

WALTZING THROUGH EVALUATION*

Ann Hassenpflug

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Abstract

New assistant high school principal, Gwen, and veteran English teacher, Anita, disagree on Gwen's approach to instructional leadership. Gwen's focus as a supervisor is on raising student achievement test scores. She prefers to make brief visits to classrooms, and she knows exactly what she wants to see happening during those visits. Anita views teaching and learning as an interactive process that requires more complex observation and evaluation methodologies. However, new business education teacher, Lisa, is satisfied with Gwen's approach. Consequently the two teachers have quite different post-observation conferences with Gwen about their teaching. Principal Jim provides limited support for his new assistant principal, Gwen. This publication aligns with the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISSLC) Standard 1: "An education leader promotes the success of every student by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by all stakeholders."



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1 Introduction

This post-observation conference in the assistant principal's office is not going well. Veteran teacher Anita can barely control her anger at the attempts of first-year assistant principal Gwen to micromanage her lesson plans. Anita believes she knows how to create and structure units and lessons that students enjoy. She doesn't need help from an administrator who had a reputation as a teacher for having spent more time coaching volleyball than planning lessons.

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¹<http://ijelp.expressacademic.org>

2 Conversation Between Gwen and Anita

Anita: “Gwen, you taught middle school computer technology, not high school English. Please stop telling me that you know more about how to teach my English classes than I do. You’ve only observed me for a grand total of fifteen minutes this week. Waltzing through five different classes for three minutes each time doesn’t provide you enough information to make you knowledgeable about my teaching.”

Gwen: “I was hired to do instructional leadership at Darrow High School. That means I have to see that student achievement test scores go up,” Gwen asserted. “My job is to make sure that all my teachers are doing their jobs.”

Anita: “There’s a lot more to instructional leadership than just making sure test scores increase and your being visible in classrooms,” Anita responded wearily.

Gwen: “Now it sounds like you’re trying to tell me how to do my job!” Gwen sniped.

Anita: “Gwen, I have been a mentor teacher for the new teachers in the English department, and I’ve supervised several student teachers during my ten years here. Plus, I’ve served on district language arts curriculum committees. So, I think I know what instructional leadership means. I have spent a lot of time with other language arts professionals dialoguing about goals and methods.”

Gwen: “Anita, if you persist in talking to me in this way, I’m going to have to write you up for insubordination!” Gwen huffed.

Anita: Anita looked at Gwen in dismay. “What? How am I being insubordinate? I’m trying to discuss the meaning of instructional leadership with you.”

Gwen: “I didn’t ask you to do that, did I? I told you what I want. I want detailed lesson plans from you for the classes I visited this past week.”

Anita: “I don’t see the point of developing lesson plans for classes that have already been taught.”

Gwen: “So you admit that you didn’t have lesson plans for those classes!”

Anita: Anita was growing more perplexed by Gwen’s lack of listening skills. “I didn’t say that at all. Of course, I had lesson plans, but they weren’t written in the detailed format that you seem to want. Why is it that you want those lesson plans now? What is it that you saw in those three-minute waltz-throughs that caused you to think that there was a problem?”

Gwen: “I told you I have to have them for my records. That is the procedure I’m using. No one else has complained about it!”

Anita: “What records?” Anita’s voice revealed her surprise. “Surely the checklists that you completed during the waltz-throughs were adequate as documentation. Are these records that are going in my personnel file? What are you planning to do with them?”

Gwen: “I don’t care for your tone, Anita. I don’t have to explain myself to you.”

Anita: “What exactly is the purpose of this conference, Gwen? You emailed me that I needed to meet with you today during my planning period. As soon as I walked into your office, you immediately started telling me what you think I need to do differently with my English classes. You never asked why the students are engaged in specific activities.”

Gwen: Gwen paused to shuffle some papers on her desk before she responded. “I know how to raise test scores, and that is what matters. I didn’t see the sort of behaviors that I was looking for when I came into your classes. Each time I came in, your students were in small groups, either writing reactions or reading other students’ reactions to reading assignments. You were sitting at your desk grading essays. I saw virtually the same thing during each visit!”

Anita: “Your five visits occurred in five different classes and lasted three minutes in each class! If you had stayed for an entire class, you would have seen other activities. But what was wrong with the activity that you did see?”

Gwen: “That should be obvious to any veteran teacher,” Gwen snipped.

Anita: “Well, this veteran doesn’t think there is anything wrong with it. All the students were actively engaged in using their language arts skills,” Anita insisted.

Gwen: “How do you know? You were sitting at your desk! You should have been moving around the classroom monitoring the activity. You’re not supposed to be doing grading during class time. You’re

supposed to be teaching.”

Anita: Anita shook her head in disbelief. “So reading and reacting to student papers while students are reading and reacting to student papers is inappropriate teacher behavior? How odd! I would’ve called it modeling. What is the point of the three-minute waltz through when you don’t even know what you’re seeing?”

Gwen: “This conference is over, Anita. I want the lesson plans in my mailbox by tomorrow morning.”

Anita: “And what exactly will you do if the lesson plans aren’t there?”

Gwen: “The lesson plans are to be there, Anita. We are done. I have another appointment. Lisa should be waiting out there so send her in on your way out.”

Gwen: Anita rose from her chair and departed without further comment.

3 Conversation Between Gwen and Lisa

Gwen barely had time to open Lisa’s file before the young teacher breezed into her office.

