

# THE LEARNING System

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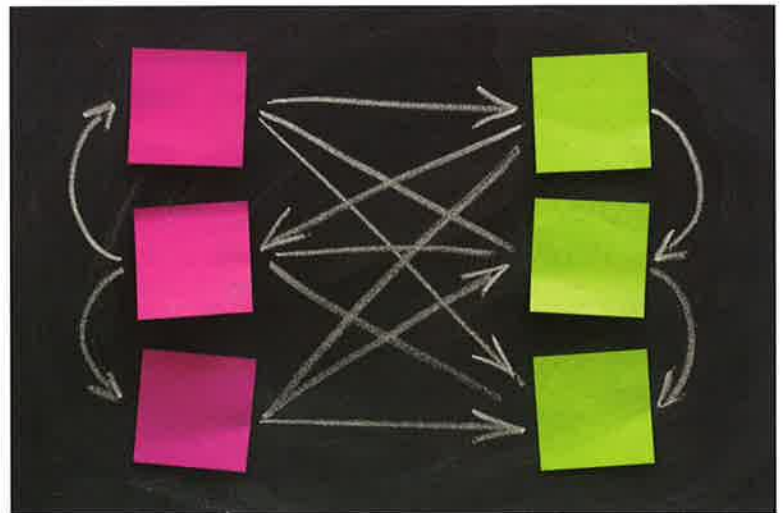
## THE ART OF FEEDBACK

Support observers with a system that ensures learning-focused conversations

By Anthony Armstrong

**W**hen Jeffery Pestrak, chief academic officer for Mastery Charter Schools in Philadelphia, Pa., was assigned as a principal at a struggling school in need of turnaround, he quickly discovered that providing observational feedback to teachers was more complicated than he first imagined. “I would give the teachers feedback about their practice, and they might value it or they might not. Sometimes they would flatly disagree with what were best practices or what was getting results with students. I realized at that time that I was observing and giving feedback without conveying what I would be valuing.”

This type of disconnect about how to define quality instruction is just one of many complex considerations for feedback that Pestrak has addressed over the years. Now, in his role as chief academic officer, Pestrak understands the importance of creating an effective feedback system and makes it an important part of Mastery’s three-day coaching institute every summer. Mastery also conducts other observation learning throughout the year. These include calibration events, where observers make sure their feedback is consistent from one person to the next, and peer leader-



ship reviews that bring observers from different campuses together to conduct a simultaneous observation and share their feedback with each other.

### START AT THE SYSTEM LEVEL

For Laura Lipton, co-author with Bruce Wellman of *Learning-Focused Supervision* (in press) and co-director of MiraVia, a publishing and professional development company, effective feedback is learning-focused, complex, and an integral part of a learning system: “Feedback that

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## Serve up a pie chart to illustrate investment in professional learning

**P**ie charts, also known as circle graphs, are fascinating visuals. Very simply, they illustrate different proportions that constitute a whole. A pie chart promotes accountability because it enables non-experts to quickly understand what makes up the whole, what portion of resources come from various sources of funding, or how an organization uses those resources.

What does this have to do with professional learning?

Everything, because too few people — educators, policymakers, and taxpayers — understand the sources or amounts of revenue that support professional learning, or how school systems allocate those resources.

There are also questions of who participates in professional learning and how, as well as sources and use of expertise that support new learning experiences.

Here are first steps school system leaders can take towards developing pie charts useful for improving professional learning quality, effectiveness, management, and communications.

**Collect and analyze professional learning data.** Credible data about professional learning is essential to collect and display, and in most school systems that will require new, systematic data collection. The first step is to frame big questions that drive the search for data. Such questions might include a focus on funding, designs

for learning, use of time, intensity, participation, and results.

**Identify funding for professional learning.** Funding for professional learning comes from a variety of sources and is used for multiple purposes. Understanding the sources of funding and how funds are allocated can inform decision making.

- During the past school year, what were the major sources of funding for all school system-sponsored professional learning, and what was the total amount derived from each source?
- Based on the school system's total expenditures for all professional learning during the past year, what was the aggregate allocation for each major type of learning experience (teacher time used for professional learning; training and coaching; administration of professional development; materials, equipment, and facilities; travel and transportation, etc.)

**Identify professional learning time and venues.** Professional learning occurs in many different places for different amounts of time. Both factors are important variables in the effectiveness of professional learning. However, most school systems have little data about professional learning contexts or time. Without it, they can neither monitor the adequacy of time for professional learning nor make informed judgments about how time is used. Professional learning in extended blocks of time, focused on a single area, for example, is associated with

increases in student achievement. Data produced by posing these or related questions could yield information that helps improve the quality and effectiveness of professional learning.

