



## Rethinking Classroom Observation

*Emily Dolci Grimm, Trent Kaufman and Dave Doty*

Midway through her 12th year of teaching social studies, Maria found herself reflecting on an ongoing challenge: her students' struggle to cite evidence from nonfiction texts. She was pleased that students in her United States history class regularly volunteered to share their opinions on topics the class was studying. It was obvious, however, that most of them struggled to use their reading to inform these opinions.

With the district's heightened focus on literacy, Maria had spent years learning literacy strategies at schoolwide professional development days. She'd discussed these strategies at department meetings. Yet back in her classroom, with 25 pairs of tired eyes staring at her, she found that her use of the practices varied. After months of implementing the new strategies, Maria felt stalled. "How can I improve my implementation of these practices while teaching in isolation?" she wondered. "I need another colleague or two to help me examine what I'm doing in my classroom."

### Why Traditional Professional Development Falls Flat

Maria's frustration is common. We've heard the same thing from teachers in elementary and secondary schools, from new teachers and veterans: Most professional development experiences fail to affect what teachers do in the classroom each day.

Traditional professional development provides no shortage of strategies and resources. Yet, these approaches fall short of improving instruction for three primary reasons:

- *Teachers have little say in what they learn.* Too often, teachers aren't involved in selecting the topics or focus of professional development sessions. As a result, the content may not speak directly to their daily challenges.
- *Transferring learning from training to the classroom is difficult.* The variables of the classroom—students, content, time of day—add a level of complexity to implementation that cannot be fully explored in a training setting.
- *There are few opportunities to practice and refine strategies.* Teachers are left to apply their learning in isolation. Without opportunities for collaborative and job-embedded practice, teachers' implementation of a new strategy can stagnate.

## **A Different Approach**

Teacher-driven observation addresses these problems by empowering teachers with a classroom-embedded process to refine their instruction. Through teacher-driven observation, teachers engage peers in gathering and analyzing classroom data—data that speak to the unique context of their own classrooms. This approach has demonstrated potential to meaningfully improve instruction and student achievement. Existing approaches to observation generally serve the observer. Teacher-driven observation flips this approach, placing the observed teacher as leader and primary learner in the observation process.

The observed teacher identifies the focus of the observation, developing a question that reflects an area about which he or she wants to learn more, and that connects to the relationship between the teachers' instructional methods and students' learning. An educator may want to explore how to develop his students' ability to solve multistep word problems or how to increase student engagement in class discussions. She may hope to improve instruction related to a curricular standard. With a clear focus in mind, the observed teacher invites colleagues to collect classroom data related to that focus.

Three components are essential to teacher-driven observation. At an initial *focus meeting*, the observed teacher shares his or her focus question and gives background for the lesson to be observed. The *observation* enables the collection of classroom data.

During the *post-observation debriefing*, the teacher and observer team collaboratively examine the data collected and discuss what the data indicate about the relationship between teaching and student learning in terms of the teacher's focus.

We've witnessed firsthand the benefits that teachers like Maria derive from engaging in teacher-driven observations—when they first develop the skills described below.

## **Observation Skills**

### **Identifying a Focus Question**

The observed teacher's selection of a focus for the observation—articulated through a question—serves several purposes. First, it positions the teacher as the primary learner, ensuring that the process focuses on an area he or she is interested in learning more about and one that is relevant to his or her challenges, content, and students. Second, the focus question narrows the observers' attention so the data they collect will address the teacher's targeted area. Without a focus, the data collected are likely to reflect the interests of the observers more than those of the observed teacher.

A focus question should require the collection of classroom data; in other words, it should answer a question a teacher can't answer on his or her own. And grounding a focus question in an area of evidence-based instruction—a specific instructional strategy or curriculum standard—ensures that the teacher's learning will improve student learning. Effective questions we've seen teachers use include, How does my use of cold calling contribute to student engagement in class discussions? How can I more effectively use think-alouds to teach students how to represent math problems visually? and Do my instructions facilitate or impede transitions between activities? Although a focus question emerges from an individual teacher's experiences, it often reflects a school or district's instructional focus. Maria, whom we met in the opening vignette, teaches in a district that's focusing on literacy. Her school's social studies department has worked on giving students more opportunities to engage in peer discussion that will promote reading comprehension. The department is deepening its understanding of this strategy through studying the guide [\*Improving Adolescent Literacy: Effective Classroom and Intervention Practices\*](#) developed by the What Works Clearinghouse.