Lisa: “Hi, Gwen. Thanks so much for being willing to help me with my classes. I really appreciate your effort to stop by and see my classes even though I know you’re awfully busy. It means a lot to me and my students to know that an administrator cares enough to drop by to see what’s going on in my classroom,” Lisa warbled.

Gwen: “That’s my job, Lisa. I’m here to help in any way that I can. Did you bring your lesson plans for your business education classes with you?” Gwen sat back in her chair with a sense of relief.

Lisa: “Yes. I have them right here. That format you gave me during our last conference was really super. I’ve been using it for every class. It really helps me use the time efficiently.”

Gwen: “I’m glad to hear that. I wish all the teachers felt that way.”

Lisa: Lisa looked genuinely surprised. “Are you saying some don’t? I can’t imagine why a good teacher would say that. I want to do everything I can to make sure my students do well on the achievement tests. My students have to be prepared for the twenty-first century. Employers want workers who can understand instructions and follow them.”

Gwen: “That is exactly the way I see it, too, Lisa.”

Lisa: “Working at Darrow High School has been like a dream come true for me. I just love it here. The administration tells me exactly what I need to do. I don’t have to guess whether I’m doing what you want. I don’t understand why some of the older teachers are so sour. They act like they know more about teaching than the administrators do. They’re so idealistic in their insistence that education is about developing critical thinking skills in students. They are so behind the times. Education is about developing employment skills and social skills. Students are the product of the school. My job is to provide the product that my employer wants.”

Gwen: “Lisa, I’m in charge of creating a school improvement committee. A person with your enthusiasm is exactly what I need on the committee.”

Lisa: Lisa sat up even straighter in her chair. “That sounds like a fantastic opportunity. Thanks so much for thinking of me. I don’t know how to improve a school like Darrow, though. Everything runs like clockwork here. It’s just like a well-run factory. Maybe we could have an online auction to raise more money for field trips to amusement parks for the students who do well on the achievement tests.”

Gwen: “That’s a good idea, Lisa. I think you’ll do fine on the committee.”

Lisa: “Is there something else that you wanted to talk to me about during our conference?”

Gwen: “No. I don’t think so. I think you understand your role at Darrow very well.”

Lisa: “Well, thanks for all your help,” Lisa said cheerily as she sailed out the door.

4 Conversation Between Gwen and Jim

A moment later principal Jim Hartstern walked into Gwen’s office, closing the door behind him. Even after ten years of being an administrator, he was still often mistaken for being a head coach.

Jim: “Gwen, I’ve been meaning to talk with you about how things are going. I know we should have regular mentoring sessions, but we’re both so busy. Why don’t we have a mini-conference right now. I just heard we might have a little problem with the union over Anita. I think maybe we better back off going into her classes any more this semester.”

Gwen: “How dare she go to the union when I’m just doing my job. Every time I’m in her class she just sits there grading papers. You’d think that she’d at least get up and start moving around when I come in. She knows what an administrator wants to see. We want to see a performance, but she just sits there defiantly reading and writing comments on those student essays. Meanwhile the students are working on their own. They’re expected to take responsibility for their own learning even though that’s what she is paid to do!”

Jim: “I understand what you’re saying, Gwen. But some of these older women teachers just aren’t good at working with younger women administrators. They see you in a role they might have had, and they’re jealous.”

Gwen: “Student achievement is more important than professional jealousy. Anita shouldn’t be standing in the way of improvement just because she doesn’t think I should be an assistant principal.”

Jim: “I know how frustrating this must be for you, Gwen. Choosing you as assistant principal was one of the best decisions I ever made. You are always so willing to work with people, but sometimes there just are people who don’t want to work with you, and it’s best to let them be and go work with the others who want your leadership. That’s one of the most important things I’ve learned as a principal. You’ve got to run with what you can net and realize all the fish aren’t going to swim into that net.”

Gwen: “You’re right. There are plenty of young teachers like Lisa who can really help make a difference. I should focus on them.”

Jim: Jim smiled broadly as he stood up. “It’s about time for your lunch supervision duty, isn’t it?”

Gwen: “Oh gosh, I almost forgot. Sometimes I get so caught up in teacher issues that I forget about the students.”

5 Discussion Questions

Support your response to the following questions by citing relevant research or theory from the reference list or from other resources addressing educational leadership, such as the ELCC/ISLLC standards.

1. Analyze the post-observation conference between assistant principal Gwen and veteran teacher Anita. How could it be improved?
2. Analyze the post-observation conference between assistant principal Gwen and novice teacher Lisa. How could it be improved?
3. Describe the your preferred approach to classroom observation. What are the advantages and disadvantages for a three-minute walk-through and for a fifty-minute observation?
4. Describe your philosophy of supervision.
5. Describe the components of instructional leadership. Did the assistant principal and principal demonstrate them?
6. Discuss the potential impact of teacher evaluation on school improvement and student achievement.
7. Should all teachers prepare daily lesson plans? Should they be required to regularly submit the plans to the administration as part of the evaluation process?

Explain your responses.

1. What is good teaching? Does observation of student engagement provide adequate and appropriate evidence of teacher competence? Explain your position.
2. Discuss the role of classroom observations in the teacher evaluation process.
3. Should a teacher use class time to evaluate student work? Explain your position.
4. How are teacher evaluation procedures affected by age, gender, and certification of the teacher and the evaluator?

5. How would you change the teacher evaluation process at Darrow High School to enhance student achievement and staff morale?

6 Resource List

Blase, J., & Blase, J. (2003). Breaking the silence: Overcoming the problem of principal mistreatment of teachers. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

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