- Among all school system-sponsored professional learning during the past year, what proportion occurred at each type of venue (school, central office, professional development center, regional service center, out-of-district, out-of-state, etc.)?
- What portion of professional learning occurred during the school day or contract year and what occurred outside those parameters?
- Among those participating in school system-sponsored professional learning during the past year, what proportion participated in professional learning focused on a specific area of development for up to eight hours, nine to 20 hours, 21 to 40 hours, 41 to 60 hours, and more than 60 hours?

Determining the most salient, narrowly focused questions to produce useful data will require collective discussion and deliberation among school system leaders and teachers who make decisions about professional learning. In all cases, though, the purpose of collecting data must be deemed useful in explaining and improving professional learning and investments in it.

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# Disjointed professional learning calls for building a strong foundation

As told to Anthony Armstrong

**I**n 2009, when I enrolled in the Learning Forward Academy Class of 2011, my problem of practice was addressing a disjointed approach to professional learning in our district. In the past, all of the professional development documentation at each of our 106 schools was either passed to central office or not captured at all. We managed hard copies of sign-in sheets and agendas, but they were not readily available for analysis and evaluation. We knew that teachers had planning periods where they met together across grade levels or content areas, but we had no way to capture that experience, document the results, or to determine their next steps.

Our school board policy requires every employee in our district to complete 20 hours of professional development every year. I polled the principals and asked if they were providing 20 hours per year at their schools. Of course, they said yes, absolutely. But they could not show me what the trainings were, the rationale for the training, who was present, or the budget for the training, if any. That's when I had an "aha" moment.

I had originally thought a management system would give the schools ownership of the process, but when I examined the problem more closely and talked with others about it, I realized that we had a larger problem. We were missing the foundational pieces for our professional learning, such

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as alignment with our board policies and alignment with the Standards for Professional Learning.

Atlanta Public Schools has been going through extensive changes over the last few years, and as a result, everything in the district has changed, including leadership at multiple levels. We had just revamped our curriculum instruction department and leadership in all areas, so I felt it was a prime opportunity to introduce the newly revised Standards for Professional Learning into our system.

I talked with Jacqueline Kennedy from Learning Forward about the process of implementing the standards and mapped out a plan of action with administrators. I shared this information with our leaders. Together, we reviewed the standards and discovered connections between the standards and our plan to implement learning communities in the district.

Last month, 300 participants at our summer leadership academy for principals and upper-level administrators left with a copy of the *Standards for Professional Learning*. We ensured they understood the need for standards. We also asked our breakout

session attendees to sign commitment cards. To make sure that we can provide learning sessions on individual standards each month, we got a commitment from our leadership that the standards would get time on the agenda at our monthly districtwide principal meetings.

We wanted to let everyone know the district has a new emphasis on professional learning and the implementation of the professional learning standards. The standards are the framework for these conversations.

In the future, I want to give everyone appropriate tools and resources for using the standards, for example the standards booklet and the activities found in the facilitator's guide. I want people to see the connection between providing a certain standard of professional learning and the results. I want people to look at the professional learning and ask, is it quality, how can it improve, and what is the best way to implement it?

It has been a challenge introducing the standards during these changes, but everyone agrees it is an important part of foundational change.

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leads to growth and improvement is data-driven, is based on shared definitions and understandings between parties, acts as a foundation for conversation, and sets goals and improves practice by naming strengths and gaps in relation to a clear set of standards.”

Professional learning leaders often draw distinctions between coaching feedback and evaluation feedback, citing the need for coaching feedback to be nonjudgmental and unattached to the pressures and consequences of an evaluation process. However, the systemic foundation and framework for both types of feedback are almost identical for Lipton. “Whatever the label is, they both have to have a preponderance of types of evidence that substantiates descriptions of practice,” she said. “You can be an evaluator and still have a learning-focused conversation that produces greater learning, forward movement, and problem solving. It is a matter of clarity of purpose and skillful communication.”

These conversations are often sources of anxiety for those receiving the feedback, so *how* the feedback is delivered is as critical as *what* is being delivered. According to Lipton, this anxiety comes from being judged on one’s frailties or weak points and can hinder the learning and improvement process. “This is why skillfulness in providing feedback needs to be deep and sophisticated,” explained Lipton. “Evaluators need to believe that they are growth agents. They need a developmental mindset that tells them the purpose of the feedback is not to judge or be the end of a conversation. Feedback is just the beginning of a conversation that explores and improves practice. If these conversations are done well, they will shift the culture to start having data-driven, inquiry-based conversations between colleagues about improving practice.”

