

Honouring teachers' practice: a coaching approach to classroom observation

Drew Mayhills, Teaching and Learning Advocate, Institute for Professional Learning



A recent history

In August 2012, the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) published the *Australian Teacher Performance and Development Framework* in which it proposed that “direct observation of teaching... (forms part of) collecting evidence that provides the basis for ongoing feedback, reflection and further development.” (2012, p. 3) While AITSL maintains that the de-privatisation of classroom teachers’ practice is indicative of efforts undertaken at a system level to raise both the status and accountability of the teaching profession, conducting high-trust, safe lesson observations with classroom teachers remains a challenge in practice. In a study of classroom observation practices, the work of Wang and Day (2002, p. 14) “revealed both subjective and procedural problems... creating numerous tensions between teachers and supervisors.” Among the chief concerns identified by their research was the suggestion that “the teachers were put in a vulnerable position for the observers’ subjective judgement” (Wang and Day, 2002, p. 15).

Moving beyond judgement to self-reflection

The need to address the safety and overall quality of classroom observation practices led to a proliferation onto the market of programs and instruments designed for this purpose. Gargani and Strong (2010, p. 389) have argued for innovation in teacher observation systems and claimed that they “can identify effective teachers from just 20 min of one lesson...using a 5-item rubric.” While these and other observation instruments have been developed in the spirit of “the potential time and cost savings (they) may provide,” (Gargani and Strong, 2010, p. 389) they remain predicated upon externally judging, or ‘locating,’ teachers’ classroom practice. Processes established on the basis of *judgement* – rather than *growth* – continue to risk negatively impacting teacher wellbeing where, at worst, they can potentially contribute to teachers’ early exit from the profession.

Understanding the challenge

An empathetic approach to classroom observation is critical, as teachers are already exposed to a stressful work environment.

Benefits of observation

Benefits of observation are not limited to but can include:



Targeted improvement

in relation to a self-nominated element of teaching practice



Heightened self-awareness

around professional goals



Generation of rich evidence

in relation to self-reflection and professional learning

Greenberg, *et al.* (2017, p. 2) has noted in a 2017 report on Teacher Stress and Health that “46% of teachers report high daily stress during the school year.” A similar link between teacher retention and classroom observation is apparent in the work of Johnson, *et al.* (2014, p. 537) who identifies “policies and practices... school culture, relationships and teacher identity” in their framework of factors that impact significantly on teacher wellbeing. The challenge for school leaders progressing classroom observation programs in their organisations is to strike an appropriate balance between cultivating positive relationships, while driving demonstrable improvements in teaching and learning. It will be argued that a *coaching approach* to implementing classroom observation is a highly effective means of achieving such an outcome.

What is a coaching approach?

Coaching in education is not particularly new: researchers Kim and Silver (2016, p. 203) point to the work of Schön, who coined the terms ‘reflective supervision’ and ‘reflective coaching’ in the late 1980s. Schön described a process through which “a coach helps, provokes, (and) encourages a teacher to reflect on her own practice” (Kim and Silver, 2016, p. 204). These reflections are achieved through a series of coaching conversations, through which it has been argued lead to an increase in the depth and breadth of teacher reflection. Kim and Silver (2016, p. 204) note that a

number of researchers believe that reflection with others (i.e. with a coach) yields additional benefits than reflections produced in periods of individual reflection. Similarly, Husu, *et al.* (2007, p. 130) argued that “reflective practice does not come naturally, it requires a dialogue.” Prior to these conversations taking place, however, the coach establishes the foundations for a high-trust relationship through the way in which they initiate how the process of classroom observation will be conducted.

Observation – by invitation

One of the distinguishing characteristics of a coaching approach to classroom observation is the significant relational dynamic present before, during and after the process. This is supported by Riley (2013, p. 13) who has argued that coaching succeeds – or fails – in accordance to the quality of the coaching relationship. This is particularly true of graduate and early career teachers, who Hong (2012, p. 428) determined “can be more sensitive to school climate, principal leadership and decision-making structures.”

Firstly, the coach invites their coaching counterpart to consider participation in observation, highlighting the range of associated benefits.

These are not limited to but can include:

- Targeted improvement in relation to a self-nominated element of teaching practice;
- Heightened self-awareness around professional goals, and generation of rich evidence in relation to self-reflection and professional learning.

This invitational approach is an opportunity for the coach to reiterate the non-hierarchical nature of the coaching relationship, reassure the teacher of the confidentiality of the process and critically, to outline the purpose of the observation: to collect data for – not ‘on’ – the teacher in relation to an area of practice they have nominated for improvement. Establishing a foundation in this way honours the professional practice of the participating teacher and increases the likelihood of the classroom observation being a positive experience. This introductory conversation is also chance for the coach to raise the possibilities of video recording the classroom observation within a context of safety and professional respect.

