

Thoughts on lesson observations | Spot Coaching

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It certainly feels like a brave new world. My colleagues and I have rightly exercised caution in the first few weeks of piloting 'spot coaching', but we know why we are doing this. I have also reminded them that the old way of observation was far from perfect and to remember those colleagues bruised by feedback and judgement received long after the moment had passed. All too often I felt a quantified lesson grade distracted from any qualitative feedback, irrespective of whether the feedback was deemed to be of any use or not.

What is different now is that feedback is purposeful, developmental and (critically) nearly always provided in the heat of the lesson. However this is not at the exclusion of an extended conversation after the lesson (often better for the exchange during the lesson). Such instant feedback provides the teacher with the perfect opportunity to re-work, trial something new or embrace an opportunity to digress to deepen pupils' thinking in the 'here and now'. That may require a little more courage and faith in oneself to speak up or interject when it might be safer to remain silent, but the silence is over in the 'new world'.

We have a duty as leaders of learning to help our colleagues move their practice forward. If we worried excessively about the possible consequences of our words on others then we would never open our mouths and we would cease to lead. I held on to this very thought when recently observing Year 7 scientists researching forces at various 'learning stations' in a rotational group activity. The sight of one pupil's insufficiently statically charged balloon falling to the floor as other pupils' balloons remained steadfastly attached to the wall, resulted in much hilarity from the rest of the class.

The teacher initially joined in the laughter, but instead of capitalising on this moment she then sought to bring the class back to order and move them on. I was like a gazelle across that classroom to catch her ear and whisper that she should make much more of this event before resorting back to plan. My colleague then expertly explored why this event had just occurred with the whole class. Her skilled questioning probed their understanding of the different roles played by the relative forces involved. This even prompted some pupils to ask more searching questions on the effect of gravity on Earth and in space. It was wonderful. A productive conversation continued after the class left, during which my colleague confirmed that she would not have otherwise seized that moment.

There have been more occasions when I have intervened discretely, talking in whispers and then standing back, than not. But there have been times when I have found myself playing a more active 'team-teach' role.

On one occasion, enrolled as the 'teaching assistant' by prior arrangement with a newly qualified teacher, the successful re-working of a Year 9 technology lesson owed much to a relationship built on trust and mutual respect with all 'distance to power' removed. Carefully considered and sensitive use of language and action quickly established this fact with the pupils and always actively sought to build the confidence of the teacher. Here was an example of collaborative teaching without prejudice or judgement, but plenty of running commentary and feedback. My heart sank a little when I was later asked for the written feedback; I dutifully wrote up some notes of our conversation and politely explained that, 'I don't really complete observation reports anymore.'

On rare occasions, I have felt no compulsion to utter anything at all – the moment never arrived. Not necessarily an indication of the quality of learning observed, but rather due to a greater need to take stock and retreat for further thought and contemplation – but always with the intention of returning again soon.

I visited one colleague three times in the space of three days before I was ready to intervene. On this occasion, I was intrigued by her framing of a Year 8 science practical experiment, setting pupils up to test the hypothesis: The shape of an object determines how quickly it can move through a liquid. I returned a little later, by which time the teacher had brought the pupils back together to sum up their test findings in the context of the original hypothesis. This was my moment. I quietly put it to her that she should then swiftly challenge each individual to write their own new and improved hypothesis. She executed this supremely as evidenced by the articulacy of pupils' findings – the justifications of their concluding thoughts post-experiment – expressed through the fine statements they composed in the last ten minutes of the lesson.

'We are not judging them so they are now actively seeking out feedback and advice,' said one senior colleague recently. There are few things more encouraging than when colleagues engage with others in a dialogue about their own classroom practice. 'A paradigm shift?' questioned another senior colleague.

The next step is to roll out our new ways of doing. Establishing a new classroom observation protocol to reflect the 'new world' is essential, especially if we are to safeguard colleagues from clumsy interferences from well-meaning and high spirited headteachers! More importantly, we need to build up the team of active coaches and empower as many colleagues as possible to provide high quality 'on the spot' feedback and frequently engage in meaningful professional dialogue.

I am left in no doubt that immediate feedback, in the same way that a tennis coach or dance instructor provides, has powerful potential as a professional development tool in teaching. Our recent work has been exhilarating. I hope never to grade a single lesson again.