

The Study Council at Syracuse University
Research, Development and Dissemination Project

ENHANCING THE COMMUNICATION SKILLS OF APPR EVALUATORS

Overview

The Study Council at Syracuse University has undertaken a project to develop a series of video-documented simulations to enhance the communication and feedback skills of evaluators under New York State's system of annual professional performance reviews. Each simulation would have practicing and preservice administrators engage actors (retired educators) who will be trained to represent teachers in one-on-one post-evaluation conferences that address various concerns about those teachers' performance. A New York State Teacher Leadership Quality Partnership grant would fund a controlled test of the strategy's effectiveness, which will be framed around situations identified in interviews with practicing administrators as particularly challenging or problematic.

The Need

The Executive Committee of the Study Council of Syracuse University has set as a general priority the goal of building school districts' internal capacity for proactive leadership in the implementation of the State's Race-to-the-Top initiatives, and equipping building administrators, in particular, to promote their faculty members' commitment to those reforms. One of the Council's specific objectives is to develop and offer training that prepares practicing administrators and preservice leadership candidates to engage teachers in serious discussions about their performance: discussions that go beyond "delivering" performance assessments and actually secure teachers' commitment to steps that will enhance their own performance and their students' learning.

There is general agreement among educators, scholars, and policy makers that the quality of teaching is the single most important factor affecting student learning, the quality of a school principal's leadership the second most important factor, and the teacher evaluation process one of the most important ways in which the latter impacts the former (Marzano, 2003). Yet for all the attention recently paid to "reforming" teacher evaluations, little attention has been paid to the heart of the process – its linchpin -- *the process by which principals (and other evaluators) engage teachers in discussions of their performance*. Without effective communication skills and a strategic understanding of how to engage teachers in an active dialogue about their performance, often under emotionally-charged circumstances, research indicates that evaluators are unlikely to achieve either of the seemingly conflicting but equally compelling purposes of evaluations: to hold teachers accountable for their performance and to promote their professional development (Elmore, 2004; Weisberg et al., 2009; New Teacher Project, 2010).

There is a limited but growing body of research on what evaluators need to know and be able to do to promote open dialogue in the evaluation process (Danielson, 2009, Feeney, 2007; Donaldson, 2013). They must have a clear understanding of what constitutes important learning and the instructional strategies needed to make learning possible; they must have and know how to communicate confidence in students' and teachers' capacity to meet high expectations; they must know how to make it safe for their staff members to reveal their mistakes and acknowledge room for improvement; they must know how to establish rapport, pose challenging questions, and invite teachers to probe their initial answers more deeply (Danielson, 2009). They must understand the psychological challenges that teachers (and others) face when they are invited or directed to make difficult transitions, and develop a repertoire of skills for

helping those they supervise let go of accustomed but ineffective practices and risk committing themselves to new practices they may not completely understand or believe they can master (Bridges, 2009). They must know how to differentiate their feedback for teachers whose performance poses different challenges, such as teachers who are well-liked by students but superficial in their classroom instruction, those who lack expertise in critical aspects of subject matter and planning, those with low expectations of their students, those who blame their students for not learning rather than accept responsibility for adjusting their instruction, those who are generally competent but unwilling to accept school-wide decisions about appropriate content or instructional practices, those who resist using student performance data to critique and adjust their instruction, and beginners or long-tenured teachers who lack confidence in themselves (Danielson, 2009, Platt et al., 2000).

Addressing the Need

As limited as the research on needed knowledge and skills of evaluators may be, there is even less research on how administrators can be equipped to act on that knowledge or develop those skills. One of the few scholars who has focused on how the communication skills of school leaders can be developed is Syracuse University's own Benjamin Dotger, whose School Leader Communication Model (SLCM) serves as the basis for the project we propose here. Dotger has developed a series of detailed simulations, in which preservice candidates and practicing administrators interact one-on-one with actors trained to represent teachers, parents, or students in a variety of challenging situations. For over two years, with State and other funding, the University has been integrating these simulations throughout its leadership programs, learning how to use a succession of simulations to gradually build candidates' communication skills, reflective abilities, and capacity for making on-the-spot decisions in tense situations.

Now, in consultation with practicing administrators and teacher leaders in our region, we will develop a new set of simulations structured around evaluation feedback sessions. Several of these cases will be structured as our current ones are, using written materials to frame the context for both students and actors. In these simulations, however, retired educators with deep knowledge of classroom teaching will be trained as the actors representing the teachers receiving evaluation feedback. With the assistance of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, which has indicated a willingness to put at our disposal its archive of videotaped lessons of candidates who have received National Board certification, we will develop a new set of cases that have candidates and in-service administrators observe the teachers in those lessons, then complete evaluations on them using approved APPR rubrics. Having completed their observations and evaluations, candidates and professional development participants will then conduct post-observation conferences with actors trained to represent the teachers in these videos. After observing video recordings of their own conferences, candidates and participants will analyze each other's strategies in group debriefing sessions (each having engaged in a conference with an actor trained to play the same teacher).

With their knowledge of teaching, we believe retired teachers will serve as particularly appropriate actors for our purposes, and ones we can recruit and train across the region. Freeing ourselves from dependence on professional actors, we believe we can develop a system for developing evaluators' communication skills that can be disseminated across central New York, and eventually more widely, in collaboration with our region's BOCES networks.