Establishing a context for video

Teachers are sometimes reluctant to participate in video recordings as part of their classroom observation for a variety of reasons. A fear of judgement, anxieties around how the footage will be archived or a general discomfort with watching oneself teaching are all common responses. The significant advantages that video recording lends to a classroom observation, however, make these factors worth addressing: in his 2014 book *What you learn when you see yourself teach*, researcher and video coaching advocate Jim Knight has written extensively on how “*using video cameras in a way that recognises teachers’ professionalism can have a dramatic effect on teaching and learning*” (Knight, 2014, p. 18). An unedited video is a reliable record of ‘what happened’ – a more objective ‘source of truth’ that can offer new insights for the teacher into their practice.

Like the negotiation of the in-person observation, a coaching approach to the use of video in classroom observation is foregrounded by seeking permission of the participating teacher (and often, the relevant school leader as appropriate) to film an excerpt of classroom practice, along with the explicit unpacking of what purposes the video recording will serve. It is characteristic of a coaching approach to classroom observation that questions of video ‘ownership,’ data storage and so forth should be approached with com-

plete transparency. To this end, a welcome suggestion might involve an agreement to permanently delete the video recording from the device after the classroom observation and reflective practice has concluded. Critically, a coaching approach always honours the ‘right to pass’ of the participating teacher, should circumstances prevail on the day (i.e. personal complications, an unanticipated issue with a student) that compromise their capacity to engage meaningfully in the observation process.

Easing the cognitive load: the role of video in the coaching approach

A blended model of in-situation lesson observation, complemented with video observation and follow-up coaching conversations, has proven to be a highly effective means of improving the practice of individual teachers. An in-situation lesson observation affords an opportunity for the coach to gather data for the teacher on the specific focus for the observation – an analysis of the kinds of feedback given to students, or the range of questioning strategies used, etc. The recent work of Kalyuga and Liu (2015, p. 1–2) around processing demands and learners’ cognitive resources in technology-rich environments (such as many classrooms) has affirmed that teachers are likely to “*construct better and more durable knowledge*” when they are able to watch back the teaching practice after the fact, rather than reflect-

ing on what they are able to recall from memory alone. Whether the coach watches the video observation after the fact is at the discretion of the participating teacher – what matters is that the *teacher* watches the video. The participant’s willingness to reflect on this video honestly might be improved through their watching individually, although this forms part of a larger process: the work of Gibbons and Cobb (2017, p. 411) supports the idea that “*teachers do not necessarily gain new insights about practice merely from watching classroom videos.*” Post-viewing, it is the responsibility of the coach to externalise the graduate teacher’s process of reflection through a rich coaching conversation.

The minutiae of interaction

In their research on how coaches elicit reflection from teachers participating in coaching after viewing themselves teaching, Kim and Silver (2016, p. 215) have observed how “*the minutiae of interaction can influence the way in which space for reflection is created and reflective thinking emerges.*” A critical element of coaching practice revolves around a coach’s ‘way of being,’ including a strong awareness of body language and non-verbal feedback throughout the exchange. A coach’s ability to effectively navigate this sensitivity can increase the coaching counterpart’s capacity to reflect on their practice: Kim and Silver (2016, p. 215) noted that “*even when*

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teachers did not initiate an episode (of reflection), ... (coaches) could initiate successfully by attending to the teachers' nonverbal reactions to the video." A coach's capacity to notice the nonverbal reaction/s in the coaching counterpart during a post-viewing debrief, respectfully consider why it occurred and use that to move towards the targeted improvement of the coaching counterpart's teaching practice is one of the greatest outcomes of participation in the coaching process. Out of these reflections, the coach guides the teacher participating in classroom observation towards framing goals that inform their future professional development and growth.

Bridging the gap through a coaching approach

Coaching can play a valuable role in bridging the gap between teachers and administrators responsible for the systemic improvement of teacher quality. Gallucci, *et al.* (2010, p. 920) argues that coaches "act as mediators between district-directed reform efforts and classroom practice." As school leaders consider the various mechanisms to drive improvement in the teaching and learning of their organisation, a coaching approach to classroom observation is a professionally respectful, growth-oriented endeavour that honours the both the participating individuals and their teaching practice.

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Drew Mayhills is a Teaching and Learning Advocate with the Department of Education's Institute for Professional Learning. Recognised in 2017 as a New Voice Scholar by the Australian Council for Educational Leaders (ACEL), Drew is currently engaged in coaching graduate and early career teachers throughout Western Australia with the In-Class Coaching Program. Twitter: @DrewMayhills

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