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Electronic Observation: 21st Century Teacher Education

Abstract

"A program of brief but frequent classroom walk-throughs has become an increasingly popular strategy in recent years for informally supervising teachers and observing classroom activities" (Protheroe, 2009, p.30). Because walk-through observation has such potential as a catalyst to support both excellent instruction and a positive shift in learning (Walk-Through as Powerful, n.d.), this process is establishing itself as best practice in educational circles (Hopkins, 2010; David, 2008).

When real-time observation data are analyzed, used to support reflection and collaborative conversation, and ultimately, when these data become the basis to drive professional learning, the results are clear (Protheroe, 2009). Program initiatives are actualized. Instructional strategies improve. Students become engaged and student achievement increases.

This research will discuss the implications of the walk-through observation as a supervisory model in clinical settings for a university teacher education program. Components of effective walk-through observation will be reviewed and results of an electronic application in higher education will be discussed.

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Introduction

“A program of brief but frequent classroom walk-throughs has become an increasingly popular strategy in recent years for informally supervising teachers and observing classroom activities” (Protheroe, 2009, p.30). Fundamentally, walk-through observations are “focused on specific ‘look-fors’...[that provide]] valuable information about what’s working---or NOT working“ (Protheroe, 2009, p.30) in the classroom. As the challenge continues to deliver high-quality, clinically-based teacher education experiences that meet accreditation standards (NCATE, 2010) and standards for field experience (Guyton & Bryd, 2000), the walk-through observation is gaining recognition as an effective supervision model.

Teaching and learning is indeed a complex process, a delicate blend of art and

science, of process and product. Simply put, if education was a *jigsaw puzzle*, an oft *missing piece* is a strategic method of observation. A system to monitor practice and expected outcomes. A system that generates dynamic data to drive decision-making and to support adjustments, needed to meet program standards in a continuous improvement model (Cervone & Martinez-Miller, 2007; Downey et al., 2004).

Classroom walk-through observation is that system, a powerful and intentional missing puzzle piece.

Walk-through Observation

Because walk-through observation has such potential as a catalyst to support both excellent instruction and a positive shift in learning (Walk-Through as Powerful, n.d.), this process is establishing itself as best practice in educational circles (Hopkins, 2010; David, 2008). When real-time observation data are analyzed, used to support reflection and collaborative conversation, and ultimately, when these data become the basis to drive professional learning, the results are clear (Protheroe, 2009). Program initiatives are actualized. Instructional strategies improve. Students become engaged and student achievement increases. Bottom line, walk-through observation serves as a powerful link between the *puzzle pieces* of education.

Components of Effective Walk-through Observation

The driving question behind walk-through observation is, “what should we see in every classroom that makes a difference in student success?” The answer becomes the customized content for the observation rubric. Five characteristics embody ideal design features for walk-through observation:

Focus. Walk-through observations are most effective when the purpose is transparent and clearly understood by all parties (both the observer and the observed). Content should be research-based, locally-driven, and collaboratively identified. This content is a set of *look-fors* that become a common language communicating program priorities (David, 2008). Ultimately, it describes the conditions that, when present, enable students to improve learning levels and increase achievement.

Brief. Brevity is paramount to success of the walk-through observation. Downey (2004) contends that, over time, far more data are obtained with frequent visits of 2-3 minutes than during fewer, more lengthy observations. When the content of the rubric is focused and succinct, the observer can quickly view the educational environment and note the results of the observation. An electronic platform further enhances efficiency.

Routine. Walk-through observations achieve the intended purpose when conducted on a regular basis with a high degree of accountability. Walk-through observation then becomes a part of the teaching and learning culture. Observers are

trained on the content and pilot walk-throughs are conducted. This *observer calibration* increases inter-rater reliability and therefore results in collection of more consistent, and therefore more meaningful, data.

