

The Marshall Memo

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Effective Versus Mediocre Classroom Observation Skills

In this article in *Connected Principals*, Shawn Blankenship says teachers who get perfect evaluations from their principals are often disappointed. "If you thought I was perfect, you weren't paying attention," said one teacher. "I want honest feedback," said another. "I want to be given extra ideas and ways to take it further, angles I haven't thought of myself."

A key factor, says Blankenship, is principals' perceptiveness when they observe classrooms. There's a big difference between a principal who stands at the back taking notes on what the teacher is doing versus a principal who moves around the room focusing on what students are doing (or not doing). Here are the notes taken by two different principals observing the same class:

Teacher-focused principal:

- Lesson plans are complete and meet district expectations. Teacher plans for low-, medium-, and high-level students.

Student-focused principal:

- Student work/outcomes look much the same regardless of students' achievement level.

Teacher-focused principal:

- The teacher is moving around and seems to have a great rapport with students.

Student-focused principal:

- Although the teacher is mobile, four students have worked three of the first set of problems incorrectly.

Teacher-focused principal:

- Students are well behaved and seem to be engaged in the content.

Student-focused principal:

- Students are working independently. Two students have put away their unfinished work and are reading a novel. One student is doodling on his notebook. The

teacher provides low-level feedback such as “Good job” and “You’re working hard.”

Teacher-focused principal:

- The learning goal is posted in the front of the class.

Student-focused principal:

- Only two of eight students chosen at random could recall the learning goal and only one student could demonstrate it with mastery.

Teacher-focused principal:

- Students are answering questions correctly and seem to have mastered the goal.

Student-focused principal:

- Each time the teacher asked questions, the same three students correctly answered them.

“Which notes will more likely translate into meaningful data to assist the teacher in improving his/her pedagogy?” asks Blankenship. Clearly, the second principal saw much more, and might follow up by asking the teacher one or more questions like these:

- When you were moving around the room, what did you hear your students say or do that demonstrated understanding of the learning goal? Which students?
- What artifact can you provide that demonstrates differentiation of instruction?
- What were you looking for specifically when you provided feedback to students?
- Why do you think only three students raised their hands?
- If you were to allow students to discuss for 30 seconds collaboratively with their peers before they answer your question, what do you predict would happen?

“These type of open-ended questions require a teacher to think cognitively and deeply about his/her own practice and, if presented thoughtfully, can lead to collegial conversations.”

“If You Thought I Was Perfect, You Weren’t Paying Attention” by Shawn Blankenship in *Connected Principals*, July 25, 2014, <http://connectedprincipals.com/archives/10634>