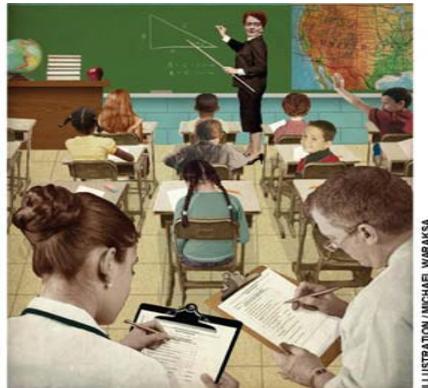


Reflections of a Classroom Teacher

Teacher Observation: Thou Shall Not Fear

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This year marks my 10th year of teaching. In reminiscing on the experiences I have had and the lessons I have learned, some things are difficult to recall, such as the names of all the students that I taught or the activities that I have implemented. However, like most teachers I know, it is difficult to forget the mixture of feelings accompanying my first day as a teacher: *fatigue* (I could not, and still cannot, sleep the night before the first day.), *doubtful* (I had spent hours planning for the first week, but I still felt underprepared.), and *anxious* (I wondered if I would be able to navigate the challenges that I would encounter). I was a young, over-analytical, yet underprepared teacher, beginning my journey into the field of education without much practical experience to chart my course.

What made my first day, and first year, easier was the support I received from my fellow teachers, the majority of whom welcomed me to the school by introducing themselves and offering to help me whenever needed. As a new teacher, this support lessened my anxiety and provided me with a reminder that I was not alone in my journey into the field of education. In particular, several individuals come to mind as providing illustrations of peer support.

One such person was Sharon, a veteran teacher in my department. Sharon had a great deal of experience designing instructional activities and was well able to integrate student-centered approaches into her lessons. I, on the other hand, found it difficult to design activities that my students did not think were “boring” or “stupid”. Upon learning of my difficulties, Sharon eagerly responded by inviting me to observe her classroom to develop a greater understanding of how to increase student engagement. During the next few weeks, I observed Sharon several times, learning a variety of instructional strategies that I could integrate into my practice. Encouraged by the insight gained through my peer observations of Sharon, I decided to observe other teachers who had a strong reputation. These peer observations offered a vehicle for gaining insights into instructional design and implementation that I had not learned during my pre-service training.

Although I sought opportunities to observe my peers, I was less eager to turn the tables and be *the observed* instead of *the observer*. My hesitation stemmed from the fear of receiving an

unsatisfactory observation. Given the increased accountability that has accompanied the current high-stakes educational era, I, like many teachers I know, am concerned that an unsatisfactory evaluation could result in a number of critical outcomes. First, an observation that is rated as “unsatisfactory” can be dispiriting and/or humiliating for the teacher whose competence and/or effort is questioned. Second, an unsatisfactory observation can result in having an unsatisfactory report placed in their permanent files, and possibly mean the beginning of the termination process. Taking into account these potential outcomes, teacher observation is often perceived as a problematic practice. Yet, rather than dismissing the practice of teacher observation, discussion needs to be had about how to replace teachers’ perceptions of teacher observation, from critical evaluation to a meaningful professional experience.

In thinking about ways to improve the teacher observation practice, the point has already been made that one’s colleagues are able to serve as effective observers. Peer observers have the opportunity to offer their colleagues non-threatening feedback, with an emphasis on improvement and development rather than on accountability alone. Moreover, when observations are conducted by peers with similar content and/or grade level expertise, they can learn to recognize common classroom challenges and practices specific to the teacher’s content and/or grade level.

Recognizing the merits of peer observation, schools have incorporated this practice into the ethos of their professional learning plan. Hammond High School in Columbia, Maryland, for example, has implemented a Program Implementation Plan (PIP) that integrates peer observation and literary development (Figure 1.).

Figure 1. Calendar Outlining PIP Peer Observation

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
1 Observation focus introduced at staff meeting	2 In-depth follow-up at PIP meeting	3	4	5
8	9	10	11	12
13 Follow-up at department meeting	14 Application at peer observation	15	16	17
18	19	20	21	22

Potentially, these peer observations have the opportunity for teachers to enhance their knowledge of instructional practices and strategies they can incorporate into their own classroom. Peer observations may also encourage teachers to initiate discussions about how to better support the needs of their students. Despite the benefits of this practice, some teachers have declared themselves unsure about the peer observation process, citing that it is “time-consuming” and “unhelpful”.

Nonetheless, peer observation challenges traditional practice of administrator-conducted teacher observation. Alternate methods of teacher observation provide opportunities for teachers and administrators to find more effective means for teachers to improve their effectiveness. And, effective teaching enhances student learning—a primary mission of education.