

Using Teacher Learning Walks to Improve Instruction

Teachers who go on nonevaluative walk-throughs of their colleagues' classrooms can learn how to improve their own instruction.

Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey

The practice of observing classrooms has traditionally been the purview of administrators, whether for evaluation purposes or to gauge progress across a department or a school. But this decade has seen classroom visits turned on their head as teachers are invited to go where only administrators once walked. Learning walks have been transformative in the schools and districts we work with, especially in moving from professional development to professional practice. Adopting them as standard practice also marks a turning point in fostering teacher leadership.

Learning walks differ from instructional rounds (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009) in their scope and their formality. Unlike instructional rounds, which use protocols for establishing long-term networks, defining problems of practice, and formally analyzing patterns, learning walks are more loosely structured. A group may be formed to complete a task. For example, when a school needed to complete a follow-up report after an accreditation visit, learning walks were used to look for evidence that the recommended practices were implemented. Meanwhile, a data team composed of administrators and teachers at the same school walks

classrooms once each quarter to gather qualitative and quantitative data that relate to annual goals (James-Ward, Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2013).

Uses of Learning Walks

Informal learning walks may be for a single purpose, like the examples already mentioned, or for ongoing professional development purposes. One school we work with ensures that teachers new to the school or the profession participate in learning walks once every quarter. The principal told us, "This has been a great way to get people who are new to our staff right into the flow." She remarked that new personnel rarely get to know how instruction is carried out in classrooms outside of their assigned department. "It's hard to call something a 'school-wide practice' if you never get to see it being implemented in other disciplines," she said. This year she has begun including student teachers in learning walks as well so that they can gain a broader perspective.

Instructional coaches use learning walks to witness the ways in which the concepts discussed in professional development sessions are being implemented in the classroom. For coaches, the focus of learning walks is to gather information and ask teachers

about what is working and what kinds of supports they need. At the school where we work, blended learning has been an ongoing focus. The technology coordinator and teachers who have participated in advanced blended learning training conduct a learning walk together in the week leading up to a professional development session. "It's like taking a temperature check," one teacher told us. "We get a chance to see what new ideas people are trying."

The principal at our school conducts one of our most popular learning walks with families. She schedules several each year, and families sign up in advance. Teachers volunteer their classrooms on the scheduled days, and the principal facilitates discussions with the visitors. She also leads noninstructional personnel on a similar learning walk. Bus drivers, cafeteria workers, custodians, and front office personnel get a chance to see what happens in classrooms. "We try to be supportive of the work

Learning walks have been transformative in the schools and districts we work with, especially in moving from professional development to professional practice.



they do,” said one, “but it’s hard to get an understanding of what happens when we’re never in there. This gives me something to talk with [students] about when I see them.”

Types of Learning Walks

Although learning walks would seem to have wide appeal to teachers, we have encountered quite a bit of reluctance in some districts. Many teachers have told us that they fear being judged by their peers or that they suspect that the learning walk is being used “as a secret evaluation mission.” In many cases, they have hosted only administrators in their classrooms. Issues of trust must be dealt with directly, and professional development and discussion should precede practice. The investment in time and conversation is well worth the effort so that learning walks are viewed positively from their inception.

Ghost walks. We advise schools new to the process to begin with a ghost walk of empty classrooms. Teachers volunteer to make their classrooms available and in turn are participants in the ghost walk. Because there are no students pres-

ent and therefore no instruction to evaluate, the observation is confined to discussion about the physical environment.

Several years ago, the professional development in a district we worked with revolved around establishing purpose in lessons. There is a significant body of research on the effectiveness of learning targets for increasing learning (e.g., Hattie, 2009), yet the debate seemed to center on how it was posted in the classroom. Several administrators led ghost walks with their members of the building leadership teams. “It really got everyone to move off this topic and get on with the business of making sure it was being conveyed to students,” said one assistant principal. “They got to see for themselves that there could be a good amount of variation, and that the real issue was student understanding.”

Capacity-building learning walks. Some learning walks are conducted expressly for the purpose of gathering evidence to inform decisions. The data team’s and the instructional coaches’ learning walks are two examples of this because in each

Watch the Video

Watch teachers demonstrate learning walks and discuss how it helps their practice.
www.nassp.org/PL0114fisher



Figure 1

Types of Learning Walks

Type Of Walk	Purpose	Time	Participants	Follow-Up After the Walk
Ghost Walk	To examine classrooms without students present.	1 hour	Principal, assistant principal, teachers, building leadership team, coaches, professional learning community.	Summary of data collected: evidence and wonderings processed with entire faculty.
Capacity-Building Learning Walks	To collect data, looking for evidence of the implementation of effective practices and gaining insights into next steps.	1 hour	Principal, assistant principal, coaches, and other members of the building leadership team.	Summary of data collected: evidence and wonderings processed with entire faculty.
Faculty Learning Walks	To involve entire faculty in visiting classrooms.	All day during planning periods	Principal, assistant principal, and whoever is available each period or time segment, ultimately involving the entire faculty throughout the year.	Summary of data collected: evidence and wonderings processed with entire faculty.

