

[REL Mid-Atlantic Webinar](#)
Using Classroom Observations to Measure Teacher Effectiveness
Q&A with Rob Ramsdell
October 24, 2013

In this webinar, Mr. Rob Ramsdell, Vice President, Cambridge Education, discussed the use of classroom observations as one measure of teacher effectiveness in a comprehensive educator support system. Mr. Ramsdell presented research-based recommendations for improving the quality and rigor of classroom observations. This Q&A addressed the questions participants had for Rob Ramsdell following the webinar. The [webinar recording](#) and [PowerPoint presentation](#) are also available.

Questions

1. Can you clarify the difference between an observation and a walk-through?

It is important to have a common understanding of both terms. Both processes allow for the collection of data connected to teacher instruction and student learning.

An observation can be either formal or informal. A formal observation that is scheduled with a teacher in advance normally lasts between 30 and 50 minutes or the equivalency of one bell-to-bell class period that contains a beginning, a middle, and an ending to a lesson. It is best practice to include both a preconference and a post conference as part of any observation. Although sometimes the preconference is omitted, there should always be a post conference/feedback meeting.

Informal observations may be announced or unannounced and allow the observer to come into the classroom at various times to collect additional information about teaching practices and student learning. Informal observations generally do not require a preconference with the teacher. However, it is always important to give the teacher feedback so informal observations should include a post conference/opportunity for feedback.

Walk-throughs are most often short, five- to seven-minute visits to classrooms and are particularly useful for school leadership teams to track school wide or department/grade trends. They can also be used to collect data that may not have been available on the day of a formal or informal observation. As with observations, it is always important to give the teacher feedback, and therefore walk-throughs should also include a post conference/opportunity for feedback.

Classroom observations and walk-throughs should be programmed on a daily basis throughout the year as they enable the school instructional leadership team to gain first-hand knowledge of the everyday quality of teaching and learning taking place in the school. They can also be used to collect and provide additional data to support an individual teacher's summative evaluation.

As previously stated, feedback should be given after any observation/walkthrough. The feedback focus should be on actionable change(s) that the teacher can make. These agreed-upon actions should be given to the teacher in writing. The observer should keep a copy of these agreed-upon actions so that in future observations of the same teacher, the observer can look for the impact of these changes in terms of both the classroom learning

environment and individual students' cognitive engagement.

2. What are the specific short- and long-term outcomes that can be quantified?

Short-term outcomes are those that immediately impact a teacher's instruction, such as enhancing emerging good practice or correcting any practices that may not be producing favorable results or those that may have a negative impact on student learning.

Classroom environment factors, such as respect and rapport, culture of learning, and classroom procedures, can be adjusted quickly and also have an immediate impact on student learning. Data gathered from student perceptions using tools such as the [Tripod](#) survey assessment are also an effective way to measure changes in student engagement and the classroom learning environment.

Student assessment data, when obtained from valid assessments that accurately measure student learning, are one of the strongest long-term outcomes most prevalently used. However, it is important to ensure that the tools being used for measurement are agreed on in advance, are consistently used and robustly applied, and are able to measure individual student learning growth within a given time period.

3. What is used to measure the effectiveness? How is teacher effectiveness measured accurately?

According to multiple facets of current research (most recently the [Measures of Effective Teaching](#) (MET) project), teacher effectiveness is best measured by using multiple methods of data collection, such as classroom observations by multiple observers, student perception surveys, value-added measures, and data related to student growth. When used alone, student perception surveys have been proven to measure teacher effectiveness more reliably than any other measure used alone.

4. Can an observation tool validly measure teacher effectiveness and provide targeted, specific feedback to improve practice, or is a tool designed to "serve one master" first, and other tasks are secondary?

Used alone, a tool cannot measure teacher effectiveness. But, when combined with an observer's ability to accurately record evidence and connect evidence of student learning to the appropriately identified portions of the rubric/tool, the tool provides the foundation for the targeted feedback to teachers. The practice of providing feedback also requires great skill and knowledge of instructional practices to assist teachers in identifying actionable change and targeting professional development to meet their individual needs.

