

Creating a classroom observation procedure

(Notes from the AITSL classroom observation guide at bit.ly/AITSL-CO and Education World article at bit.ly/TOTPD)

Fullan and Hargreaves (2016) explain that, “a culture of daily staff interactions, engaging pedagogy, mutual trust, and regular, quality feedback related to teaching improvement are foundational to teacher growth and improvement.”

Classroom observations are used to support school improvement. Along with other strategies, they mainly focus on achieving SMART goals in the school improvement plan; those that focus on student learning. However, they are also used to support teachers to reflect on and improve their strategies for facilitating learning as a mission in itself, especially approaches identified through PLC meetings and performance appraisal feedback.

When planning to introduce classroom observations as a school improvement strategy, it is important to deeply consider the following aspects.

Be clear about purpose

The main purpose of classroom observations is for teachers to observe each other's practice, provide feedback, and learn from each other to improve student learning.

This is achieved by

- supporting the development of a common understanding of effective teaching practices
- supporting the sharing of ideas and expertise, including modelling good practice
- providing opportunities to discuss challenges and concerns
- building whole-school understandings about and accountability for the quality of teaching and learning

Explore the various observation types

Lesson Study: In this three-pronged approach designed by Japanese educators, teachers collaboratively develop a lesson, observe it being taught to students, and then discuss and refine it.

Peer Coaching: In this non-evaluative professional development strategy, educators work together to discuss and share teaching practices, observe each other's classrooms, provide mutual support, and, in the end, enhance teaching to enrich student learning.

Cognitive Coaching: Teachers are taught specific skills that involve asking questions so that the teacher observed is given the opportunity to process learning associated with teaching the lesson.

Critical Friends Group (CFG): This program provides time and structure in a teacher's schedule for professional growth linked to student learning. Each CFG is composed of eight to 12 teachers and administrators, under the guidance of at least one coach, who meet regularly to develop collaborative skills, reflect on their teaching practices, and look at student work.

Learning Walk: Learning walks are used to gain a global understanding of the physical environment in classrooms, especially to identify if there are any issues relating to such aspects as over-crowding, learning resources, furniture placement, display areas, noise, and heating or cooling.

Self-observation: Using a video camera, teachers observe themselves trialling a new initiative or monitoring the effectiveness of existing practice.

Establish pre-conditions for effective classroom observations

For classroom observations to be effective, certain pre-conditions need to be in place. Consider the following.

1. Ensure school leaders advocate and support teacher observation as a valid form of professional development
2. Build a community of trust among all employees
3. Establish a school-wide commitment to the approach
4. Separate observation from the teacher evaluation process
5. Declare the purpose for teacher observation and a commitment to its outcomes
6. Invite teachers to first participate in the process as volunteers
7. Factor time into the regular schedules for teachers to observe other teachers
8. Organise scheduled meetings, coaching sessions, and follow-up conversations
9. Select specific strategies and skills on which to focus during an observation session
10. Institute a way to measure the impact of observation

Establish agreed protocols through professional dialogue

Common understandings and agreements need to be reached about the purposes and protocols of classroom observations. The following prompts can help to guide discussions.

1. Determine who is accountable for the quality of learning and facilitation in a school.
2. Agree on effective teaching practices.
3. Agree on the prime purpose of feedback.
4. Identify how classroom observation sessions can arise from professional learning community (PLC) meetings.
5. Identify what mutual agreements (protocols) should be in place to support the success of classroom observations, especially the 'Why', 'Who' and 'How', and what happens with outcomes.
6. Identify what organisational conditions should be in place to support the success of classroom observations.