Clinical Observations with Veteran Teachers

Clinical observations are used by administrators for two distinct purposes. First, they are employed for the purpose of Teacher Evaluation — making summative judgments about teacher performance based on the state’s legitimate right to ensure minimum competency. But observations are also utilized for Teacher Supervision — collecting data for the purpose of teacher growth. Scholars have documented the importance of these two purposes for decades (Nolan & Hoover, 2011; Kilbourn, 1982; Sergiovanni & Starratt, 2007; Danielson & McGreal, 2000; Reiman & Thies-Sprinthall, 1998), but the implementation of the Teacher Effectiveness model (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2014a) in Pennsylvania’s public schools has exponentially increased the need for administrators and faculty members to identify the goal of the observation prior to its beginning in order to make the observation more effective. Principals and supervisors must therefore understand the purpose of the observation, explain that objective to the faculty member before and during the pre-observation conference and engage all faculty in training opportunities and "job-embedded learning" strategies (Nolan & Hoover, 2011) that reinforce the observation’s objective.

Clinical observations should focus on teacher growth, not evaluation, when the faculty member being observed is a veteran teacher who has demonstrated satisfactory ratings consistently over time and whose growth is underserved with traditional evaluation models. The pre-observation conference is the first essential component of the clinical process and the most important element when approaching work with veteran teachers who have an expectation of professional growth.

Pre-Conferencing with a Purpose

To facilitate growth, the pre-observation conference must begin with the context of the teacher who will be observed and the logistics of the clinical process. The planning and preparation required to effectively coordinate the clinical observation will necessitate at least a 3-5 day window from beginning to end. Initiate announced observations by informing the teacher that they will be observed in the next 7-10 school days. Remember to allow 1-2 days for the teacher to complete pre-observation questions or submit a lesson plan. If your district has included the Student Learning Objective (SLO) into the process, consider observing a class that directly relates to the teacher's SLO.

Pre-conferences should be held during a mutually agreed upon time before or after school, during a prep period or during another negotiated non-instructional time. Consider where the meeting will be held. Conventional wisdom and practice suggests the meeting be held in the administrator’s office, but alternative meeting places are just as effective. Conducting a pre-observation conference in the teacher’s classroom, for instance, offers additional insight for the observer about the instructional resources, student seating and physical arrangement of the classroom before any observational data has been recorded.

Inform the teacher that the purpose for the pre-observation conference is to gain an understanding of the lesson that has been designed, the lesson's objectives and the teacher's expectations for his/her students' learning. Setting the stage with the pre-conference objectives will help focus dialogue with the teacher on the lesson that will be observed and proper data collection methods — both essential elements to facilitate teacher growth through evidence-based data analysis.

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Next, ask for preferred method of questioning and discussion (3b). Will the teacher pose mostly chorus questions, student-specific questions or a combination of both? Data can easily be collected using a tally sheet for question and discussion techniques and Bloom's Taxonomy can be used to collect information about higher order questions and student responses.

Before the conclusion of the pre-observation conference, a clear picture of the teacher's expectations and plans for the lesson must be formed by the observer. Before the teacher leaves the office — or the administrator leaves the teacher's classroom — it is important to wrap up the pre-conference by reviewing the teacher's lesson in simple terms. Summarize everything that the teacher has included and have him or her correct any errors in the understanding of their lesson and instructional design. Agree upon the data to be collected and share any appropriate data collection tools that will be used during the observation. Will the administrator be stationary or move around the classroom? Will the evaluator use paper and pencil to collect data or a laptop/notebook? Will any recording devices such as video or audio be utilized? Detail those items with the teacher before adjourning the meeting and end the conference by confirming the date and time of the lesson.

Pre-conferencing in this manner will allow the administrator to collect evidence that the teacher "owns." Data from evidence-based observations are more likely to produce opportunities for professional growth. Allowing the teacher to submit additional evidence, such as lesson plans, student work and anecdotal records will also add to the teacher's ownership of the observational data and the process of supervision (Nolan & Hoover, 2011, pg. 71) for teacher growth.

Conclusions

In order to collect evidence-based observational data that is capable of facilitating teacher growth for veteran faculty, principals must purposefully guide the pre-observation conference with well-crafted and thoughtful questions which are free from personal bias and interpretation. Questions should be based on data that is likely to be collected during the observation and should clarify the teachers planned activities and expectations. Strategic pre-observation questions are provided by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PA Department of Education, 2014b) and are readily available throughout the relevant literature (Nolan & Hoover, 2011).

Opportunities for teacher growth are endless when the pre-observation conference is used to purposefully collaborate with satisfactory faculty and agree upon observation data that can be collected, coded and analyzed for teacher growth. Pre-observation conferences that do not yield mutual understanding of instructional techniques that can be observed and accurately recorded will not contribute to veteran teacher growth or to teacher autonomy and building morale. Such conferences will do little more than satisfy annual evaluation requirements, leaving veteran teachers without authentic opportunities for professional growth and instructional development.

Once the teacher begins to investigate an area for growth based on their own wonderings and the observational data stimulates authentic connections to the teacher's instructional practices, the teacher should be encouraged to take the lead during pre-observation conferencing and steer the data collection process. Principals need to
Continually refine their conferencing skills, data collection techniques and data analysis skills in order to continually prompt growth and develop leadership.

It is worth noting that the clinical process can be accomplished by skilled colleagues through a process known as Peer Coaching. While a comprehensive list of alternative methods for teacher supervision is beyond the scope of this article, principals are wise to recognize the talent and expertise of their faculty members. Using trained Peer Coaches who are capable of facilitating the clinical observation model, including skilled pre-observation conferencing, data collection and assisted data analysis, is an excellent use of human resources and is no less capable of generating authentic learning and teacher growth — not to mention a timesaver for administrators!

September-May is the optimal time to work with veteran faculty and foster teacher growth through clinical observations. The process must be begun with a purposeful pre-observation conference that focuses on observable behaviors and teacher growth if strategic data collection and reflective data analysis are to follow. Do not miss this valuable opportunity because of mistaken purpose of the clinical observation or misguided pre-conference dialogue. Maximize time with faculty members and make every pre-observation conference meaningful.

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References