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#### **BUILD A SAFE ENVIRONMENT**

According to Lipton, feedback is only as good as the

opportunity to make meaning from it and apply that meaning to the receiver’s own practice. To do that, Lipton says, the relationship between the giver and receiver of feedback needs to be clearly developmental and growth-oriented. This means there is a culturally shared belief that everyone can move forward to improve practice, and the feedback conversations establish a baseline and clarity about desired

growth and desirable practice. “The system’s values can be conveyed clearly and modeled congruently by the system leader and others,” said Lipton. “The on-the-ground person can be clear by naming some of the outcomes of the conversations, the use of feedback, the desired qualities of the supervisor-teacher relationship, etc.”

“Strategizing together helps the receiver increase capacity to self-monitor and self-modify — based on the same set of standards. This way, the language choices made by the evaluator become the internal talk of the teacher.”

While coaches will often cite the need to establish strong relationships first before providing feedback, Lipton feels that it is possible to relate to someone in a way that helps them feel safe and emotionally secure, if one pays attention to the psychological and emotional aspects of providing feedback. Learning skills to establish psychological and emotional safety is critical for engaging in these types of conversations, said Lipton, and feedback providers should learn how to use verbal and nonverbal practices to demonstrate an underlying belief in the exploration of practice.

“If you look at the neurology of the brain,” Lipton explained, “people shut down and do not have the capacity for complex thought when they feel threatened. This can happen if they feel they are being judged, or if they think that the evaluator feels they are not up to the task. To prevent this, the evaluator must learn to avoid questions that can be threatening. Inquiries must be exploratory and not have a ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ dynamic. For example, when the evaluator asks, ‘Can you think of...’ the question itself expresses the potential doubt that the receiver can think of something. Instead, the question can be phrased as ‘What might be some ways to...’ which invites exploration of the topic at hand. Instead of asking ‘What might be *the* cause of...’ which implies that there is one right answer, one could ask

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**“Feedback is just the beginning of a conversation that explores and improves practice. If these conversations are done well, they will shift the culture to start having data-driven, inquiry-based conversations between colleagues about improving practice.”**

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‘What might be *some* causes of...’ which implies that there is more than one correct answer.

“Therefore, the feedback giver is continually making intentional choices about verbal and nonverbal communication that leads to creating an environment of emotional safety, which gives the receiver the capacity to have cognitive complexity in the conversation.”

## PROVIDE SUPPORT

Pesttrak understands the importance of making sure teacher evaluators are skilled in providing high-quality feedback and builds it into the system’s professional learning schedule. “We do a significant amount of training on providing feedback and conducting observations and coaching,” said Pesttrak. “During our summer institute, Molly Eigen, our deputy chief academic officer, who is the brains and execution behind our coaching model and training, makes sure our coaches also study effective teacher practice, conduct modeling and norming activities — where we compare observation notes from different observers, review data to look at trends, review teacher thoughts on coaching and observations, and examine input from the supervisors of our observers.”

To provide coaches and other observers with a solid foundation for delivering quality feedback, Mastery starts with the links between instructional models, coaching, and evaluation and how that alignment drives professional learning for teachers. “At the core of our instructional system is our instructional standards document,” said Pesttrak, “which we use to drive induction, orientation, and ongoing professional development for teachers. When our coaches coach, everything they use comes from it, such as observation tools, targeted feedback, and classroom visits. Everyone knows what expectation is — what we consider quality instruction.”

The summer learning Pesttrak provides is then supported throughout the year. “Everyone has a supervisor who provides coaching and support. They co-observe, calibrate, and review observations. We also have regional directors and directors of teacher coaching that can support principals and assistant principals as well. We routinely collect formal observation data, look for trends, and talk with people about what we see in the data. We will have assistant principals and principals from several schools gather in one school to co-observe one teacher. They will record and review their observations collectively. We might also watch videos of teachers to calibrate our observational practices. So there is this constant conversation about the feedback that administrators and coaches provide to ensure they are

improving and in alignment.”

Helping facilitate these constant feedback conversations, said Pesttrak, is Mastery’s value-based culture. “We have a culture of open doors where teachers and administrators talk to each other. Everyone should feel comfortable in talking to each other. One of our values is straight talk, which means that we should be able to talk with each other in a direct and nice way.”

Mastery schools use formal observations that are based on their five instructional standards and require both a rating and a narrative. “We have our observers rate the teachers on each of our five instructional standards and the accompanying specific strategies we expect to see being used to implement the standards,” said Pesttrak. “The observers then write comments for each that form a narrative of the observation, like ‘The lesson was conveyed clearly and was highly focused. Could use more checking for understanding and cold calling.’ ”

Because Mastery’s instructional standards and expectations are the basis for observation and feedback, the process is assured alignment, a common language, and clear goals for moving forward. “All of our professional development, induction, teacher coaching, and performance-based evaluation system is directly tied to our instructional standards,” said Pesttrak. “The ideal that we work towards is transparency as to what the observer is looking for; training to prepare the teacher for such an instructional approach; agreement among all that those key standards and focus areas are valued; and the confidence that our observers know how to evaluate. These have all contributed to our improvements in practice and gains in student achievement.”

