

Section 2b:

Observation/Feedback Approach

Observation/Feedback is a collegial, professional development approach that encourages practitioners to analyze, critique, practice, reflect, and revise instructional practices. Frequently equated with teacher evaluation (and thus “threatening” to some practitioners), Observation/ Feedback takes several other forms, such as peer coaching, mentoring, and clinical supervision. Using observation and feedback, practitioners may pair up, formally or informally, to practice a specific instructional technique or strategy they wish to incorporate into their teaching repertoire or to gain feedback on their overall teaching styles.

Regardless of form, the approach may involve a series of observations and feedback conferences to be held over an extended period of time, (or it may involve more limited observations). The specific time frame depends upon specific practitioner needs and staff time, as well as the ability to engage in the process. A professional development coordinator may set up the logistics for the observation and conferences, provide guidance on techniques for observation and feedback, or be the individual conducting the observations and feedback discussions.

Underlying Assumptions

Observation/Feedback is based upon the following assumptions (Sparks and Loucks-Horsley, 1990):

- Practitioners enhance their professional growth by reflecting and analyzing instructional practices;
- Practitioners need to practice new instructional strategies if they are to be effectively implemented in their classrooms;
- Observations by others enhance reflective practices;
- Observations benefit both the practitioner and the observer; and
- Positive results from the efforts of practitioners to change behaviors foster efforts to continue to improve practices.

Theory and Background

The Observation/Feedback approach is grounded in the literature on teacher evaluation, clinical supervision, cognitive processes, and peer coaching. Often an observation guide or focusing instrument is used to narrow the scope of the observation. A pre-conference may be conducted to allow the observer to gain more information prior to the actual observation (McGreal, 1982). Alternating unfocused observations (the observer collects data on all significant instructional behavior, to identify areas of strength and potential weakness) with focused observations (the observer gathers data related to (a) a specific area the instructor wants to practice or (b) a problem that has been identified) also enhances the process (Glatthorn, 1987).

Glickman (1986) presents a framework for understanding individual learning processes that is applicable to the Observation/Feedback process for adult education instructors. He categorizes teacher thought into *low*, *moderate*, and *high abstract* cognitive levels. A practitioner's level of abstraction helps to determine the processes for providing teacher feedback. (It is important to note that a practitioner's level of abstraction may change over time as the individual gains skills, knowledge, and experience.) Low abstract is characterized by confusion, a lack of ideas, dependence on “experts,” and unilateral responses to varying situations. Moderate abstract is characterized by focus on a singular dimension of problems generated, few solutions, and assistance from authority figures on planning and implementing actions. High abstract is characterized by identifying problems from multiple sources, generating various solutions, and developing and implementing plans of action.

Peer coaching provides an approach to professional development for instructors at all levels of abstraction. Instructors at low abstract levels have the opportunity to observe classes, to see concrete demonstrations and new ideas presented, and to discuss the techniques and strategies demonstrated with professional development coordinators or mentors. Observers may help these instructors to reflect upon their teaching practices and may need to ask a series of questions to help the instructor identify problems, practices to follow, and ways to implement any chosen practice. Instructors at moderate abstract levels also can observe peers, be observed, and discuss collaboratively with professional development coordinators, mentors, or colleagues ways to build on their strengths and to improve and refine their practices. Instructors with high abstract levels may be more likely to identify their own areas for improvement or skill development, mutually engage in peer observation, and collaboratively share findings with their colleagues.

Implementation

The Observation/Feedback approach involves two primary processes: observation and feedback to the instructor. Thus, based on cognitive styles, participant needs, and staff availability, participants can set parameters for various activities.

Practitioners can work in pairs, based on mutual interests, needs, and schedules. By alternating roles and by providing one another with feedback and support in refining their instructional practices they can develop a sense of trust and collegiality. This approach is particularly effective if implemented over a period of time during which practitioners actually experience changes as they apply new strategies.

The professional development coordinator may play several roles in the process. He or she may (a) provide training in new strategies or in the coaching process prior to the actual coaching, (b) play the role of observer, or (c) facilitate the process among other practitioners.

Observation/Feedback, whether in the form of supervisory observations, peer coaching, or mentoring, includes four primary activities: *a pre-observation conference, observation, analysis of data, and a post-observation conference*. Research findings demonstrate that continuous practice and feedback are most effective in bringing about changes in behavior. Therefore, the steps in the observation/assessment process are likely to be repeated over time, with each cycle building on the findings of the previous cycle.

Step 1: Conduct pre-observation conference.

A pre-observation conference allows participants to articulate goals for improving instruction, identify the focus of the observation (e.g., items on which instructors want feedback), discuss the goals of the lesson, determine the block of time for the observation (to ensure that the targeted instruction will take place), select the observation methods (e.g., use of tape recorder or video tape), and identify any “special problems.” Participants may choose to use a prepared observation instrument to narrow the observation focus. Observers concentrate on specific elements of the instruction and provide feedback for those elements. The pre-observation conference also allows the observer to gather information prior to the actual observation, and thus enhance the validity and reliability of the observation.

