

Successful Supervision: Three Perspectives

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I have always looked for the perfect tool to use when observing teachers, and I have tried many different ones. What has become clear to me in the past year is that what matters most is not so much finding the "perfect tool", but how one uses it and adapts it to one's own program and purpose for observation.

For years I would take copious notes while observing a teacher and afterwards, I would type up the notes into a report form divided into the three categories of 1) time of activity, 2) description of the activity and 3) general comments. My biggest complaint in conducting observations in this way was that it was extremely time consuming. I spent more time writing the report than I did discussing the class with the teacher. After the follow-up meetings I would wonder how effective they really were. Were teachers using the observations and follow-up meetings as ways to improve their teaching? Or was this just a tool for me to evaluate teachers in the classroom and all the teachers got out of it was an evaluation in their file? As I look back at the way I used to conduct evaluations, I realize the process was too one-sided, not allowing a lot of teacher reflection.

My observation and follow-up with teachers changed dramatically in January of 1999 when I became involved in the School for International Training's (SIT) TESOL Certificate Program. In partnership with SIT, the International Language Institute now provides both intensive and part-time TESOL Certificate Programs.

An integral part of the SIT TESOL Certificate Program is giving the participants in the program a hands-on opportunity to teach followed by an in-depth feedback on the class. The form that SIT uses for its teacher observations is simple (see attached form). I liked the form immediately.

It takes the three categories that I was using in my previous observations and puts them in a format that is clear. Most importantly, in the "comments" category, the emphasis is on posing questions rather than writing possibly critical statements on what is going on in the class.

After using this assessment tool a few times, I began to realize that how I had previously been observing teachers was more "observer centered". My observations and follow-up meetings were not set up to allow the teachers time to reflect on the class that they had taught, and I was the one who would initiate the discussion about the class.

Under the SIT model, I now give the instructor a copy of the form I filled out while observing the class as soon as the class is over. We then make an appointment within the next few days to discuss the class. Teachers have the opportunity between the observation and the follow-up meetings to really think about specific questions or issues, rather than wonder what comments the observer had about the class. Discussions during the follow-up meetings are initiated more by the teacher as s/he responds to the questions that were posed to her/him on the observation form rather than a one-sided conversation with the observer telling the teacher about what worked or did not work in the classroom.

I do not think any assessment tool works perfectly the first time that it is used. When using the SIT Observation Form, the more the observer becomes familiar with the process of asking the right questions for teacher reflection, the better the follow-up meetings will be. For me, the best follow-up meetings are when there is truly a dialogue between observer and teacher. The playing field has been leveled and both parties strategize together on ways to improve the class.

Obviously, this type of dialogue can never happen if the observations are handled by administrators who have very little teaching experience and whose purpose is only to evaluate the teacher. This assessment tool works best when the observer has a lot of classroom instruction

experience along with the ability of highlighting the strengths and posing questions when there are weaknesses. The purpose of the observation tool is focused more on giving the teacher support and providing an arena for reflection and growth rather than just evaluating her/his teaching.

Just as I was changing my method of observing teachers, Rebecca Schiffren from Lutheran Social Services called me with concerns about her observations of teachers. The International Language Institute and Lutheran Social Services of West Springfield are funded together to provide ESOL services both in Northampton and West Springfield.

Rebecca and I met to discuss the tool and then both used the tool to observe a teacher who was teaching a practice class. (As part of the hiring process at ILI, applicants have to teach a 30-minute practice class.) We found that the assessment tool was difficult to use in a practice class, but it allowed Rebecca and me to talk about what questions we would have asked the teacher about the class and a hands-on opportunity to evaluate how this tool would work with other teacher trainers.

What follows is how Rebecca used the tool with one of her teachers, Steve Kurtz, and Steve's reaction to the observation and follow-up meeting.

Rebecca's piece:

I was hired as an ESL teacher at Lutheran Social Services (LSS) in September, 1995. (I had been teaching ESL for six years before that.) In March, 1999 I was given the position of ESL Coordinator and part of my job was to observe and coach other teachers in our program.

I had never done this before and began by using a format that had been helpful to me when a supervisor used it while observing my class the previous year. That method was to describe the activities in detail and give positive feedback and constructive suggestions as to how to improve the lesson.

When I used this approach with one relatively new teacher, she said the critique and suggestions were helpful. With another teacher, however, the technique was not so successful. This was a relatively inexperienced teacher whose class attendance was slipping. I felt, after observing him, that there was a lot of room for improvement. I made many suggestions but sensed as the critique went on, that he became more and more defensive. In the end, I wasn't convinced he would be able to take in the feedback and improve his teaching.

At this point, I met with Caroline Gear, who introduced me to a new technique she had learned working with The School for International Training (SIT). This approach was to use three columns: one for the time, the next for a running account of what was happening in the class, and the third for comments posed as questions. At the end of the lesson, the observer would pose more general questions that considered the lesson as a whole. The idea was for the input

not to be critical but to give teachers room to think about ways of solving problems that made sense to them. I wondered whether this would work since raising a question, in my mind, implied a criticism.