With these efforts in mind, Maria articulates this question: "During small-group discussions, how are my questions promoting students' abilities to cite text to support their conclusions?"

### **Looking for Data in All the Right Places**

Maria's next step is to gather a team of peers who will observe her and to choose data-collection methods she wants them to use. Because classroom data collection is at the heart of teacher-driven observation, it's crucial that observers are clear about the type of data they should collect. We've found three distinct methods of data collection most helpful:

- *Scripting.* This method requires observers to transcribe interactions between the teacher and students—things like teacher instructions and questions, student answers, or individual conversations—as well as interactions among students. Student answers may be further categorized as voluntary, in response to being called on, related to the lesson, or supported (or unsupported) by pertinent details. Scripting engenders a wealth of detail and so is relevant to nearly every observation focus area. However, recording such a quantity of data can be challenging for an observer. The teacher may elect to narrow the focus, asking observers to script the questions he asks, the responses students give, the interaction among a small group of kids, or the dialogue between the teacher and certain students.
- *Counting.* Counting methods let observers capture a high-level view of one particular element of the classroom. A teacher may use counting to examine the distribution of class time, the number of questions she asks at each level of Bloom's taxonomy, or the percentage of students who voluntarily respond to questions. Although counting methods provide insight into classroom patterns, they're often best paired with scripting or tracking methods to provide deeper insight. For example, a teacher may want to explore the number of comments

from each student during a whole-class discussion alongside the scripted comments themselves.

- *Tracking.* Tracking can also help illustrate patterns in a classroom. An observer may use tracking methods to collect data on movement in a classroom—such as by recording on a map of the classroom the movement of a teacher during a lesson or of students during transition time. An observer might track students' eye contact to examine patterns in classroom attention.

Classrooms are complex. Observed teachers often select multiple data-collection methods to gain a holistic picture of their focus area. For example, an English teacher hoping to increase his use of higher-order questions in class might ask one observer to script the questions he asks students, a second observer to tally the number of students who respond to questions, and a third to record the wait time he provides. Collectively, these recordings equip this teacher with a data set that helps him explore how to increase the rigor of his questions during class discussions.

As the leader of teacher-driven observation, the observed teacher selects the data-collection methods observers will use. The method or methods should align with that teacher's area of inquiry. Maria, who seeks insight into the relationship between the questions she asks and how well students cite the text to support their conclusions, selects scripting. In her pre-observation focus meeting, she asks each of her three observers to sit with a group and record students' dialogue during small-group discussions. In addition, she asks them to script the questions she asks each group. Maria's colleagues ask her to clarify a few points. One checks whether he should interact with the student group he sits with on observation day. Another asks, "Do you want me to try and script all student dialogue or only that which directly reflects kids' ability to cite textual evidence?"

Maria looks forward to examining her peers' transcriptions—and to analyzing the way her interactions with each student group affect how often they turn to evidence from the text. She arranges for her observers to visit her class during the last 20 minutes of third period the following day.

## **Using Protocols to Tame Time**

Educators can attest to the shortage of collaborative time in the school day. Using protocols—explicit structures for conversations—to guide the pre-observation conversation and post-observation debriefing helps observer teams use time effectively. Straightforward protocols (see "[Teacher-Driven Observation Protocols](#)") maintain a team's focus on the data. Most important, the structure of the protocol helps teams concentrate on the task at hand: to identify improvements in teaching that improve student learning.

The structure of protocols can feel awkward to teams, particularly those with years of experience working together. However, we've found that teams that stick to protocols come to see them as essential. This tool ensures that the hours teams invest focus on the most important thing within their control: their teaching.

## **Staying Descriptive**

Our own experiences as educators make it challenging to shed our perceptions about instructional methods (or even particular students!) when we enter the classroom as observers. Although prior experiences are valuable, they can inhibit a teacher in the observer role. He or she may draw conclusions before taking the time to make sense of all of the data collected. We've heard evidence of such premature conclusions in comments like, "Wow, your students were really engaged!" or "That work was too difficult for those students." Such general comments don't easily inform shifts in instructional practice. They more often result in a failure to identify instructional improvements or in defensiveness.