Step 2: Observe instruction.

The observer collects data by using the methods determined in the pre-observation conference, which may include use of an observation instrument or (in the case of an unfocused observation) taking exact notes on all significant behavior. There are a variety of techniques that the observer can use to gather data on classroom activities. Some techniques provide a more detailed picture of what is

occurring in the classroom setting; others focus on specific aspects of the learning environment. Smith and Garner (1995) identify several observation techniques.

- *Running Transcript.* The observer records the lesson in a rough narrative form, including quantitative comments where relevant (such as “It’s hard to hear you” or “No one answered,” and timing activities.
- *Grids.* The observer records comments under specific topic areas. For example, if the focus of the observation is teacher action/student action, grid headings would be “teacher” and “student.”
- *Tally Sheet.* The observer records the type of participation seen in the class. For example, to determine the level of teacher talk vs. student talk, use three headings, “teacher,” “student,” and “silent.” When the teacher talks, draw a seating chart and note when each student participates.
- *Lesson Plan.* The observer records events in the class under headings such as “Presentation” and “Practice,” to provide information on how the flow of the lesson went.
- *Time Notation.* The observer records the length of time of each activity or step to get a sense of the pacing of the lesson. It’s easiest to do this if you record time at regular intervals, such as every 10 or 15 minutes.
- *Dialogue Recording.* The observer records the actual words spoken by the teacher, or the teacher and the students, or the students. This information can be used to determine how clearly the communication is, what type of interaction takes place, who is interacting.
- *Videotape.* The videotape is as an objective a record of a class as possible. It’s important to focus the camera on both the teacher and the class.

Observation sessions will tend to flow more smoothly if the observer remains unobtrusive. As Pennington and Young (1989) note, observations work best when the observer:

- Arrives before the class begins (to allow some minimal contact with students and an introduction to the class before the lesson begins);
- Sits in an inconspicuous place where both students and teachers can be seen well (generally at the side or back of the room);
- Avoids distractive behavior during the observation (such as frowning, moving about, or making unnecessary noise); and
- Resists the temptation to give any kind of verbal or nonverbal input or feedback during the observation (either to students or to the teacher).

Step 3: Analyze data.

The observer analyzes the information she or he has observed in order to assess the strengths of the practitioner and to identify areas wherein further improvement is needed.

Questions that may help the observer in the data analysis are:

- Have any patterns become evident during the instructional process?
- What occurs in the classroom when . . . ?
- How does the instructor respond when . . . ?
- How does the instructor monitor and assess progress?
- How does the instructor accommodate diverse learning styles?
- Are there any noticeable changes in student behavior as a result of teacher behaviors or actions?
- Where does the instructor seem particularly strong?
- What are the instructor's potential or existing areas of weakness?
- How well has the instructor met the objectives of the lesson?

(Note: The narrower the focus of the observation, the more specific the questions.)

Step 4: Conduct post-observation conference.

It is important to conduct a post-observation conference as soon after the observation as feasible, given the schedules of the participants involved. This conference provides the opportunity for both the instructor and observer to reflect on the lesson and for the observer to share the data collected. The feedback focuses on practitioner strengths and potential areas for improvement and/or attainment of goals established during the pre-observation conference. The CASAS Implementation Measure (1993) describes techniques for the post-observation conference. It is important that the discussion be informal, while the observer:

- Reminds the instructor of the area(s) targeted for observation;
- Asks the instructor how he/she felt about the session. Observers may also ask for areas where the instruction went especially well or did not go as planned. Gathering this information from the instructor will make the discussion much less threatening;

- Discusses areas of weakness not articulated by the instructor by using non-accusatory questions or observations such as “I wasn’t certain why students were . . .” “I noticed students were having difficulty with . . .”;
- Discusses with the instructor what specific areas he or she would next like to work on next;
- Asks the instructor if any help is needed; and
- Arranges another date for a follow-up observation (if necessary or desired by the instructor or observer).

During the post-observation conference, practitioners also may choose to analyze the Observation/Feedback process, itself; reflection on the process may lead to modifications and improvements for future cycles.

The following scenario is designed to illustrate the four steps involved in the Observation/Feedback approach.

SCENARIO FOR OBSERVATION/FEEDBACK APPROACH

As part of a collaborative effort to formulate a model workplace program consisting of instructional methods, assessment techniques, and evaluation measures (at four manufacturing sites), the Adult Learning Resource Center initiated several professional development activities including an Observation/Feedback component; in which instructors worked on three content teams: conversational ESL, reading/writing, and math. Three pairs of teaching partners formed a team, and the professional development coordinator worked with each six-person team to:

- Conduct a needs assessment with members of the team on their knowledge and skills in implementing cooperative learning strategies and portfolio assessments. An interview protocol and a review of lesson plans were the primary techniques used in the assessment;
- Conduct workshops on implementing cooperative learning and portfolio assessment strategies. This step was taken to ensure familiarity with skills required to use effectively the instructional strategies;
- Conduct a demonstration lesson in the individual instructor's classroom. The goal of this demonstration was to provide a more effective transfer of new information and skills into classroom practice; and
- Conduct a workshop to present information on techniques for conducting observations and for providing feedback.