5. What does effectiveness look like in the classroom situation? What are some examples?

Teacher effectiveness can take many shapes and forms. It is therefore important that schools develop and agree on success criteria that are directly linked to the rubric they are using to evaluate teacher effectiveness. However, in an effective teacher's classroom, one would expect to see students cognitively engaged in learning that is student driven and student owned. Students would be monitoring their own learning and setting goals for themselves based on their own assessment of where they are in the instruction and where they need to go.

6. Which classroom observations are the most comprehensive?

Formal observations are the most comprehensive. Please refer to the response to question 1.

7. What is the optimal length of an observation?

Please refer to the response to question 1.

8. What if the observer has no experience/expertise in the content area or grade level he/she is observing but still has to evaluate that teacher's effectiveness?

As indicated earlier, the key focus of all observations and walk-throughs should be identifying the impact that teachers are making both in terms of the classroom learning environment and individual students' cognitive engagement. Because the focus is on learning, the content knowledge is less important.

However, in the absence of content knowledge, a preconference with the teacher can often be of help to the observer. Also, the observer may consult a district-level content area expert if specific questions arise during an observation for which the observer needs clarification prior to meeting with the teacher for a post/feedback conference. Many districts and schools are also now promoting peer observation and evaluation as a means to enhance teacher lesson observation and teacher evaluation.

9. What (how) is the best way to debrief with the teacher you are mentoring about the observation?

Placing the focus of the debrief on student learning and using statements such as "I observed that learning was best when..." and "students were more actively engaged when..." encourage teachers to be actively engaged in the feedback process.

Once good rapport is developed with the teacher being mentored, inviting the teacher to undertake a self-assessment using the agreed-on rubric before meeting with the mentor can be beneficial. This also encourages the teacher to recognize the importance of self-reflection as a means of adjusting his or her instruction.

10. What are keys for effective feedback?

Grant Wiggins provides seven key areas to help provide effective feedback. Ensuring that feedback is goal oriented and actionable, clear, and user friendly, as well as timely, are just a few (Wiggins, 2012). It is also important to remember that feedback should not be delivered in language or processes that are threatening to a teacher but rather use conversation that is centered on student cognitive learning and connected to learning in terms of the teacher's practices that have an impact on that learning.

11. What are your thoughts regarding Pennsylvania's new standard that 50% of a teacher's evaluation is based on direct classroom observation?

Teacher evaluation based on direct classroom observation can provide a useful means for recognizing teacher effectiveness when the observation practices follow proven research-based procedures and protocols. These include multiple observations by multiple observers

who have been trained to use the specific rubric, joint observations, and calibration.

12. How do we know this is a true representation of general activities?

One or two formal classroom observations alone cannot provide a true picture of what happens in classrooms on a daily basis. For that reason, it is not recommended that teacher observation be the only method for determining teacher effectiveness. Observers/evaluators must make their presence known in classrooms frequently by first sharing with teachers and creating an atmosphere and culture conducive to these ongoing instructional practices for the sake of student learning. As previously mentioned, additional measures, when used along with teacher observation, are most likely to provide an accurate picture of teacher instruction and student learning.

13. How many observations give a fair representation of teacher effectiveness?

It is best to have multiple observers conduct multiple observations, some short, unannounced, and informal, in addition to the formal observation(s). Including many walk-throughs during the year to gather additional evidence of effective teaching is also suggested.

14. Do you have a specific protocol for observations of literacy instruction?

The protocol may remain the same, but the observation rubric used should adequately reflect the specific role and responsibilities of the position. In the context of the Common Core State Standards, a separate supplementary rubric that is geared to the shift to the Common Core is likely to be beneficial in gathering evidence to be used in feedback.

Agreed-on “look-fors” associated with the rubric could provide an additional lens for the observation, data collected, and feedback.

15. How many times during the school year should teachers be observed through unannounced visits?

Should there be a limit to the number of unannounced visits?

As noted in the answer to question 1, the school should implement a planned program of observations throughout the year. It is important to remember that unannounced visits are more likely to provide a picture of day-to-day teaching when used in addition to the formal observation process and walk-throughs.

16. Apart from the number of student responses and cumulative duration of apparent student engagement, what ingredients point toward teacher effectiveness?

