be one of the most valuable PD experiences I have ever had. This experience gave me insight from the students’ point of view.”

The second column on the observation form focuses on what the observed teacher is doing. How is she interacting with the students? What questions is she asking?

Finally, the observing teacher is asked to note questions that emerge from the observation, and, again, all of these things are tracked in accordance with the predetermined focus. The rest, as difficult as it may be, must be ignored.

When an unfocused observation takes place,

it is easy to get hung up on details that can detract from instructional practices. For example, on one visit that didn’t include pre-visit planning, the observing teacher was bothered by the fact that students were chewing gum, which she did not allow in her classroom. At first, she couldn’t get beyond this, and as a result, the purpose of the visit was in jeopardy. Thankfully, the observing teacher was able to refocus with the help of the visit facilitator and glean instructional practices that were being used to help boost student achievement rather than obsessing over students chewing gum.

Such things may seem trivial, but without a clear focus it is easy to become distracted, causing the collegial visit to become a waste of resources. This brings about another important point — one that cannot always be addressed in large group situations.

Role of the visit facilitator

The visit facilitator should also attend the observation and take notes alongside the observing teacher, so that a comparison of the notes can be used to guide the reflection. In large groups, unfortunately, like our students, teachers can appear focused and engaged, but behind the glazed-over look, they are creating their shopping lists, processing an argument with a student, or simply dreaming of when the clock will show the magic time when everyone gets to go home.

A collegial visit allows for more one-on-one attention. Besides helping the observing teacher remain focused, the visit facilitator can also provide another view on what was observed in the classroom, which proves helpful when the observing teacher later reflects on and implements what was observed.

The visit facilitator probably cannot participate in all collegial visits. If the principal, for example, is the sole facilitator of such visits, she clearly cannot leave the building each time a teacher participates in a collegial visit. Even so, clear expectations should be established for the process of reflecting on the collegial visit. When the teacher visits alone, pre-visit planning to establish the focus is critical. A meaningful conversation about what could and should happen must take place. Stressing that notes should be

ADMINISTRATOR POINTS:

- It’s not an evaluation.
- Your presence is optional.
- Be supportive.
- Show appreciation for teachers’ willingness to share ideas to further student learning.



taken is not enough. The visit facilitator must make it clear that each notation must be related to the observation focus.

After the visit

After returning to her building, the observing teacher should visit with the administrator to debrief and reflect on the experience of watching another teacher and what she has learned. In larger schools, debriefing with an administrator may not be possible.

But, in all cases, the observing and the observed teacher should write a reflection paper that they submit to the administrator and share with one another. With a reflection, the professional development is two-fold. One, the observing teacher discusses what teaching and learning she saw that could be implemented in her classroom. Two, the observing teacher reflects on what it was like to see another person teaching. If the observed teacher is brought into the reflection process, then she also is able to benefit, which allows another layer of learning to take place.

Again, because of time constraints, the reflection will have to be individually planned. If possible, it is most beneficial to have everyone involved discuss the observation immediately following the closing. In other situations, it may take place after school, or if a teacher observes several teachers within a building, during the department's planning time. Because some school districts are quite large, these reflections might need to be shared via e-mail, allowing for ongoing communication about the observation to take place.

Create next steps

Watching another teacher practice the craft of teaching is tremendous. It can reaffirm what we are already doing, and it can help us continue to learn and grow. Guiding the observing teacher through the reflection of her experience and asking her to create the next steps is critical whether she attends with someone or alone.

But, as one principal told me, "Changes in practice should be evident following a visit; otherwise, a collegial visit is no more than an experience."

Teachers cannot change everything in one

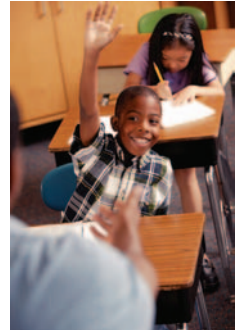
fell swoop, and expecting a teacher to change more than one thing at a time is unreasonable. However, if the observation focus was based on reading strategies, then what one strategy could the observing teacher apply in her room? Once that one thing is chosen, the visit facilitator needs to help the teacher create a timeline for implementation which should take place no later than seven days after the initial observation because the likelihood of implementation decreases with each passing day.

Reflection after the next step

The final step of the collegial visit is to reflect on the implementation of the new idea or strategy. If it failed, that's okay. Analyze why it failed. Analyze what could be done differently. Examine the student work. It could be that the teacher feels it was a failure because of her level of comfort with the strategy. It could be that the students really did poorly, but they did so because it was a new strategy for them, too. They need time to practice just as the teacher needs time to practice. If it worked, examine why and prepare to try it again. If possible, include the observed teacher in this process. Then the two teachers can compare notes and discuss the teaching of the strategy together.

About the author

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