The major purposes of the project were to:

- Enhance instructors' understanding and use of specific instructional and assessment techniques (i.e., cooperative learning and portfolio assessment);
- Establish a core group of instructor-consultants capable of providing peer support, and capable of engaging in ongoing self-evaluation and improvement; and
- Facilitate individual growth in using appropriate instructional and assessment strategies and techniques.

The Four-Step Process

Instructors observed one another three times: once prior to the demonstration lesson noted above, and twice afterwards.

Step 1: Conduct pre-observation conference

During the pre-observation conferences, the observer and instructor discussed the elements of the lesson to be observed. The instructor provided the observer with an overview of the lesson goals and activities; and, together, they decided to focus initially on grouping strategies, group interactions, and instructor facilitation. They further decided that the observer would take notes and then complete the checklist that had been jointly developed by members of the team.

Step 2: Observe instruction

During the actual observation (approximately one hour), the observer sat in the back of the classroom to record both instructor and student behaviors. Detailed anecdotal records of the specific instructional activities agreed upon in Step 1 were kept. These included such items as time on task, frequency of interaction between students and instructor, level of interaction among group members, number of groups organized, group leadership, and the like.

Step 3: Analyze data

Directly following the observations, the observer completed the checklist agreed upon in Step 1. The observer reviewed the data to determine the presence or absence of each of the items on the checklist, as well as to determine the extent to which the items present were demonstrated.

Step 4: Conduct post-observation conferences*

Post-observation conferences were conducted directly after each observation. Discussed during these conferences were the:

- Instructor's feelings about the design and content of the lesson;
- Instructor's use of the cooperative learning strategies in terms of their own instructional objectives;
- Areas in which the instructor appeared comfortable implementing and facilitating the cooperative learning strategy;
- Areas in which the instructor had difficulty implementing the cooperative learning exercise;
- Instructor's recommendations for refining the process;
- Areas to focus on for the next observation, and
- Instructor's reaction to the peer coaching process.

**Post-observation conferences averaged 30 to 45 minutes*

Results

Anecdotal information from instructors who have participated in the Observation/ Feedback process in Massachusetts indicate a number of benefits, including a better understanding of teaching, improved self-analysis skills, an improved sense of professional skill and recognition, increased collaboration, improved teaching performance, and increased student growth and development (Drew-Hohn, 1993).

A small number of research studies in the K-12 literature have found that Observation/Feedback is an effective professional development approach. Joyce and Showers (1988) indicate that training (followed by peer coaching) enhances student learning; they found that when coaching was used, transfer of learning into practice increased from 30 percent to 80 percent. In another study, Sparks (1986) found that peer coaching is more effective than coaching by outside consultants.

Issues

Difficulties encountered in implementing an Observation/Feedback professional development approach revolve around issues of scheduling, developing a sense of trust among colleagues, and recognizing that the process is not simply a "performance evaluation," but a valuable learning experience. For part-time practitioners, it is often hard to schedule activities, especially when activities are spread over an extended period of time. Likewise, comparable classrooms for peer coaching may be at sites that are a considerable distance from one another. Practitioners also may need to learn techniques for focusing observations and for providing appropriate feedback to the individual observed.

On a more personal level, practitioners often feel insecure about inviting colleagues into their classroom, which may be related to the fear of being evaluated and critiqued by peers (or damaging working relationships with peers). Peer coaches that work as a team observing and giving feedback to one another alleviates much of this fear. Practitioners also need to understand that the Observation/Feedback process is a constructive one that will ultimately enhance their practice. In short, an environment that builds trust and fosters a sense of caring is required.

Supervisors using the Observation/Feedback approach to assess the performance of instructors may cause increased anxiety on the part of the instructor. For such an instance, the observed behaviors may not be up to the level of the instructor's normal performance. One potential way of decreasing this anxiety is to engage in the Observation/Feedback process on a "practice" basis, in which supervisors share the observation instrument with the instructor and use it on an informal basis. Another introductory approach to supervisory observation allows instructors to videotape themselves and use the resulting tape to analyze their own instruction, prior to supervisory visits. Of course, once instructors become more familiar and feel more comfortable with the instrument, the process will seem less threatening.

To assist practitioners in implementing this approach, support of program administrators is needed. Release time, and recognition of efforts to engage in professional development activities, as well as resources to train practitioners on observation and feedback techniques, all provide forms of such support.

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