Across time, the completed walk-throughs become a set of snapshots collectively forming a comprehensive picture of the instructional program. Importantly, walk-throughs are NOT evaluation, but powerful observation that supports the delivery of excellent instruction. Data are generated for coaching and mentoring, not for personnel decisions.

Professional dialogue. Simply put, “the best walk-throughs give teachers the opportunity to review the data collected by the observer and participate in a collaborative, professional conversation surrounding it” (Using the Classroom Walk-Through, n.a.). No matter how the process is tailored, “the essentials are the same--- teachers learning from teachers in a non-evaluative way, talking about their craft, and developing lessons that will improve student achievement” (Using the Classroom Walk-Through, n.a.).

Self-reflection. Ultimately, self-reflection is the strongest and highest order behavior that will occur as a result of walk-through observations. It is invaluable to allow educators time to ponder the data indicators, to set goals, and to design new approaches to the craft of teaching.

Continuous improvement. Across time, programs that implement the process of walk-through observation will enjoy the fruits of this otherwise missing puzzle piece. “When walk-throughs are disconnected from larger improvement efforts, teachers tend to dismiss them as *drive-bys* or *gotchas*” (David, 2008). “This connection should be reflected in the specific data that observers collect, the thoughtfulness and quality of the protocols, and the way the results are used” (David, 2008).

Application of Electronic Observation

Pre-service Teacher Preparation

Breaking new ground with the use of walk-through observation, a handful of higher education programs across the state are taking the lead to institute this practice. Upon recent adoption of the more rigorous Kansas College and Career Ready Standards (2011), the teacher education program at Southwestern College (SC) in Winfield, Kansas, determined that preparation of future teachers was at a crucial point for helping students reach a heightened expectation for learning. Coupled with, *Our Responsibility, Our Promise: Transforming Educator Preparation and Entry into the Profession*, released by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) Task Force (2012), the SC Education Department took heed and initiated a strategic re-examination of its teacher preparation program.

Using the INTASC Model Core Teaching Standards (2011) and the *Framework*

for Teaching (Danielson, 2007), the initial step was to reconsider the expectations for preparation of *classroom ready* teachers. Undergraduate and graduate level education courses were then restructured using the newly designed conceptual framework which consists of five constructs (see Figure 1): Content and Pedagogy; Instruction and Assessment; Collaboration; Leadership; Reflection and Growth. These five constructs identify the skill sets necessary to be classroom ready.

Observation of Clinical Practice

A fundamental component of teacher preparation is clinical practice. The traditional model for observing student teachers involves a University Supervisor completing a small numbers of site visits for each pre-service teacher. At SC, the supervisor completed four such visits per semester. Depending on proximity of the student teaching site to the campus, SC often hired supervisors in distant local communities. A standard observation form was completed during each visit. Notably, two of the four visits consisted of observing an entire lesson in order to fulfill the Kansas Performance Teaching Portfolio (KPTP, 2013) requirement. Each University Supervisor had a unique viewpoint, and therefore observation results were in constant danger of being subjective and inconsistent. With a heavy emphasis on supervisor observation, this often led to conflicting data for determining final grades. Additionally, the process was labor intensive; therefore, the costs did not balance the benefits.

In order to address these issues, and move the teacher education program at SC into a 21st century learning model, a web-based tool, the eWT (www.swprsc.org) was implemented in fall 2013. Tool content was customized for the teacher education program at SC and reflects the five elements of the Conceptual Framework. The ultimate vision was to progress monitor student teaching competencies and to collect *real time* data as demonstrated by the student teacher.

In this new observation model, the classroom teacher at the student teaching site/school (often labeled the Cooperating Teacher), now plays the role of the traditional College/University Supervisor. The Cooperating Teacher receives comprehensive training on the eWT. This training provides increased assurance of observer calibration and therefore more consistent data. The training of Cooperating Teachers, who live and work at schools throughout the region, is conducted electronically. In the case of SC, each Cooperating Teacher is expected to conduct 15-20 observations per semester; therefore, a much larger data set is generated than in the traditional supervision model.

