

REIMAGINING Classroom Walkthroughs

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At their best, classroom walkthroughs are viewed as a part of an ongoing formative assessment process in which teachers and administrators are engaged in a system of reciprocal accountability. While there are many ways for a school or district to enhance its walkthrough procedures, reimagining the form used for collecting and sharing the information can be a valuable first step. I believe that any walkthrough tool should be created in Google Drive. As such a form can be accessed any time from anywhere, administrators can seamlessly share the information with teachers without using print or email, and all parties shared on a document can synchronously collaborate on its content.

Technology aside, here are the five essential components of the new walkthrough tool:

1. SUMMARY

This is a brief, objective summary of what is seen in the classroom. Often, administrators and teachers refer back to an old walkthrough form, and they cannot quite remember what took place on that day (making the feedback almost entirely unusable). This section will help with this problem. To go with the typed summary, or in place of it, consider linking to a video of the classroom action:

Record a video > upload to a Google Drive folder dedicated to videos with a permissions setting accessible to anyone with the link > copy the link to video > paste the video into the document.

Along with serving as a reminder of what transpired, teachers can learn by reflecting upon film from their own classrooms or each other's. In *The Global Achievement Gap*, Tony Wagner discusses how teachers analyzing classroom footage (of themselves or others) is the best way to improve upon instruction.

2. SPECIFIC FEEDBACK

Under no circumstances should this feedback involve any sort of checklist. Providing teachers with feedback along with a checklist is the equivalent of giving students feedback along with a grade. In both instances, the feedback (the key, differentiated component meant to move the recipient forward) is mostly ignored. In *Embedded Formative Assessment*, Dylan Wiliam reveals, "If teachers are providing careful diagnostic comments and then putting a score of a grade on the work, they are wasting their time. They might as well just give a score or a grade -- the students won't learn anything as a result, but the teacher will save a great deal of time" (p. 109). When handed feedback and a grade, students first look at their grade. Second, they look at the grades of their classmates. Third, they ignore feedback.

Also, aim for specific questions rather than general statements. There is a big difference between "How could you differentiate your guided reading groups based on level of reading comprehension?" and "You need to do a better job differentiating." The latter statement is vague, and it holds the assumption that teachers know how to differentiate but have decided not to do so (vague directives + insufficient administrative support = teacher anxiety). On the other hand, the former option promotes inquiry and thought because it is written in the form of a question, and it gives teachers a clearer idea as to what instructional shift should be taking place. Working from an electronic document allows for administrators to link questions to resources that will support teachers in making these necessary changes.

3. TARGETED FEEDBACK

While specific feedback is based on whatever may be taking place in the classroom at the time of walkthrough, targeted feedback involves anything observed that relates to current school or district initiatives. There should be space on the form for these initiatives to be indicated with specific "I can" statements. "I can create higher-order thinking routines that promote deeper understanding of texts" is preferable to the ambiguous "Higher-order questioning." For both forms of feedback the same general rules apply. A few more points to consider when leaving either specific or targeted feedback:

- Instead of writing in paragraphs, try bullet points. This technique makes it easy for the reader/teacher to pull out key points and ideas. Plus, in general, it makes the content less overwhelming.
- Go for a less-is-more approach. Between both forms of feedback, there should be anywhere from 1-4 bullet points (comparable to the approach that teachers take when meeting with students for writing workshop). Keep in mind that targeted feedback will not apply to all walkthroughs, as classroom instruction and learning does not always relate to school or district initiatives.
- As much as possible, the focus of feedback should be on student learning, not necessarily on classroom instruction. There is a difference. In *Visible Learning for Teachers*, John Hattie declares, "The best way in which to choose the best teaching method (and way in which to change teachers so that they begin to use the best method) is to place more attention on the evaluation of learning effect sizes from the lesson, and use these as the first discussion point for considering whether the optimal teaching methods have been used" (p. 86).

4. TEACHER REFLECTION / ACTION PLAN

An optional section for teachers should provide them with an opportunity to reflect upon the lesson and to develop a brief action plan going forward (no more than about 4-5 sentences). The hope is that eventually most teachers will not have to rely on administrator feedback to know what their next steps should be. As Hattie states, "When we become the 'evaluators of our impact,' then we have the basis for the single greatest improvement in our schools" (p. 166). Hattie refers to this as "with-it-ness," when teachers (and students) have the abilities to continuously assess the effectiveness of their work and adjust their actions accordingly. Ideally, we would like for teachers to be able to independently evaluate this effectiveness. This section of the form also provides teachers with a more formalized opportunity to respond to administrator comments without the need for an official (and possibly time-consuming) meeting. Although face-to-face conferences can obviously occur, Google Drive would allow for both parties to efficiently respond to each other's comments without needing to get together. Following up each walkthrough with yet another meeting could easily overshadow any potential learning benefits.

5. MULTIMEDIA

This is a section on the form to insert some type of multimedia (photograph, video, drawing, comic strip, etc.). Administrators should make sure that any included file is related to its accompanying feedback. Ideally, it should enhance that feedback, but it doesn't have to be informational. Such worthwhile motivations may be to pique teacher interest or trigger laughter. As administrators across the same school or district insert their multimedia, they can drop their selected files into a shared folder (such as Google Drive or Dropbox) for everyone else to access. Think of this component as the same reason why PowerPoint or Keynote slides should include images along with their respective information -- images evoke emotion, and audiences are much more likely to remember the content if images are included along with it. Also, this approach follows the ideas of Dan and Chip Heath in *Made to Stick*, in which the authors credit six key principles for memorable stories or ideas: simplicity, unexpectedness, concreteness, credibility, emotions, and stories. Consider how many of these values could possibly be encompassed just by this multimedia section of the walkthrough form (or by all five sections that have been discussed).

Revamping an inadequate walkthrough tool isn't enough to single-handedly transform a school's or district's walkthrough procedures into a success. There are many other factors to consider, such as administrators taking the time to get into classrooms, administrators being capable instructional leaders, clear expectations and common language in regards to school or district initiatives, creating a culture of risk taking, etc. Nonetheless, reimagining the walkthrough tool is a necessary step in the right direction.

How would you recommend enhancing classroom walkthroughs?