Adapted from James-Ward, C., Fisher, D., Frey, N., & Lapp, D. (2013). Using data to focus instructional improvement. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

The goal of learning walks is to make it a part of the professional learning of the entire faculty. Ideally, each teacher participates in two every year.

case the insights gained were used to determine next steps. Like ghost walks, these are short (typically an hour or so in length) and members are empowered to act on their findings. As an extension of the learning walks conducted for new faculty members, the principal meets with the observers to gather their impressions and help them write goals for their own practice. “I work in a state where the annual evaluation process includes a goal crafted by the teacher, but I find they’re often at a loss as to what they might choose,” she said. “This gives them experience at establishing their own goals in a more informal way and gives me an opportunity to learn about their interests before we meet for the formal evaluation later in the year.”

Faculty learning walks. The goal of learning walks is to make it a part of the professional learning of the entire faculty. Ideally, each teacher participates in two every year. In many cases, this can be achieved by coordinating planning periods so that coverage is not an issue. Teachers are therefore grouped by convenience, but this in itself can create interesting conversations among teachers who don’t otherwise have much contact with one another. Teachers often come away with ways to innovate in their own classrooms and even to form new partnerships.

For example, a series of learning walks concerning the practice of close reading of complex texts resulted in an interdisciplinary lesson between the World History and English teach-

ers. Students read and discussed the poem “In Flanders Fields” by John McCrae twice in the same day. Their English teacher used the poem to discuss its structure as a rondeau, and their World History teacher contextualized the circumstances under which it was written. “I was in an English class and they were examining another poem with a historical context, and it struck me that I could totally do that in mine,” said a history teacher. “Now we’ve got plans to deconstruct a speech the same way,” she said. (See figure 1 for a summary of those learning walks.)

Implementing Learning Walks

Learning walks are best conducted with some boundaries in mind, lest they devolve into the kind of judgmental discourse many teachers fear. Participation is always voluntary, and teachers who open their classrooms to such visits always receive advance notice. We take steps to ensure that the host teachers get opportunities to serve as members of a learning walk team as well. No matter how well acquainted the participants are with the process, they meet in advance with a facilitator (a teacher or an administrator) who revisits expectations and purpose and reminds participants to refrain from taking notes because it raises anxiety levels.

After spending a short time in each classroom (no more than 15 minutes, and often less), participants meet again to engage in a reflective conversation led by the facilitator. They are asked what they noticed, what was surprising, and what was held in common with their own practice. Importantly, this reflective conversation ends with insights about their own classrooms. Time is reserved at each professional development ses-

sion for observers and host teachers to share their impressions with the entire faculty.

Conclusion

Teachers have not historically been invited to participate in observations of one another’s practices, but that is rapidly changing in a professional climate that values collaboration. Anticipate that some may be hesitant at first; principals can build their teachers’ capacity by conducting ghost walks of empty classrooms. Principals must also empower teams to make decisions on the basis of what they have garnered; without the ability to act, learning walks become a pointless exercise. Most importantly, principals must ensure that they are part of the feedback loop. By listening to the insights of teachers, principals can determine next steps for quality instruction. True teacher leadership requires empowerment. **PL**

REFERENCES

- City, E. A., Elmore, R. F., Fiarman, S. E., & Teitel, L. (2009). *Instructional rounds in education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Hattie, J. A. C. (2009). *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- James-Ward, C., Fisher, D., Frey, N., & Lapp, D. (2013). *Using data to focus instructional improvement*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Douglas Fisher (dfisher@mail.sdsu.edu) is a professor of teacher education at San Diego State University and a teacher leader at Health Sciences High and Middle College in San Diego, CA.

Nancy Frey (nfrey@mail.sdsu.edu) is a professor of teacher education at San Diego State University and a teacher leader at Health Sciences High and Middle College. They are the authors of *Rigorous Reading* (2013, Corwin Press).



Advertiser Index

	PAGE
National Student Clearinghouse 703-742-4200 www.studenttracker.org	11
Pepperdine University 866-503-5467 gsep.pepperdine.edu/	10
Salsbury Industries 800-562-5377 www.lockers.com	15
Seton Hall University 800-313-9833 www.shu.edu/go/exceedd	42
Solution Tree 800-733-6786 www.solution-tree.com	17, C4