Electronic Observation: 21st Century Model for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

Assessing effective instruction, in support of student achievement is a requirement for institutional accreditation. Simultaneously, considering overall student success, "among school-related factors, teachers matter most" (Teachers Matter, n.a.). If education was a jigsaw puzzle, a missing piece is a strategic method of observing teachers to support institutional effectiveness. A system to monitor practice and expected outcomes; to generate dynamic data that drive decision-making; and to ensure program standards are met in a continuous improvement model (Cervone & Martinez-Miller, 2007; Downey et al., 2004). Walk-through observation is that system, a powerful and intentional missing puzzle piece (Glasgow, et.al., 2014)

Introduction

Excellent teaching and learning is germane to the mission of institutions of higher education. As a profession, education has historically generated a rich and continuous body of research-based, best practice; delivered effective professional learning for educators; and engaged in instructional conversations and self-reflection. Yet, establishing and assessing effective teaching practices, in support of student achievement, continues to be challenge, a work in progress, and importantly, a requirement for institutional accreditation.

Many factors contribute to student academic performance, including individual temperament, family attitudes, and external influences. But "research suggests, that among school-related factors, teachers matter most" (Teachers Matter, n.a.). An "effective teacher is estimated to have two to three times the impact of any other school [environment] related factor " (Teachers Matter, n.a.), including support services, facilities, and leadership.

As such, Colleges of Education and programs in teacher education hold a unique opportunity to generate vital research on teaching and learning, and to model best practice in the delivery of instructional excellence. Furthermore, they are poised to create a model of continuous improvement for effective teaching. A model which results in increasing levels of student achievement and ultimately, a model to be practiced by teacher education graduates as they become practicing professionals in

the field. This model requires innovation and active collaboration with those who educate future teachers at colleges and universities. This model requires a 21st Century perspective.

Accreditation Standards and Institutional Expectations

Specific language differs among regional accrediting agencies across the country, but all criterion-based programs, centered on continuous improvement, include a mandatory requirement that an institution provide support for student learning and effective teaching. Assessing effective teaching practices and supporting positive gains in learning is of primary importance in meeting this requirement and must be based upon a common set of research-based best practices, while allowing for differences across disciplines (e.g. www.ncahlc.org).

The Challenge of Instructional Quality

Finding an efficient, data-informed model for a) identifying best practices in teaching and learning; b) conducting systematic observations based on these identified data points and providing just-in-time feedback to all instructors; and c) using the resulting data within a continuous quality improvement accreditation framework presents a daunting challenge.

At the outset, collaborative perceptions and a collegial attitude are vital to the observer-instructor relationship. Can the observer be trusted to be objective, fair, and considerate of the varied challenges faced by instructors in a wide range of classroom settings? Is the process (system, tool, and/or rubric) itself reliable and does it generate reliable data? Are the observations based upon criteria that are aligned with research best practice, overall college expectations, and individual course variables? Are the results readily available and feedback immediate, in order to initiate collaborative instructional conversations? Will opportunity exist for self-reflection, in order to generate authentic and intentional improvement of instruction? And, based on the results, will instructors receive the support needed for on-going delivery of excellent instruction?

Background of the Project

A unique provider in the broad system of education is the community college. Community colleges serve a vital role in preparing students for successful transition to four-year institutions; many of these students plan to pursue first or second careers as classroom teachers (The Crucial Role of Community Colleges, n.a.). The two-year environment serves as an excellent research forum and proving ground for best practices in teaching. Such venues exist in freshman level methods courses, such as Introduction to Education, and in classroom practicum settings, where

learning to teach is a primary focus, as well as within program courses where students are expected to gain applicable, general education competencies.

Opportunities for assessing quality instruction within the community college setting occur within a wide range of delivery formats including face-to-face, hybrid/distance learning, online, and high school dual-credit classrooms. Notably, over 70 percent of community college students are taught by part-time instructors, highly qualified in their respective disciplines (National Profile of Community Colleges), yet separated by geography and/or the constraints of traditional course schedules.

A team of community college instructional staff, consisting of regional site directors and selected full-time faculty, were attempting to provide substantive feedback on teaching effectiveness to each and every new, part-time instructor during his/her first term. Additionally, this leadership team was scheduling classroom visits for returning instructors, especially those with identified challenges, at least once per year. Utilizing a paper-and-pencil form, observers traveled throughout a nine-county service area in an attempt to observe selected instructors in a systematic and consistent manner. Given the ratio of observers to instructors (approximately 10:230) and the unwieldy tool, results were not available to instructors until the end of term and often well beyond.

Identification of a Solution

As a possible solution, administrators at the community college investigated the walk-through observation process. Fundamentally, walk-through observations are "focused on specific look-for's… [that provide] valuable information about what's working--- or NOT working" (Protheroe, 2009, p.30) in the classroom. Walk-throughs connect instructional leadership to teacher effectiveness and to student achievement. As the challenge continues to deliver high-quality teaching with increased levels of student achievement, walk-through observation is gaining recognition as an effective coaching model for instructional leaders and administrators.

