

Tools FOR SCHOOLS

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS AND LEADERS

Learning through a lens

Classroom videos of teachers and students
prove to be a powerful professional learning tool

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

During a videotape of a classroom lesson, one student consistently had his hand up, vying for the teacher's attention. But teacher Becky Hinson never called on the student.

"I didn't see him while I was teaching. If you had told me that, I wouldn't have believed it. But, there it was on tape," she said.

Hinson taped herself teaching as part of the portfolio she created while seeking certification from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards.

"Videotaping myself teaching was one of the most worthwhile experiences I had. You see yourself doing things that you don't know that you do," she said.

Now, as a curriculum coordinator at Green Sea Floyds High School in Horry County, S.C., Hinson encourages others teachers to tape

themselves and teams of teachers to view videotapes of exemplary instruction as a way to learn more about how to improve their own teaching practice.

Using videos as a professional development tool is growing in popularity as videocameras and video playback machines have become ubiquitous in schools across the nation.

Numerous commercial ventures have sprung up to offer videotapes to schools and many school districts have taken videocameras into classrooms to create their own videos of exemplary instruction.

With the popularity of YouTube and the ease of posting videos online, educators can be certain that video will become even more widely used. But ensuring that videotapes are used as an effective professional development tool requires far more

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Classroom videos are a powerful professional learning tool

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than just sitting teachers in front of a television.

“Videos allow the observation of teachers and students and videos allow that observation to take place in a way that can be reviewed time and time again and studied. They can be incredibly powerful learning tools,” said Curtis Linton, executive producer for School Improvement Network/Video Journal. Now in its 16th year of operation, Video Journal has been in well over 1,000 schools and taped more than 3,000 teachers.

“So much of professional development has relied on workshops and books. The limitation for both of them is that they’re devoid of students,” he said.

Sandi Everlove, chief academic officer for TeachFirst, said observing teachers in action is essential for getting a clear picture of good instruction. “But it’s not feasible for us to have lots of teachers take time off to go and watch other teachers teach. But it is feasible to videotape good teachers teaching and share those videos with others and talk about what works and what doesn’t work,” said Everlove whose company uses videotapes in its work to develop professional learning communities in schools across the country.

Linton believes videotaped observations offer many advantages over traditional in-person observations. “Classroom observations don’t allow observers to back up and review what they’ve seen. That means the discussion is only as good as your memory and your notes. A video is a visual record of what’s actually gone on,” he said.

For videos to be effective professional development tools, however, requires that educators look at and discuss the videos with colleagues. “When it’s watched with a colleague, they can really unpack what they saw going on in the video,” Everlove said.

Jim Stigler, professor of psychology at UCLA, has used videotapes to study teaching throughout his career, including his work as a principal investigator for the TIMSS project, agrees with Everlove. Teachers cannot learn simply by watching another teacher “doing it right. . . . No one can learn that way,” he said.

The learning occurs because of the analysis and discussion that follows the watching of a videotape, he said. To deepen the learning, Stigler said teachers should put their learning into action by planning and delivering lessons. Then, and only then, he said, should they consider videotaping their own instruction for study.

Stigler believes teachers should first learn how to analyze videos before they videotape themselves teaching. “Looking at yourself is very threatening. You want to develop your analytic skills in situations that aren’t so threatening,” he said.

In addition, Stigler is skeptical about the value of a teacher watching his or her own practice on tape. “If you videotape the way you teach, you’re not going to learn a new idea. Even after you start looking at yourself, you can still have blindspots if you don’t have colleagues sitting there with you while you’re viewing the videotape and critiquing your teaching,” Stigler said.

Linton sees similar challenges with videotaping peers in the building. “What gets videotaped and shared may be common practice rather than best practice,” he said.

Everlove said she has learned that schools must have high levels of trust before colleagues can effectively critique each other’s teaching. “If that person on the video teaches in my building, I am far less comfortable critiquing that person. Viewing videos of teachers who are not in their building, maybe not even in their district, frees teacher to go deeper into their analysis,” Everlove said.

Self-videotaping can be helpful if teachers have a clear purpose for why they are videotaping themselves, Everlove said. For example, teachers might watch a video of themselves to gauge their wait time during lessons or to see how successful they’ve incorporated a particular strategy into their teaching.

When it’s used correctly, Everlove believes videos have the power to transform thinking and practice. “If every teacher in the U.S. were to film themselves for an hour and calculate the number of minutes they were talking and the number of minutes that kids were talking, we might start an educational revolution in this country,” she said. ■



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THE VALUE OF VIDEO

One of the best known videotaping efforts was the work done by Trends in International Mathematics & Science Study (TIMSS), a cross-national study of 8th-grade mathematics and science teaching. With the videotapes, TIMSS researchers were able to give American teachers a window into the normal routines of regular classrooms in other countries and show the difference in instruction between nations.

Jim Stigler, director of the TIMSS video studies and now CEO of Lesson Lab, a commercial venture that markets the use of the TIMSS videos for professional development, believes there are three primary outcomes that educators can expect from studying videotapes.

Develops a shared language about instruction.

Stigler believes that a group observation is essential. “This is really critical. Instead of talking about instruction in the abstract, teachers can actually point to an example in a video,” Stigler said.

Watching and discussing a video together can point up differing ideas about key instructional issues, he said. For example, several teachers in the room might believe that they incorporate problem solving into their instruction. By viewing a videotape, they might realize that they have different views of exactly what problem solving means in a classroom situation. That could lead to a further discussion and clarification about what is and is not problem solving.

Teachers are not the only ones who need this shared understanding. In the Horry County district in South Carolina, one of the TeachFirst districts, the administrative team watches videotapes at each of its meetings as a way to develop a consistent approach to evaluation. “We wanted to make sure that we had the same idea not 75 different ideas. Teachers get confused when different evaluators see different things. We were trying to get everybody on the same page about what is exemplary,” said Charles Collins, principal of Green Sea Floyds High School.

To assist any videotape conversation, Sandi Everlove from TeachFirst recommends designing a

facilitator’s guide for each video that’s viewed. See Pages 5 and 6 for sample questions that could be used or adapted for viewing a videotape at your school.

Allows teachers to view instructional strategies that they have not seen before.

The TIMSS videos showed that there is a lot of homogeneity in instructional practices within a country. In other words, teachers in any given country tend to teach in much the same way. “If you want a new idea, it may not come from watching your colleague down the hall,” Stigler said.

“It’s very helpful to study videos from other cultures, provided that teachers know the reason they’re studying them is not to copy but to learn about a different way of teaching,” Stigler said.

Enables teachers to analyze teaching and learning as a situation of cause-and-effect.

Videotapes can be especially good at enabling observers to watch both the teacher’s instruction and the student responses. “You want them to shift their focus from the teacher to the student. You want them to look at the lesson from the student’s point of view,” Stigler said.

“You want teachers to look at a classroom lesson and say ‘I don’t think that student understood the question that the teacher asked. Look at his face. Listen to his answer. I wonder why he did that. Maybe it’s the way the teacher phrased the question. Maybe the teacher didn’t provide enough time.’ Questions like that leads to thinking about what you can change about instruction and how it can make a difference in what the student learns,” Stigler said.

“This thinking analytically is the most powerful mechanism for improving teaching,” he said.

Stigler said teachers who appear on videotapes don’t necessarily have to be exemplary teachers but they should be good teachers. “You don’t learn a lot from pointing out the errors of bad teachers. The point is to develop your analytical skills, to analyze teaching and identify strategies,” Stigler said.