Staying descriptive is the single most difficult skill to develop in teacher-driven observation. It challenges established norms of conversation, particularly among educators whose conversations commonly remain in what Elizabeth City and colleagues call the "land of nice."<sup>1</sup> In addition, educators are in the habit of drawing immediate conclusions about our classrooms—we do so hundreds of times a day as we make decisions. Teacher-driven observation requires that we take a moment to pause and examine the data collected in our classrooms.

It's quite powerful when a team stays descriptive throughout the post-observation debriefing. Rather than drawing a conclusion about student engagement, for instance, observers discuss exactly what they saw and heard in the classroom. The pool of data they share through descriptive evidence lays a richer foundation for discussion. As Maria's observers debrief with her, one shares two questions Maria posed to students: "If we look at page 2, what specific information does the author provide to support your point?" and "What does the author say in the final paragraph?" Through examining this data, Maria realizes that she often directs students to specific parts of the text. Although this contributes to students' ability to cite textual evidence, she realizes that students may be ready for less direction, which will increase their responsibility for citing evidence to support a conclusion. Maria decides to change her question for an upcoming lesson to this one: "What content in the text supports your conclusion?"

The scripted data of the students' conversation also illustrate that learners frequently echo one another in their small group—about their conclusions from the text and on the textual evidence cited. (Part of the transcript reads, "Student 1: Yeah, I agree that the author presented a balanced view of FDR. Student 2: Me too, and for the same reasons you said about what the author says in the first paragraph.") As Maria considers this data, she wonders whether students' agreement is preventing richer dialogue, through which students would be challenged to consider evidence that disputes their conclusions.

"I'm wondering how you can get students to consider the contradictory evidence in the text," one observer tells Maria. "Well," she replies. "One idea I have is to ask questions to the small groups that draw them to pieces of the text that contradict their ideas. Or I might have students identify their general conclusion before they're divided into groups—and create groups that include students with opposing conclusions." With some fresh and relevant ideas to refine her implementation of peer discussion strategies, Maria is no longer stalled.

### **Activating Teachers' Voices**

We've seen dozens of schools improve their teaching and learning through developing the skills described here and through the structure of teacher-driven

observation. For instance, teachers at Hamilton High School in Chandler, Arizona, have participated in such observation for four years. More than 80 percent of Hamilton's teachers report that the approach has been more valuable than other professional development opportunities they've experienced and has contributed to instructional improvements. In 2012, Hamilton received the highest growth score among Arizona's comprehensive high schools.

At Central High School in Evansville, Indiana, a cross-department teacher team used the process to address a schoolwide need: students' difficulties applying critical-thinking skills. As part of their school improvement plan, Central's faculty had selected several reading and writing strategies to promote students' critical thinking. As teachers carried out these strategies, they leveraged teacher-driven observations to monitor their implementation. For example, after reviewing an observer's scripted data of his directions to the class, a teacher became aware of how he could clarify his introduction to this content so the strategy would be more effective.

It's time to rethink traditional approaches to both teacher observation and professional development. Just as surgeons see observation and coaching as vital to improving their craft, teachers should be no different. As Ball and Cohen<sup>2</sup> note, "Teaching occurs in particulars—particular students interacting with particular teachers over particular ideas in particular circumstances." These particulars make traditional approaches to professional development inadequate in cultivating instructional change. We can only get at these particulars effectively by embedding professional development in the classroom and by activating the voice too often absent in professional development efforts—the teacher's.

## Teacher-Driven Observation Protocols

### Focus Meeting

1. Lead teacher provides logistical information for the observation and the post-observation debriefing. (2 minutes)
  - Observers ask clarifying questions. (2 minutes)
2. Lead teacher provides context for the lesson to be observed and shares the focus question. (3 minutes)
  - Observers ask clarifying questions. (2 minutes)
3. Lead teacher assigns observation methods to observers. (2 minutes)
  - Observers ask clarifying questions. (2 minutes)

### Debriefing

1. Observers discuss the teaching and learning they observed. (2 minutes)
  - Descriptive statements: What did you see and hear? (3 minutes)
  - What do you conclude from this/wonder about? (3 minutes)
2. Observed teacher speaks about how the data from the observation relate to the focus question. (2 minutes)
  - How do the data answer my focus question?
  - Have the data informed other areas of my instruction? How?
3. Observers and observed teacher discuss next steps. (3 minutes)
  - Observed teacher: How will the data collected today inform my instruction?
  - Observers: What have I learned that I can apply to my own instruction?