

6 SKILLS

EVERY OBSERVER NEEDS — AND HOW TO BUILD THEM

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Classroom observation has changed dramatically in recent years. Trivial checklists have given way to research-based rubrics that describe important aspects of teaching and, for each aspect, explain the difference between more and less effective practice. Instead of asking if the lesson objective was posted, these new instruments typically ask to what extent the objective was clear to students, how well the teacher connected the objective to students' prior knowledge, and to what extent the teacher reinforced the objective

throughout the lesson.

This clarity around what to look for in a lesson has tremendous potential. It makes it possible for different observers to reach the same conclusions about how well a lesson demonstrates a set of practices that matter to student learning. This is essential for trust and aids decision-making. Teachers need to know their ratings reflect the quality of their lessons, not a set of arbitrary or idiosyncratic criteria that may or may not be associated with student learning. District leaders also need observers to produce trustworthy data to inform their systemwide investments

in professional development.

Perhaps less widely understood is that the same agreement about the indicators of effective teaching also enables observers to give more effective feedback. Feedback becomes meaningful when observers call attention to specific examples from the lesson that align with an observation instrument's descriptions of practice. It lets an observer say, "Let's talk about that check for student understanding. What did you learn from it that told you students understood? What follow-up questions could you ask to probe more deeply?" In this



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OBSERVATION KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

Prerequisites			Core skills		
1	2	3	4	5	6
KNOW THE RUBRIC	COLLECT EVIDENCE	UNDERSTAND BIAS	RECOGNIZE EVIDENCE	USE CRITERIA FOR RATING	COACH TEACHERS
Understand the key rubric elements that define each teaching component and performance level.	Record objective description — efficiently and without judgment — of what occurs in a lesson.	Awareness of how observer preferences may influence observation and of ways to reduce the impact of bias.	Identify in a lesson all the evidence related to each teaching component defined in a rubric.	Apply a rubric’s rules for rating teaching components correctly and without the influence of bias.	Provide feedback that helps teachers implement specific techniques to address areas for growth.

way, quality observation reveals the opportunity to fine-tune instruction. Yet for all the promise, the quality of observation remains highly uneven. In some places, teachers report getting meaningful feedback — but not everywhere. In some districts, we see evidence that observers can apply their system’s criteria with consistency. But elsewhere, observation results suggest

that teaching still is being judged based on different standards. In others, it appears that observation remains part of a perfunctory evaluation system in which nearly all teachers receive a rating of proficient or above. Why such inconsistency, when so many systems now use similar tools and procedures? A big part of the answer is that many observers lack the full set of


knowledge and skills to employ those tools and procedures as intended. This isn’t their fault. Quality observation is highly challenging. It involves filtering a dynamic and unpredictable scene for a common set of indicators, making an accurate record of them, and applying a set of criteria to reach the same conclusions as would any other observer who’s doing it correctly.

IDEAS

It also includes feedback that provides teachers with specific ways to make small changes in their practice, which over time can translate into measurable improvements in teaching and learning. A lot of what that entails is new to many administrators and instructional leaders. You can't just hand a rubric to someone and say, "Go observe."

Fortunately, researchers and leading school systems have identified what observers need to know and be able to do — and the kinds of activities that can be used to develop, monitor, and reinforce those skills. Like effective instruction, these activities entail a good deal of modeling and practice — and significant investment in time.


A well-developed initial professional learning program may keep observers occupied for four days, and even then their skills will need sharpening each year. But keep in mind that the effect of a cadre of skilled observers is multiplied over the many teachers whose professional learning they support. Here are six skills every observer needs and how to build them.

 **Know the rubric.** Observation rubrics define a system's vision for effective teaching. As such, they pack a great deal of information into a single document. They have their own structures, terms, and rules. When observers understand these features, they can read the tool and answer the questions, "What am I looking for?" and "How will I judge what I see?" When they don't, they'll answer differently.

Hence before observers try to apply a rubric, even in professional learning, they need to learn their way around it. That may sound obvious, but a rubric overview often gets left out of professional learning or addressed too quickly — causing multiple problems

down the line as observers miss important distinctions in the instrument.

