

CHECK YOUR GAUGES

CALIBRATING CONVERSATIONS ASSIST TEACHERS IN FINE-TUNING INSTRUCTION



By Arthur L. Costa and Robert J. Garmston

Teachers maintain a capacity for learning throughout their careers. However, experience alone is not enough to promote learning. Growth occurs when teachers reflect on that experience and use higher-order thinking processes to plan, monitor, evaluate, and modify educational tasks.

Coaching is a way to support teachers in assessing and improving their practice. By engaging in rich, rigorous, and reflective professional conversations with colleagues, teachers can continue to develop and grow as they construct meaning, reinvest their cognitive resources, and apply new learning.

Calibrating conversations are a way to foster this type of career-long development and growth. Calibrating — meaning to measure and attune performance against an

established standard — is based on the assumption that a teacher is a continuous learner looking to refine his or her craft and, as a result, turns to other sources and research to improve personal practice.

TEACHING EXCELLENCE

Many descriptions of teaching excellence are available. All draw on the rich knowledge base about instruction. Such lists of standards are usually categorized into at least six domains of inquiry, though frequently with different terminology. They are:

1. What's worth learning? (Content knowledge)
2. What works in teaching? (Pedagogy)
3. What factors influence student learning? (Knowledge of students and how they learn)
4. Who am I, and who am I becoming? (Self-knowledge)
5. How does the brain learn? (Knowledge of cognitive processes of instruction)

CALIBRATING CONVERSATIONS

STAGES

Coach mediates by having the coachee:

1. Select a focus.
2. Identify existing level of performance or placement on a rubric and give supporting evidence.
3. Specify desired placement, explore values and beliefs, and identify congruence with desired placement.
4. Establish behavioral indicators for new placement on rubric or level of performance.
5. Describe support needed to get to a higher level of performance and commit to action.
6. Reflect on the coaching process, explore refinements, and explore ways of using this process on his or her own.

TOOLS

Coach navigates the stages using these tools:

1. Pause to allow you and your partner time to think.
2. Paraphrase from time to time.
3. Pose questions to specify thinking by asking, for example, "Specifically, which area might you want to focus on?"
4. Pose questions to explore thinking by asking, for example, "What are you aware of in your students that is causing you to move to a higher level of performance?"
5. Pay close attention to your partner. Attend with your mind and your body.

6. How are collegial interactions continually strengthened and enhanced? (Knowledge of collegial interactions)

School or school districts might develop their own standards based on their mission or beliefs. Schools may adopt standards approved by the state, or they may use descriptions of excellence based in instructional research developed by Marzano, Danielson, Hattie, Saphier, Silver, Tsui, or others. (See resources on p. 47.)

Calibrating conversations are designed to assist a staff member in measuring his or her progress against an agreed-upon standard to determine where his or her skill level falls. Standards, test scores, and rubrics that propose to define teaching quality but are developed and imposed without the teacher's involvement, comprehension, and commitment lead to short-term, shallow results and, ultimately, to failure (Danielson & McGreal, 2000).

For insights to be useful, they need to be generated from within, not given to individuals as conclusions. In-

volving teachers in developing and applying these practices promotes self-managing, self-monitoring, and self-modifying — and provides a mental rehearsal prior to performance.

CALIBRATING CONVERSATION

A calibrating conversation has six stages, each with a specific purpose designed to support the coachee in reaching objectives or goal(s) reflected in the standard. (See above.) During the calibrating conversation, the coach uses the basic tools of rapport, pausing, paraphrasing, posing questions, and especially paraphrasing before questions to stimulate the coachee's thinking.

Here are the stages of the calibrating conversation.

Select a focus.

The coach asks the coachee to decide on what aspect of the standard he or she wants to focus. This is important, given that most contain a great deal of information. The se-

CALIBRATING: A THIRD-POINT CONVERSATION

The document being used in the calibrating conversation becomes what is called a third point in the communication. The third point serves as a focus separate from each of the parties in the conversation.

A conversation between two people may signal a difference in status (Rock, 2009) — with one person as evaluator or judge and the

other being judged. In a third-point conversation, however, the data — for instance, the standards

rubric — is set in a position that both parties can observe free of judgment.

