

With peer visits, teachers see for themselves how to improve practice

Catherine Trinkle

A 1st-year teacher popped into my office to talk about her recent evaluation. Jennifer shed tears as she noted her low scores for poor classroom management that led to too many students not being engaged in the lesson. "I already know I'm having classroom management issues. But what do I do to make it better?" she asked.

As Jennifer's instructional coach, I had already discussed with her techniques that improve classroom management, and the principal had likely given her tips, too. But simply being told what needed to be done wasn't working for Jennifer. She needed to observe other teachers so she could see for herself what effective classroom management practices look like.

Jennifer is not alone in needing hands-on, personalized support. Just like their students, teachers learn best when they are active participants in their own learning — when they are thinking, analyzing, making connections, reflecting, and asking questions.

Data from a recent survey of U.S. teachers show that teachers want professional learning to be personalized and responsive to their unique needs in the classroom (Trinkle, 2018). Those who had no influence in determining the content of professional learning were more likely to leave teaching than those who felt they had a great deal of influence over the content of the professional learning in their schools (Trinkle, 2018). Teachers who were able to observe other teachers were also more likely to remain in the profession.

Peer visits provide teachers with such opportunities to see effective practices. Peer visits are different from peer observation models, which are usually designed to provide feedback to the teacher being observed (Burgess, Rawal, & Taylor, 2019; O'Leary, 2013).

A peer visit is purely informational and growth-oriented. In a peer visit, the teacher, accompanied by her instructional coach, makes a casual, collegial visit to the classroom of another teacher whom the coach has identified as a good match for the teacher's needs and goals.

The visiting teacher looks for specific teaching and management techniques, such as examples of standards-based lesson planning, class norms, routines, procedures, and student engagement strategies she can adopt to improve her own practices to increase student learning in her classroom.

Peer visits can benefit teachers of all experience levels, but they can be particularly valuable for new teachers, who face an “overwhelming number of unfamiliar issues” (Mizell, 2010, p. 3), including the classroom management issues with which Jennifer was struggling. This approach turned out to be just what Jennifer needed — and it can be just what many other teachers need, too.

### **Steps for Peer Visits**

At the heart of the peer visit cycle are conversations between the visiting teacher and her instructional coach before, during, and after the visits. These conversations happen during a series of five steps.

#### **1. Previsit conversation.**

During this first step, the instructional coach asks the teacher to articulate what she wants to see during the visit by asking, “What are your goals for the visit? What do you want to see that might help you in your classroom?” Teachers may choose topics from their teacher evaluation or based on their current experiences in the classroom. Their goals will likely differ according to teachers’ experience levels.

For examples, Jennifer’s goals were to see teachers’ management of behavior, especially kids who act up in class, how teachers get all kids thinking about the text, assignments, and discussion topics, and the various ways teachers start and end class to maximize instructional time. In contrast, 23-year veteran teacher Scott hoped to see a variety of instructional practices, including how teachers differentiate instruction, ideas for effective group work, and different ways to cover objectives during class.

Based on this conversation about topics and goals, the instructional coach creates a schedule of teachers who will demonstrate skills, procedures, and strategies the visiting teacher wants to adopt. Over time, coaches become increasingly skilled at matching teachers as their classroom visits allow them to see which teachers demonstrate strengths in every aspect of pedagogy from across grade levels and content areas, from data walls, to questioning techniques, to student engagement, and beyond.

Having this broad base of knowledge about teachers is essential because scheduling visits around tests, principal observations, and personal days can be tricky.

## **2. Classroom visits.**

Visits usually take just 20-30 minutes, so a teacher can often visit two classrooms each period. Coaches should encourage visiting teachers to watch students as much as they observe the teacher to see how students react to the lesson's design and delivery.