Helping observers understand how to read a rubric is akin to helping students learn how to read a map: Give them the high-level view, explain the elements, and *then let them practice*. You might assign them one aspect of teaching in the rubric (e.g. use of questioning) and have them read across the descriptions of the different performance levels, noting what changes as it goes from high to low. It may be the extent to which a teacher uses appropriate wait time and asks students to explain their reasoning. The point is not to memorize the indicators, but to build the practice of reading the rubric to understand what's valued.

 **Collect evidence.** Evidence is the basis of quality observation. It's what grounds agreement on the level of performance and the conversation about how to improve. Pointing to specific examples from an observed lesson demystifies why a rating is given and provides a clear starting point for planning improvements.

But a lot happens in a few minutes of teaching: Teachers and students respond to each other, they move about the classroom, and they use materials and tools. Getting an accurate account of what matters — without getting overtaxed by writing down everything — is no small challenge. Even experienced instructional leaders need coaching and practice on evidence collection.


First, observers need to understand what evidence is. Evidence is objective description of something observed. It makes no suggestion of quality. "Lesson objective clearly explained" is not evidence. It's the observer's interpretation of evidence. Evidence would be the statements the teacher made to explain the objective and how

students responded.

You can build an understanding of the distinction by providing observers with examples of evidence, contrasted with nonexamples (e.g. generalizations, judgments, etc.). Then give additional statements, ask which represent evidence, and why or why not.

Videos of teaching are great tools for professional learning on evidence collection. An expert observer models the process by taking down evidence in real time, so observers-in-training can see the instruction observed while the notes are being taken.

This shows that not everything observed is collected as evidence (e.g. a wall chart that's not part of the lesson), and yet it's possible to record a great deal of information efficiently through coding and shorthand (e.g. using tick marks to note repeated behaviors, as in "T: 1-2-3 Eyes on me: √√√"). After seeing the process modeled, observers can practice themselves with additional videos.

 **Understand bias.** Consider your image of an ideal lesson. What do you think is most important thing to see in the classroom? No two educators will answer exactly the same way. One might say, "Lots of student talk," and another, "Students following procedures." Of course, both are part of effective teaching. But a preference for one over the other can color one's impression of the lesson as a whole. When evaluators who favor quality discussions see lots of it in the classroom, that favorable impression may bias their judgments of other aspects of the same lesson.

Observers can counter the effects of bias when they understand what bias is and build an awareness of their own preferences. Sensitivity is important when asking observers to examine their biases. They may be defensive, thinking,

“I don’t have biases.” But everyone does.

The point is not to eliminate one’s instructional preferences, but to recognize them and keep their influence in check. It helps for professional learning facilitators to talk about their own biases first. (“I like student discussions so much that I need to make sure I don’t discount evidence of other aspects of teaching.”) Then observers should ask themselves: What would cause me to have a favorable impression of a lesson?

Recognize and sort evidence.

4 How can two observers record objective evidence from the same lesson and yet still assign different ratings? One reason is that one or both observers hasn’t collected all the evidence that’s relevant to the rubric.

To rate a teacher’s “checks for student understanding,” an observer might need to note the frequency of such checks in a lesson, the extent to which a teacher called on nonvolunteers, and whether the check was likely to yield useful information for the teacher. But an observer who doesn’t know to look for all those things won’t collect all the evidence needed to rate the practice correctly and provide accurate feedback. Hence the challenge of observation is not just to collect objective evidence, but also to collect all the objective evidence that’s relevant.

Understanding what evidence is relevant to a particular aspect of teaching begins with a close study of the rubric’s language and asking oneself: “What might I see or hear that would indicate this?” Then comes practice in collecting relevant evidence, ideally with videos of teaching. Observers get increasingly proficient when they can compare their own attempts to identify relevant evidence to the work of experts who have reviewed the same lesson.

A closely related skill is sorting.

Sorting is the categorizing of recorded evidence to the right components of teaching. Sorting puts all the evidence of “checks for understanding” into one bucket and all the evidence for “student discussion” into another. That way, all observers are considering the same examples from the lesson when determining a set of ratings, and they easily can refer to relevant evidence in providing feedback to the teacher. Novice observers typically sort their recorded evidence after they observe, while experts may develop the skill to sort as they take their notes.