When the process is initiated with clarity and vision, walk-throughs have multiple benefits. Simply put, excellent instruction must be the focus and improved learning outcomes must be the result. Transparency of expectations, and of the protocol for implementation of the observation process, encourages collaboration and ultimately, acceptance of mentoring and coaching.

Ultimately, instructional conversations will ensue and self-reflection will be nurtured. Data can then be used to create individual learning plans. Aggregate data can drive a cycle of continuous improvement throughout a department, college, or even university-wide. The data will serve as evidence for design and delivery of professional learning, and for the accreditation process.

Because walk-through observation has potential as a catalyst to support both excellent instruction and a positive shift in learning (Walk-Through as Powerful, n.d.), this

process is recognized as a 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.

Design of a Customized Walk-Through Tool

Community college administrators initiated the design of a customized electronic observation tool. Content look-for's were driven by accreditation standards, common learning outcomes of the institution, program initiatives, and research best practice. Campus-wide behavioral expectations, designed to support a positive and supportive learning culture, were embedded in the tool.

Components of the customized walk-through tool include the ability to disaggregate the data by location (the community college has 6 locations throughout the state), department/program, and instructor. Data points or look-for's were identified by the design team and divided into four main categories: Instructional Practices; Learning Environment; Academic Planning and Alignment; and Student and Instructor Interaction. Additionally, the design team included the opportunity for open-ended digital comments and a set of pre-populated, select-from comments to assist the observer with efficient completion of observation.

Pilot Study for the Observation Tool

An initial study was conducted to pilot the observation tool. A selected set of observers were trained for the pilot. Observer training was conducted to ensure confidence and calibration across the team. Training included both competency in functionality of the tool and clarity with regard to the specific measurement of the data points in the tool content. The calibration process included multiple test observations in subgroups of the observer team (2-3 observers per subgroup) across a 6-month period. After each observation, the observer subgroups held intense conversation regarding conditions that supported the marking of the data points. In addition, the entire observer team held a set of five whole team calibration sessions, across the 6-month period, to further refine observation calibration.

Results of the Pilot Study

The pilot study included six trained and calibrated observers. A total of forty-four (44) pilot observations were completed. As a result of this process, nine data points were hyperlinked to more permanently clarify definition and understanding; therefore, expectations and marking of selected data points during an observation were refined. These hyperlinks can be accessed live, during an observation, as support to the observer and as a method to maintain calibration throughout the process.

Specific results across the four look-for categories included the following data. Within Instructional Practices, results of the pilot study indicated all students engaged 65.9% of the time, with an additional 25% described as most students engaged, for a total student engagement across all 44 observations (all or most of the time) of 90.6%. Selected effective teaching practices within this category indicated the use of focused instruction in 61% and digital learning style was addressed in 55% of the observations. Clear communication of learning objectives was indicated in 36% of the pilot observations.

Pilot results in Learning Environment revealed that IT resources were available and used to support effective instruction in 23:44 observations or in 52%. Instructional environments were considered physically and emotionally safe in 39:44 observations or 89%. Within Academic Planning and Alignment, observers indicated a clear emphasis on critical thinking in 29:44 cases or 66%. Student and Instructor Interaction data points included effective use of teacher proximity at a rate of 59% or in 26:44 observations.

Although results of this pilot study have multiple implications (for example, data to drive professional learning decisions and data to support instructional conversations), the primary purpose was to refine the content of the tool and its functionality. Multiple edits and adjustments were made to the tool in order to improve the observation process and the clarity of data collected.

Going forward, continuing content customization will reflect changing national and state initiatives, accreditation standards, institutional expectations, and campus priorities. Additionally, regular observer calibration will help ensure the collection of reliable, valid data for decision-making.

As an aside, web-based features of the observation tool make it an ideal partner for the community college interactive distance learning system (IDL). Observers have the ability to access classrooms without traveling to multiple and distant locations. Digital data can instantaneously submitted and immediate feedback shared. Growth and change across time can be analyzed due to longitudinal data storage.

Summary and Implications for Higher Education

Excellent teaching is the focus. Increased student achievement is the goal. Electronic walk-through observation to create a model of continuous improvement is the solution. Key outcomes of this process include collaborative instructional conversations and self-reflection based on real-time data.

Simply put, if education was a jigsaw puzzle, an oft missing piece is a strategic method of observation and a system to monitor practice and expected outcomes. A system that generates dynamic data to drive decision-making and to support adjustments, as

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. (Glasgow, et al., 2014) When implemented in a university setting, administrators and instructional leaders must carefully consider selection of the content look-for's to be observed. They must also ensure consistency of observations across the team of observers by designing a protocol for, and conducting a regular and continual process of, calibration. Finally, the college or department initiating the walk-through observation process must make a commitment to on-going customization of the observation instrument. As accreditation standards; state and national initiatives; and the unique culture of teaching and learning at an individual institution evolve, the observables must reflect these changes. Only then will meaningful data be generated. These results must be immediately available to instructors for self-reflection. Only then can teaching remain the living, adaptable, and student sensitive process that truly make it excellent. Faculty feel supported. Decisions are data-based and resources utilized with maximum gain. Student achievement improves. This is 21st century teaching and learning.

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