According to Lipton, the importance of ensuring that evaluators can provide the right quality of feedback and deliver it with psychological and emotional skill cannot be overstated. “Without high-quality feedback, people will stagnate — there will be no growth. When people engage in rich conversations, it changes the culture to one of collective efficacy. Shining spots of distinguished practice are not enough to produce rich learning for all kids. Teachers and administrators need to talk with each other, learn, be willing to learn, and see each other as resources so that we are all moving forward in improving practice.”

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## Learning Forward BELIEF

Sustainable learning cultures require skillful leadership.

See  
 pp. 6-7 for  
 tools that help  
 structure feedback  
 conversations.

## Learning-focused conversations

Feedback is the beginning of a conversation that explores and improves practice. Use these conversation templates to help shift your culture through data-driven, inquiry-based conversations about improving practice.

### A TEMPLATE FOR PLANNING

<b>ACTIVATING AND ENGAGING</b>
<b>Context</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are some things about your students' readiness (social skills, routines, self-management) that are influencing your lesson (unit) design?</li> <li>• What are some of the skills/knowledge students will need to bring to this lesson (unit) to be successful?</li> </ul>
<b>Presenting issues</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are some special areas/student needs you will need to address?</li> <li>• What are some issues you anticipate might influence student learning?</li> </ul>
<b>EXPLORING AND DISCOVERING</b>
<b>Goals and outcomes</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As you think about what you know about your students, and the content, what are some key learning goals?</li> <li>• What are some ways that these goals integrate with other content learning?</li> <li>• What are some thinking skills students will need to apply?</li> </ul>
<b>Indicators of success</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Given these goals, what are some things you expect to see/hear as students are achieving them?</li> <li>• Given these goals, how will you monitor student learning?</li> <li>• What kinds of assessments will you use to determine student success?</li> </ul>
<b>Approaches, strategies and resources</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are some strategies you're planning that will both challenge students and support their success?</li> <li>• What are some ways you'll ensure high engagement for all students?</li> <li>• What are some resources or materials you/your students will need to support and extend student learning?</li> </ul>
<b>Potential choice points and concerns</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As you anticipate teaching the lesson, what are some points where students might struggle?</li> <li>• What are some options for supporting struggling students and enriching those who need greater challenge?</li> <li>• Should you notice that students' attention is drifting, what are some possibilities for reengaging them?</li> </ul>
<b>ORGANIZING AND INTEGRATING</b>
<b>Personal learning</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are some ways that this lesson provides opportunities to pursue your own learning goals?</li> <li>• What new learning/skills will you try or exercise in this lesson?</li> </ul>
<b>Next steps</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As a result of this conversation, what are some next steps?</li> </ul>

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These planning and reflection templates include sample questions, not scripts, to illustrate each category being explored (e.g. presenting issues). Adjust the categories to meet your professional learning needs.

**A TEMPLATE FOR REFLECTING**

<b>ACTIVATING AND ENGAGING</b>
<b>Recollections</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>As you reflect on this lesson/unit, what are some things that come to mind?</li> <li>Given your recollections, what are some things that captured your attention?</li> </ul>
<b>Perspectives and perceptions</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In this lesson/unit, what was particularly satisfying?</li> <li>In this lesson/unit, what were some things that concerned you?</li> </ul>
<b>EXPLORING AND DISCOVERING</b>
<b>Weighing evidence</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What is some of the evidence that supports your impressions/ judgments?</li> <li>What are some examples that stand out for you (student responses, work samples, interaction patterns)?</li> </ul>
<b>Search for patterns</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Given what occurred, how typical are these results?</li> <li>What percentage of the time does this (behavior, learning, response pattern) tend to happen?</li> </ul>
<b>Compare / contrast</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How similar or different is what you anticipated from what occurred?</li> <li>How might you compare students who were successful to those who were less so?</li> </ul>
<b>Analyze cause-effect</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What are some factors that influenced what happened?</li> <li>Given (specific success/concern), what's your hunch about what may have it produced it?</li> </ul>
<b>ORGANIZING AND INTEGRATING</b>
<b>Generalizations</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What are some big ideas that you are taking away from this conversation?</li> <li>Based on this experience, what are some new connections (about students, curriculum, instruction) that you are making?</li> </ul>
<b>Applications</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What are some things that you are taking away from this experience that will influence your practice in the future?</li> <li>As a result of new learning, what are some goals you're setting (for yourself, for your students, curriculum, this unit)?</li> </ul>

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