After each completed eWT, the data are electronically submitted by the observer (the Cooperating Teacher) to themselves, to the Director of Student Teaching at SC, and to the student teacher. Results are provided simultaneously to all parties, thus creating multiple opportunities for reflection and educational dialogue. Subjectivity is minimized and feedback is immediate.

Findings

The Southwestern College eWT is in its first year of eWT implementation. Feedback from Cooperating Teachers is very positive. Cooperating Teachers enjoy the ease of use and the provision of real time data as evidence of instructional practice. Cooperating Teachers indicate that the eWT is a springboard for rich dialogue. All parties have a clear understanding of the content being observed as outlined in the tool. The walk-through observation process levels the field for initiating non-threatening, unbiased professional conversation.

The overall intent of the eWT process is for the Cooperating Teacher to become the mentor and instructional coach for the student teacher, as ongoing educational dialogue and reflection ensues. Student teachers enjoy the immediate feedback and the tangible evidence of growth and development. Not only do the eWT data support the development of classroom ready student teachers, but the Cooperating Teacher indicates that it is valuable for self-reflection of personal classroom practice, as well.

The eWT essentially eliminates the University Supervisor. The Cooperating Teacher communicates directly with Director of Teacher Education at SC. Travel is also eliminated. As higher education attempts to manage scarce resources, the eWT delivers superior results with maximum resource efficiency.

Implications for Further Research

Further application of the eWT is expected to include use of the tool with building principals to monitor first year teachers from SC. These data will provide additional evidence for improving the preparation of teacher candidates. Alignment of the SC Conceptual Framework and the eWT content will continue.

Further analysis will be conducted using the eWT data collected during pre-service teacher observations. These results will allow the Director of Teacher Education and the teacher education faculty to more comprehensively assess exactly what happens when the puzzle pieces are put together--when preparation in content, pedagogy, and assessment, meet practice. Ultimately, the data will inform the re-customization of the eWT tool, and the on-going development and modification of the teacher education program.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the CCSSO Task Force emphasized a greater need for collaboration, communication, and shared leadership. Kachur, et al. (2013) found benefits of teacher leadership when teachers collaborate and participate in

walkthroughs:

When teachers have the opportunity to observe, and be observed, using a walkthrough model, those teachers often: (1) note useful practices, (2) are more comfortable when trying something new, (3) become more motivated to improve the craft of teaching, (4) identify possible areas for professional learning, (5) see opportunities for reflective dialogue with colleagues, and (6) note improvement in student performance. (Kachur, et al. 2013)

Bottom line, “student achievement is directly linked to collegial collaborations, which is clearly supported by classroom walkthroughs” (Kachur, et al., 2013, pg.3). Using the new conceptual framework and the electronic observation (eWT) process, the Education Department at Southwestern College has crossed the threshold into 21st Century teaching and learning, and is now among the ranks of cutting-edge practice in teacher preparation. This process is transforming the teacher education learning community by building a culture of continuous improvement and professional learning.

Figure 1. Educator Preparation Program Conceptual Framework- Southwestern College

The Southwestern College Educator Preparation Program Conceptual Framework consists of five constructs with three recurring components. Indicators for each construct and component detail the expectations of educators prepared in the Southwestern College undergraduate and graduate education programs.



Content and Pedagogy: The educator has knowledge, skills, and dispositions in content and pedagogy that continuously grow and evolve over time

Instruction and Assessment: The educator has knowledge, skills, and dispositions to facilitate learning for students.

Collaboration: The educator has knowledge, skills, and dispositions to interact collaboratively with students, families, colleagues, other professionals, and community members.

members.

Leadership: The educator has the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to act as an instructional leader, data analyst, community relations officer, and change agent.

Reflection and Growth: The educator has knowledge, skills, and dispositions to use evidence, reflection, and feedback to continually evaluate his/her practice and the effects of his/her choices and actions on others, and to adapt practice to meet the needs of each learner.

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