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LESSON OBSERVATION STAGE (PRE-OBSERVATION, WHILE-OBSERVATION, POST-OBSERVATION)

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Abstract
Classroom observations in school are an important tool for gaining an overview of patterns and trends, capturing the difference between what is said and what is actually done. It can form a good basis for continued development and improvement work. Research shows that there is a clear connection between the development and further training of teachers' professions and students' learning. You can use the initial meeting to introduce yourself to these people and to explain to them the purpose of your observation. In the context of this discussion, you can find out what their expectations are, and you should also help them to understand what your needs are. The school might have hosted teachers such as you in the past, so they might have some pre-conceptions about what your role is; or you might be their first visitor. Either way, it is important to go over these details, to ensure that there are no misunderstandings.

Keywords: fundamentally, monitoring, traditional, technology, learning, teaching, development, difference, example.

Introduction

A key monitoring activity of leaders in Primary Schools has long been termly lesson observations of teachers operating in classrooms and then providing feedback that is intended to improve practice and the quality of teaching. Peer observations and giving effective feedback are highly sophisticated skills of effective teaching, and many leaders, not just those newly appointed to the role, or aspiring to take on the role, require coaching in the art if their time is to be used as effectively as it might be, i.e. for the specific purpose of improving teaching practice and through it the quality of provision for all pupils[1]. For too long, lesson observation policy has been plagued by the need to make and communicate judgements in the name of accountability. In my experience, those who feel they are being judged during peer observations, criticised and subjected to the opinions held by others are naturally resistant and defensive, and it becomes very difficult to open up and explore with them what, in their observed practice, worked well or otherwise in an open, non-threatening manner [1].

[1] https://www.structural-learning.com/post/lesson-observations.

However, conversely, when professionals feel supported and trusted during structured teacher observations and can engage in low-stakes exploration of their real-life classroom challenges, they are more open to new possibilities and the idea that they can change for the better. They are much less likely to feel the need to mask their difficulties or deny the need for change in their approaches. It is with this firmly in mind, that I strongly advocate, a coaching model that adopts a problem-solving paradigm, and seeks to develop the mindset required to ditch judgemental thinking and language once and for all. It is a model based upon professional dialogue that essentially recognises that what is going well, and probes those less-effective aspects, perceiving them to be problems that can be resolved by solutions arrived at collaboratively.

We can delude ourselves, as experienced observers giving feedback, that the teachers will be motivated by what we say, and seek to improve their practice as a result. Sadly, this is often not the case with the traditional model. It can feel a bit like "chucking peas at an advancing tank, trying to get the driver to change direction"! The drivers themselves need to be involved. The reality is that any observed lesson is just a snapshot of a larger picture, and all an observer should do is focus on what they see, ask questions of the teacher subsequently, and above all, avoid making assumptions.

Essentially, there are no good, bad, weak or strong lessons, and no observed teacher should be judged to be better or worse than any other in the classroom. There are simple problems with learning that occur in the changing contexts within which each teacher works on a daily basis; problems that need to be solved. The role of leaders in English state schools is to support their teachers, to offer insights into what they themselves observe, and then to help the individuals to problem solve. When I work in English state schools as a coach to develop effective practice, it is either to coach the teacher being observed or to coach a leader to improve their formal lesson observation and feedback skills in their monitoring role. Teachers whose classrooms are the focus of the classroom observation should be very clear about which of these two purposes is the focus [2].

As a general rule, I don't ask "How do you think that went?" It is in my experience a recipe for disaster, and encourages people to defensively give excuses for things that went wrong, or to mistakenly overstate the success of the lesson. Be honest; if it was a bit of a disaster or disappointing, say so up front, for example say, "Well, we both know there were a few problems there, so let's see what we can do about them. In the context of lesson observation models and providing feedback to teachers that is designed to improve their effectiveness, leaders in schools need to rethink their roles. Instead of setting out to judge how good the lesson or the teaching is, and where on the scale it should be placed, they should think about and discuss openly how this could be made better, and create the conditions where no one judges, they are there to help. Only then will this important monitoring activity be regarded, as it should be, as a supportive, non-judgemental ingredient in a healthy diet of professional learning.

Furthermore, despite Ofsted's efforts to clarify that they don't expect schools to imitate their procedures and that they have stopped grading lessons, school headteachers and leadership teams continue to use lesson observations to evaluate teachers' performance. Below I

discuss 5 problems with lesson observations used to evaluate teaching performance and offer some thoughts on how they could be used to encourage improvement. The practice undermines teacher professionalism and can easily be used as a mechanism of intimidation. Openness and objectivity are difficult to achieve through this process. Teaching is fundamentally relational and the dynamics that individual teachers bring to their lesson practices are as complex as each of the students they are working with. It takes time for teachers to understand their students and for their students to know their teachers. Much of the effectiveness of a teacher depends on the ways learning relationships develop over time. However, many factors within the culture of a school can undermine the bonds of trust and mutual respect necessary for benign learning relationships to flourish. These are often outside of the control and responsibility of the teacher. The good judgement of the daily choices teachers make in how they address, manage, encourage, support, instruct, direct and motivate their students is impossible measure through one isolated lesson observation. Despite this, observers assess the quality of a lesson and thereby call into question the professional conduct of a teacher. This process does nothing to foster and stimulate the development of better pedagogical wisdom [3].