As with every other skill involved in observation, it takes practice to learn how to sort correctly. It may not be clear initially, for example, when a teacher’s particular question is a “check for student understanding” versus a “discussion technique.”

Observers learn how to sort consistently when given feedback on their attempts to place evidence where it belongs — when they hear things like: “That question actually demonstrated discussion techniques. It didn’t probe students’ mastery of the concept, but rather pushed their thinking.”

Use criteria for rating.

5 An observer assigns ratings by reviewing his or her collected and sorted evidence, then finding the performance indicators in the rubric that best describe it. That involves interpretation and judgment.

Determining if a teacher checked for student understanding at all key moments in a lesson requires judgment about how many moments there were in a lesson when a check for understanding was warranted.

The challenge in preparing observers is making sure all observers are interpreting and judging correctly. When observers’ interpretations of a lesson’s key moments are different, so

will be the ratings and feedback they will give for the same lesson.

An essential part of learning to rate accurately is to practice with videos of teaching that have been scored carefully by expert observers. Having several accurate examples of rating will accelerate novice raters’ progress.

But it’s not just a matter of saying, “Here’s a level two, here’s a level three ... now go rate.” Observers need a primer on a rubric’s rules for ratings before attempting to apply those rules, and after applying them they need feedback on their attempts. A primer on rating “use of questioning” might clarify that a proficient rating requires evidence that students had to explain their answers, while an exemplary rating requires additional evidence of students posing questions to each other.

Coach teachers.

6 Little is more frustrating than getting feedback that’s so vague as to be meaningless (e.g. “You should use multiple strategies to increase engagement”). When this is the norm for feedback, a school system has missed an important opportunity to improve teaching and learning. It’s a waste to invest in the effort required to ensure accurate ratings if the resulting feedback doesn’t lead to professional growth and a change in practice.

Feedback needs to be specific, practical, and focused on improvement. A teacher should leave the feedback conversation with something to use in an upcoming lesson (e.g. a wall chart to clarify key ideas for students in a lesson on topic sentences).

Few principals and other instructional leaders have really had the chance to practice applying a consistent set of ideas about what makes feedback effective. For this reason, a shared vision of effective feedback must be proactively developed. Observers need

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Teachers bring with them untapped talent and expertise that schools must identify, elevate, and share.

The activity illustrated in this article is an example of a structured protocol that accesses teacher voices, engages in immediate problem-solving, and leverages teachers' experiences and expertise. Because teachers have daily contact with learners and are in the best position to directly influence student learning, timely, high-quality, and teacher-driven professional development is crucial to the success of any education reform effort.

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to learn what it means to prioritize a narrow but potentially high-leverage area for improvement from among all the strengths and weaknesses in a lesson. They need to learn the kinds of questions that can prompt teachers to analyze what happened in their lesson, and they need to learn how to work with teachers to co-produce solutions.

A straightforward way to promote this kind of feedback is with protocols for post-observation conferences. A good protocol helps evaluators avoid common pitfalls, like starting off with what a teacher did poorly (which reduces receptivity) and overwhelming a teacher with too much information. Along with protocols, observers need guidelines and opportunities to practice identifying areas for improvement, preparing reflective prompts, and coming up with suggested actions steps for teachers.

PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

None of these skills is optional. They build on each other. You can't rate accurately if you can't identify relevant evidence. You can't collect

relevant evidence if you don't know what evidence is. More broadly, you can't coach teachers to improve their practice if you can't accurately identify effective teaching.

Nor is one-shot professional learning sufficient to ensure these skills are developed. Observers need to be assessed and their work in the field monitored to make sure they learned these skills — or, if they haven't, to make sure they get additional professional learning. Observers also need regular follow-up to sharpen and extend their skills.

The good news is that all of what we've described is being done in various places and in ways that fit the needs of local contexts. In Minneapolis, observers take part in face-to-face professional learning in which they practice identifying and rating relevant evidence, then get immediate feedback on their attempts. In the District of Columbia Public Schools, the same is accomplished with a blend of online and group sessions. The Rhode Island Department of Education has disseminated guidelines and tools for reviewing the quality of feedback. What's needed is for such

practices to take hold in more places. Then the true potential of observation will become evident.

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