The value of designating a third point is that both parties can refer to it in an impersonal way. The third point does not belong to



either party; it is simply a reference point for the conversation.

Physically referencing the third

point in a space off to the side between the parties provides a psychologically safe place for information and depersonalizes ideas. Thus, placement of the conversational focus creates a triangle, either literally or

referentially, keeping the conversational container psychologically safe (Wellman, 2009).

Establishing a visible “third point” for the conversation increases psychological safety for the teacher by shifting the focus to the data and promotes conversations about the factors producing positive results and what may be causing any perceived performance gaps (Grinder, 1997).

lected focus should be one that can be addressed in the amount of time scheduled for the conversation. The coach might ask, “On what aspect of the standard would you like to focus today?” or “What aspect of the standard is of interest to you for today’s conversation?”

Identify existing level of performance or placement on a rubric and give supporting evidence.

The coach is interested in finding out where the coachee sees himself or herself on the document. The coach poses questions to specify thinking in order for the coachee to be clear about the data that supports his or her self-assessment. Questions the coach might ask include:

- “Where do you see yourself currently?”
- “What might be some examples of how that plays out for you?”
- “What do you see in your students’ performance that leads you to see yourself here?”

Specify desired placement, explore values and beliefs, and identify congruence with desired placement.

The coach asks the coachee where he or she would like to be. This supports the coachee in establishing a goal or objective toward which he or she wants to move. The coach might ask, “At what level of competence would you like to be on this behavior?”

This stage is designed to go to the deep structure of the coachee’s thinking to validate the importance of the desired placement. The coach is interested in raising the coachee’s consciousness about the importance of the desired placement. The coach might ask:

- “What might be some of the values motivating you to

reach this level?”

- “What makes this important to you?”
- “How do you want to see your students performing when you reach this level?”
- “What would you need to tell yourself ...?”

Establish behavioral indicators for new placement.

The coach is interested in having the coachee envision himself doing what he aspires to do. The coachee should be specific in identifying what it looks, feels, and sounds like to achieve the level he desires. The coach might ask:

- “What might students notice that’s different about you when you are performing at this level?”
- “What might this change cause students to do differently?”
- “What might it look and sound like when you reach that level?”
- “What might be some examples?”
- “By when do you want to achieve that?”

Describe support needed to get to a higher level of performance and commit to action.

The coach is interested in having the coachee draw on his or her resources to determine what it’s going to take to reach the goal or desired placement. The coachee should identify what support he or she will need to reach the goal. This support might be in the form of strategies, materials, or the support of other people.

Once support is described, the coachee should state what he or she will do to implement the plan and the data collection tool(s) that might be used. The coach might ask:

- “What might be some resources you will need to reach

this level?”

- “What might it take for you to apply these strategies?”
- “What kind of help might be useful to you?”
- “What is the most powerful step you might take?”
- “As you implement your plan, what will you be aware of to know it is working?”
- “What data collection tool(s) might be helpful to you?”

Reflect on the coaching process, explore refinements, and explore ways of using this process on your own.

In this stage, the coach asks the coachee to reflect on the conversation in which he or she just engaged. The intent is to give the coachee the opportunity to identify what was helpful and what supported thinking and to raise to consciousness the process of self-calibrating. The coach might ask:

- “How has this conversation been helpful to you?”
- “How has this conversation supported your thinking?”
- “Where are you now in your thinking compared to where you were when we started?”
- “Given your desire for continuing improvement, how might the process that we engaged in today assist you in doing this on your own?”
- “How might you use this same process when I’m not with you?”

CONTINUOUS LEARNING

Based on the assumption that professional teachers are constantly searching for ways to improve their craft, standards originating from external sources can be a source of continuous learning.

By supporting self-directed learning, assisting teachers in gauging current performance with aspirations as noted on locally developed statements of excellence or adopted standards or rubrics from other sources, the calibrating conversation embodies the values and goals of self-directed learning which, in turn, translates into instructional processes with students as well.

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RESOURCES

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