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REL Mid-Atlantic Teacher Effectiveness Webinar Series
The Teacher's Role in Quality Classroom Interactions Q&A with Dr. Drew Gitomer
November 21, 2013

In this webinar, Dr. Drew Gitomer, professor at Rutgers University, shared results from recent studies of classroom observations that helped participants understand both general findings about the qualities of classroom interactions and also the challenges to carrying out valid and reliable observations. This Q&A addressed the questions participants had for Dr. Gitomer following the webinar. The webinar recording and PowerPoint presentation are also available.

Questions

1. **How do the teacher interactions affect student outcomes?**

   There is a broad literature that attempts to relate particular kinds of interactions to student learning. Often this has been done in specific subjects and with specific groups of students (e.g., English language learner students). Typically, studies have tried to isolate particular instructional interactions and associate them with different outcomes.

   The use of observation protocols actually allows us to investigate this kind of question systematically in that we have ways of coding interactions and relating them to learning. But identifying that interactions are related to outcomes does not, in itself, answer the question of how student outcomes are affected. There is very limited research on how student outcomes are affected at this point, but this is a very rich area for further research.

2. **Do interactions vary in response to students' abilities?**

   It certainly seems to be the case on average that interactions are stronger in classes that include students with stronger academic histories, and I reported on some of those findings in my presentation. However, this needs to be understood to a much greater extent. It would not be surprising if students with stronger academic histories were exposed to teaching that called for deeper reasoning or richer discussion. It is, of course, possible for classrooms composed of students with weak academic histories to have very rich interactions. Unfortunately, this is not what we see on average.

3. **Have think-alouds with the teachers been conducted with recordings of these types of classroom interactions?**

   Yes, a variety of approaches have been used to get at teachers' thinking and analysis of their own practice. An early study was done by Penelope Peterson in 1978. More recently, there is a large body of work around such things as video clubs in which teachers analyze their own and peers' practice. There are also different assessment systems (e.g., National Board for Professional Teaching Standards) that ask teachers to systematically reflect on their own practice (in written rather than oral form).

4. **How can researchers communicate and create observation protocols with teachers' involvement?**

   This is essentially a design problem and one in which it is important to involve different expertise to address particular issues. Certainly, teachers can contribute substantial expertise and reality checks to any observation protocol design. I think the key for any design process for researchers is to maximize the strengths of different participants in the design and development. So, for example, I would want teachers involved in helping to define critical dimensions of teaching and to identify strong exemplars of different scale points. I would want them working with technical measurement experts, but I would ask these experts to weigh in more strongly on technical aspects of the instrument (e.g., sampling issues).

5. **In what areas of classroom interaction are current teachers strongest, and in what areas do they most need to develop?**

   I can answer in generalizations that do not hold for all teachers in all settings, of course. What we see across studies using different protocols is that classrooms are generally strong on dimensions that are associated with how classrooms are organized. Behavior is generally good, classroom procedures are carried out reasonably well, and students are generally on task. However, in most classrooms, cognitive expectations are low, content goals are limited, discussions are also limited, and students do not engage in much deeper reasoning around content.

6. **What are the focus areas for an observer? What are some tips?**

   A challenge that almost all observers face is, first, learning to look at teaching through the lens of the protocol. Observers have deep-seated beliefs about teaching and are likely to bring those views to the observation of a classroom. But, in using the protocol, we want people to use the language and intent of the protocol itself and move away from idiosyncratic judgments.

   A second challenge is to learn to look at interactions among students and teachers rather than just focus on teacher moves. Often, observers will focus only on what the teacher does and says, and pay little attention to what the students are doing. Because these protocols focus on interactions and not just teacher behaviors, it takes some practice to pay attention to the full set of evidence that is important in making observational judgments.

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.

- *[I'm] already sending emails.*
- *Share information and PowerPoint with school administrators who are implementing a new evaluation system; members of the district teaching and learning team, the research team who is conducting classroom observations in turn-around schools, peers in teacher education program, colleagues, induction coaches, and professors of pre-service and in-service teachers.*
- *Incorporate these ideas into a curriculum design web tool.*

- *Incorporate the aspect of a "common language."*
- *Use Danielson's Evidence of Teaching to ensure that my lessons are "Distinguished."*
- *Organize a staff development retreat where teachers can observe the processes among each other and then make improvement plans based on the models presented.*
- *[I'm] currently reviewing my state's educator performance framework and providing feedback specific to special education itinerant staff.*
- *Research comparing types of observation tools and the aspects of instruction that different views on teaching highlight.*
- *[Place] greater emphasis on communication about purpose of observations and ensure a feedback component is part of the data collection protocol itself.*
- *I am working to form grades 6–9 Algebra teacher groups to collaboratively understand "good teaching" so they can participate in peer evaluations that do not seem capricious and develop trust.*
- *I will encourage my pre-service teachers to have a more common understanding of the evaluation/observation terms before being observed, evaluate themselves periodically, and share information with other school of education faculty.*
- *Consider pulling out specific domains from different rubrics that are supported by research that improve student achievement and change teaching practices in a positive way, and consider a rater system that relies on a co-rater protocol instead of using multiple raters.*
- *I would like to co-observe as much as time allows.*
- *Provide multiple opportunities for pre-service teachers to observe good student teacher interactions so they will learn and be able to use it in their future practice.*

Additional Resources

- ETS Classroom Video Library: http://www.etsvideo.mylearningplan.com/
- Penelope L. Peterson, P. L. & Clark, C. M. (1978). Teachers' Reports of Their Cognitive Processes During Teaching. *American Educational Research Journal 15*, 555-565.