Multiple “ingredients” contribute to teachers becoming effective. A few of the key elements include setting learning outcomes and designing instruction that is relevant and coherent, as well as designing ongoing formative assessments that identify whether students have met the learning objectives. The ability of teachers to create and maintain a classroom environment that is conducive to student learning and one in which students feel safe to explore learning is also important, as are the quality of teacher questioning and the level of cognitive student engagement.

17. Can you speak to the way these types of observations can be used to support teachers through responsive PD [professional development] or coaching? Have you found specific types of measures or aspects of instruction that are particularly well aligned to this type of support? Where are the challenges?

Effective teacher observation is geared towards identifying an individual teacher's practices, especially those that promote a classroom environment conducive to learning and individual student cognitive learning. This actively promotes targeted feedback, the identification of strategies and actionable change, and areas of personalized development that are geared to each teacher's needs. The implications of this are that a "one size fits all" approach to professional development is no longer relevant.

18. How do you make an effective checklist?

Best practice observation focuses on collecting first-hand objective evidence in relation to "how" the teacher is developing the classroom learning environment and promoting student cognitive engagement, rather than "what" the teacher is doing. Once the observer has collected this evidence, he/she can then match this evidence to the agreed-on rubric.

Therefore, checklists should be used with extreme caution as they tend to promote a checkbox approach and detract from the main focus of any lesson observation, which should be about collecting high-quality, first-hand evidence of the impact of the teaching and not the teacher input.

However, any checklists that are used should refer to teachers setting high expectations for student learning, creating a safe and respectful learning environment that allows for student trial and error, and including elements that help students identify why they are learning what they are learning and how this learning connects to them individually now and in the future.

Action Steps

Participants responded to the question "As a result of today's webinar, what action steps do you plan to take?" and some of their responses are listed below.

- *Ask the administration for guidance, training, and cooperation in order to observe my department, and keep observations to student learning.*
- *Ensure that all observation leaders are on the same page with regards to what the ideal lesson classroom instruction should entail.*
- *Double-check my feedback to ensure it is linked to student learning.*

Inter-rater Reliability

- *Continue to work on inter-rater reliability and put into place some practice for addressing it (2).*
- *Test the reliability (paired) regarding our observation instrument.*
- *If and when inter-rater reliability is below expectation, try to repeat with the same peer in another class and exchange notes.*

Tools

- *Use the self-assessment tool.*
- *Use the self-reflection tool with staff.*

- *Take the self-assessment tool to our partnering school districts to use as a pre- and post-test to see if our professional development improves their instructional feedback.*
- *Plan to make an observation tool or observation checkbox.*
- *Administrative peer evaluations.*
- *Report back to our research team and refine the observation tool we have been working on, based on information received today.*

Teacher Preparation

- *As an instructor in higher education for teacher prep, I would like to continue working with districts to understand the evaluation system so I can prepare my teacher candidates to be active participants.*
- *Coordinate teacher preparation training with the specific evaluation structures in districts we work with.*
- *Hope to improve student teacher programs to encourage innovation in education.*
- *Assist school and district leaders with conducting effective classroom observations.*

Share Information

- *Discuss with Dean of School of Education, district POC, supervisor, or principal investigator (4).*
- *I will share this with the other principal coaches in Delaware.*
- *Share with our Director of Teaching and Learning the importance of connecting with students and student learning.*
- *I will utilize all facets from today's webinar with my administrative team.*
- *I will use the outline and strategies presented in the webinar to make a case for a stronger evaluation system.*
- *The information shared today is in concert with some of the initiatives in our district. We will continue to use this as we go forward.*
- *We have a peer coaching model. I'll recommend a 2-coach observation model to raise the quality of observation.*

Additional Resources

- McClellan, C. (2013, September). What it looks like: Master coding videos for observer training and assessment (Policy and Practice Brief). Washington, DC: Measures of Effective Teaching Project. Retrieved from http://www.metproject.org/downloads/MET_Master_Coding_Brief.pdf.
- Teachscape resources can support thinking on reliability and effective teacher evaluation: <http://www.teachscape.com/resources/teacher-effectiveness-research>.
- Wiggins, G. (2012, September). Seven keys to effective feedback. *Educational Leadership*, 70(1), 10–16. Retrieved from <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/sept12/vol70/num01/Seven-Keys-to-Effective-Feedback.aspx>.