Coincidentally, the meeting with Caroline happened just before my next scheduled observation of Steve so I had a perfect place to try out the new method. When students hadn't written in journals as assigned, I wrote, "Why do you think they aren't writing?" "How can you get them more interested in writing?" When students had trouble remembering and pronouncing past tense verb forms, I asked, "What other ways could you practice irregular past tense forms?" In the review session after the lesson, Steve reflected on these and other questions and came up with some new ways of approaching problems. When he was finished thinking about a question, I shared some of my experiences with the same issue. I felt that Steve was much more involved in this session. He thought about his teaching and was more enthusiastic and less defensive.

When I observed him again about a month later, he had made real strides in his teaching. He was much more assertive, had a plan and followed it. His students' attendance during the month had noticeably improved and they gave me positive feedback about his teaching (as opposed to earlier, when all I heard were complaints).

This method of observation and coaching proved to be extremely successful for Steve. It encourages reflection and exploration that is meaningful and empowering because it comes from the teacher's own experience. The method does require skill on the part of the observer - you must be aware of classroom dynamics and pose meaningful questions - but it gives teachers the responsibility (and power) to be actively involved in their own development.

Steve's piece:

I have worked for twelve years as a teacher. Before my current position as an ESOL instructor, I was in the public schools, initially as a Spanish teacher and then as a bilingual social studies teacher. I have been in my current position as an ESOL instructor for two years.

Throughout my teaching career, supervisors have observed me between eight and ten times. In my current job, I have been observed on four different occasions by supervisors. I have

made progress in improving my teaching style and classroom management; however my progress has been rather slow for the better part of a year. I struggled with important teaching areas and I began to wonder about my suitability for the profession.

My current supervisor began her official duties approximately six months ago. She has observed me four times, the first observation having occurred on April 14, 1999 and the most recent, on October 13, 1999. Each of the observations consisted of an observation of me in the classroom and a feedback session, which followed. In this paper I want to describe how I have experienced these sessions and how the changes in my supervisor's feedback approach have impacted on my teaching.

After the first observation my supervisor and I met. She shared her notes and we discussed the lesson. Her notes consisted of six comments. For each comment she had written suggestions for ways to improve or modify my teaching. I felt somewhat deflated and discouraged during the above-described meeting. I listened to my supervisor, tried to act like a good adult professional, yet I felt like very much the opposite. My feelings of discouragement continued for a while after the session. I knew the suggestions were good. Now I had to "deliver."

Before the second observation/feedback session (July 7, 1999) my supervisor informed me that she was going to change her approach. She briefly described the new approach and how it would differ from the first observation in April. She asked me if I wanted her to focus on any particular aspect of my teaching.

In the July 7 feedback session my supervisor included clock times for her observations. After each comment she posed a question. For example:

Comment: 6:25 Students talked about fireworks, not seeing them before.

Question: "How could you have extended the talk about fireworks? They were interested and it was 'real' talk."

I then offered my response to the question. "I could have encouraged them to talk about fireworks in their own countries and how they compare with fireworks in the USA."

During the July 7 class I had planned a session in which students would practice question formation using the July 4 weekend as a stimulus. Students were very involved in discussing the fireworks theme in their conversation partners, when I ended this activity and began another activity involving story writing with numbered pictures. The abrupt move from an activity in which students were very engaged to another activity with little transition or preparation confused the students. Moreover, this new activity was unrelated to its predecessor. At the end of this session (and subsequent sessions) my supervisor included comments which were more global in scope. These comments helped me come away from the session with a kind of quiet "mantra," which would apply to a broader range of situations. Also, in the second and subsequent feedback sessions, my supervisor posed her questions and waited for my response. This waiting or pause was an invitation for me to offer a thoughtful response. I was given real time. My response was important. My feelings during both the first and second classroom observations were similar: anxiety, nervousness, awkwardness, embarrassment and increased adrenaline.

During the third and fourth observations, I continued to be anxious and felt high adrenaline flowing through me. The difference was that I felt more energetic, more in control and, in general, more positive about my teaching. I'm not certain how much of this improvement can be attributed to the new observation procedures. Perhaps, the good results have come from both the new procedures and from the increased trust I have for my supervisor.

During this process my feelings about my work have changed. I feel more hopeful and more positive. I am still very much a teacher who needs to improve his performance. The difference is in the kind of clarity of thought that I have now. "Clarity" for me means that I'm focusing more on what I am doing and less on what I'm failing to do. The question is "Why?"

First, by presenting information and observations and following each observation with a question, my supervisor is inviting me to participate. She is implying that I have the ability to be analytical. The question is still a form of criticism but it is a form of criticism in which I offer my own analysis. The analysis is mine.

Second, the process of observation and question invites me to focus on a solution. Since I am invited to answer a question, to respond to that question, I am further empowered to design a solution and implement it. I am focusing on what I need to do to improve and not on what I haven't done or on what I have been failing to do.