Lesson observations add pressures on teachers which inhibit their intuitive decision-making in lessons. Not being able to read students' minds, lesson observers are reduced to identifying whether teachers are using 'good' teaching techniques and methods. Although it may be appropriate and advantageous to use these at times, when there are lesson observations as part of inspection and quality assurance processes there is increased pressure to use them on occasions teachers would not normally consider them appropriate. In this way, teachers' professional judgement is further undermined and a conformity to models of lesson delivery is imposed. Observation criteria, checklists, 'indicators' and evidence of 'good practice' may be worth discussing with a teacher but not it terms of "what you didn't do". If excellent teaching could be reduced to these techniques, robots could be trained to manage classes. Again, the interactive and relational aspects of learning are wholly ignored. The document where this quote came from went on to state that, "Every teacher needs to be given both the time and tools to think about their own individual part in the educational enterprise". However, rather than adopting the approach to professional development recognised and taught as the most effective means to enhance effective teaching, resources are spent in unhelpful lesson observation inspections. Many schools think they are imitating Ofsted and continue to evaluate teachers through ill-conceived policies of observation and measurements of students' performance. Why cannot the money spent on this regime be invested in giving teachers time to do what educationalists and academics advocate for professional development? It is ineffective and inefficient, I have failed to find any academic studies to support the positive value of this approach in terms of raising the quality of teaching and learning outcomes. Lesson observations tend to ignore or frown upon many teaching practices that in the hands of a good teacher are key to effective pedagogyLinked to this, teachers need to feel they can talk to senior colleagues within judgement about the challenges and difficulties they are facing. They should also be encouraged to talk openly with their students about their own learning, how the students are finding the lessons and

activities. What matters most is that teachers want to continue to grow and develop, they listen to others and reflect on their work. Processes can be put in place to record this self-directed activity. In the right environment, what becomes worrying is silence and inactivity. This is easier to evaluate than trying to make subjective lesson observation judgments appear objective [4].

Finally, lesson inspection regimes are simply bad business. Learning Inventory, originating from pioneering research at the University of Bristol, confirms Pink's argument. The model of school inspection and internal quality improvement policies we need is one that recognises and values professional trust. In a learning school culture, teachers can grow and develop in understanding, their pedagogical craft can improve and the quality of teacher-student relationships can strengthen. But evaluation of individual lessons is no way to encourage these things and no way to show recognition for the complex and difficult job of teaching.

I am happy to acknowledge that several elements have been shown to impact student outcomes either strongly or moderately. These include: Content knowledge - effective teachers have deep knowledge of the subjects they teach and understand the ways students think about that content, these inform their classroom practice; quality of instruction – this includes good questioning and use of positive assessment methods, reviewing previous learning, providing model responses, giving time for students to practice application of skills; creating a learning climate – teachers' classrooms are characterised by a sense of by demanding yet supportive, students' success is attributed to their effort rather than ability and resilience is encouraged; and classroom management - teachers make efficient use of lesson time, use resources and space wisely, and positively manage students' behavior [5].

However, I think when we really look at these, it would be pointless creating a checklist to see if they are all done in every lesson observed. The fact is that in general good teachers do them but not necessarily by specific actions lesson by lesson. Some teachers seem to be able to create positive outcomes despite clear evidence of their subject knowledge or ability to manage behaviour consistently well. These are statistically 'proven' things but not a divinely ordained model. They might be helpful as discussion points but not as rulers by which a teacher's quality is measured in one or two lessons observation. Recording lessons in one way or another and using this to evaluate teaching has become popular in some places.

Advocates claim that this removes the potentially unknown variable of an observer having to be in the room. It also allows several lessons to be viewed and consequently sequences of lessons. There are potential benefits to this approach but not as a strategy for teaching evaluation. With so much data, what method of analysis could be applied that fairly represents the reality of teacher's pedagogical qualities? However, if a colleague or senior teacher identified 5 things they think evidence good practice and 3 things that they have questions about, then the strategy could stimulate positive professional reflection. Classroom observations in school are an important tool for gaining an overview of patterns and trends, capturing the difference between what is said and what is actually done. It can form a good basis for continued development and improvement work. Research shows that

there is a clear connection between the development and further training of teachers' professions and students' learning [6].

Many believe that continuous classroom observations, in order to develop the teaching, provide in-depth pedagogical discussions between teachers-educators. In the end, it probably also leads to a safer work climate where you as a teacher feel the support of colleagues in the various situations that arise in the meeting with the students. You should never see observations as a test of your teaching ability.

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