It is helpful to provide a handout the teacher can use during the visit to focus on instructional strategies and student responses. This handout asks visiting teachers to consider questions like:

- What are the students doing? Why are they doing what they're doing?
- How does the teacher assure all students are thinking about the question, topic, assignment, etc.?
- How does the teacher find out what each student knows, is able to do, is learning? (No opt-out).
- Does the lesson match the objective(s)? Can you tell what standard is being taught?
- What routines and practices have the teacher implemented with students to prevent disruptions to the lesson?

During the visit, the instructional coach takes notes about instruction and learning related to the visiting teacher's goals for reference during the debriefing.

## **3. Debrief.**

The post-visit conversations should occur during the day of the visit in an informal setting to send the message that the conversation is nonevaluative. The debrief is anchored around four questions: What is your initial takeaway from the visit? This open-ended question allows teachers to articulate what was important to them and make connections to their own classrooms. Responses provide the coach with valuable feedback about what is now important to the visiting teacher as a result of visiting multiple classrooms. Don't be surprised if this question takes much of the debrief time.

What did you see the teacher do that you also do? This question allows struggling teachers to feel good about the positive and effective things they do in their classrooms. Even veteran teachers have exclaimed, "I'm doing it right! I wasn't sure!" after visiting their peers. Coaches and building leaders always want to build on the positive, so this is an important question to ask.

What did you see the teacher do that you want to bring into your own practice? Teachers articulate what they need to do to improve, and they now have concrete examples of how they can do these things. The instructional coach shares specific

resources, strategies, and supports to help the teacher with his personal professional growth.

What are the goals you have now after today's visits? After articulating practices teachers want to strengthen or bring into their own practice, it is important to create goals. These articulated goals become the focal point of continuous conversations between the instructional coach and teacher.

Jennifer's goals reflected her growth after visiting seven classrooms, followed by an hour-long debrief:

- More and clear direct, slowed-down instructions. Use a strong voice when giving instructions. Make strong statements verbally. Project instructions. Include expectations when giving instructions.
- Consistency with rules and discipline. Go over rules at beginning and during class. "Can't do the teaching part well without the discipline in place."
- Contextualization. Make connections between learning activities and kids' lives.

#### **4. Coach visit.**

The instructional coach observes the visiting teacher in her own classroom to provide feedback about how the teacher is incorporating the practices she observed and addressing the goals she identified.

#### **5. Continuing conversations.**

Peer visits are neither sit-and-get nor one-and-done. Instead, the visits become a support system for professional learning. Each visiting teacher completes a survey (click here for a sample survey: [forms.gle/xGLfYzuZNtk1uSgw7](https://forms.gle/xGLfYzuZNtk1uSgw7)) to provide feedback about the peer visit experience.

Responses provide valuable information the coach can use to provide further support for the visiting teacher as they continue to work together through informal conversations and coach visits until the teacher's original goals have been met.

Teachers often want to do a second round of peer visits with different goals after new instructional strategies have been incorporated into their teaching practice. Expect teachers to ask to do a second round of visits and look forward to visited teachers asking to do visits as well.

#### **Energized teachers**

Building leaders and instructional coaches visit many classrooms throughout the year and become excited about the techniques, strategies, and approaches they observe

during their visits. Yet these educators don't have the opportunity to then apply what they learn to their own classrooms. For this reason, teachers also need to visit classrooms so they can observe new and different instructional strategies to apply in their classrooms.

In my experience, peer visits energize teachers, increase collegiality, and grow teachers' professional learning. As a result, teachers want not only to continue teaching, they have a strong desire to teach at higher levels of effectiveness.

As Lauren Kraft, a 5th-year teacher at Avon High School in Avon, Indiana, said after engaging in peer visits, "Seeing other teachers both struggle and succeed allowed me to hold myself to a higher standard."

Or, as Steve Drabyn, a 33-year veteran teacher at Avon High School, put it: "I learned that I am doing what I am supposed to be doing and that I can still do more." That kind of commitment can improve teaching and, most importantly, benefit students.

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## References

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