

Reimagining Classroom Walkthroughs

In a [recent post for Education Week](#), Peter DeWitt details some of the problems with classroom observations. This got me thinking about the ways in which a school's or district's walkthrough tool could be reimagined from the ground up for the benefit of all parties involved.

Asking the Right Question

At their worst, walkthroughs are viewed as compliance checks with administrators strutting around schools and classrooms to enforce top-down initiatives. There's not much progress when teachers generally wonder, "How can I avoid getting in trouble?" rather than, "How can I collaborate with my administrators to improve things for students?" At their best, walkthroughs are viewed as a part of an ongoing formative assessment process that finds teachers and administrators engaged in a system of reciprocal accountability. They work together to improve students' results, their own professional development, and each other as people.

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. Regarding the technology, I believe that any walkthrough tool should be created in Google Drive, as it's universally accessible, administrators can seamlessly share the information with teachers without print or email, and all parties shared on a document can synchronously collaborate on its content. After a school or district creates their desired form, it should be saved as a [template](#), instead of starting from scratch each time.

5 Critical Elements

Technology aside, here are the five essential components of the new walkthrough tool. (For a more detailed description of these pieces, [download this PDF](#).)

1. Summary

Often, administrators and teachers refer back to an old walkthrough form and cannot quite remember what took place on that day (making the feedback mostly useless). This section invites a brief, objective summary of what is seen in the classroom. To supplement (or replace) the typed summary, consider linking to a video of the classroom action, which can serve as a reminder of what transpired, as well as an opportunity for reflection -- on their own classrooms or each other's. In [The Global Achievement Gap](#), Tony Wagner discusses how analyzing classroom footage is *the* best way for teachers to improve instruction.

2. Specific Feedback

Under no circumstances should this feedback involve any checklist. This is the equivalent of giving students feedback along with a grade -- the feedback (the key, differentiated component meant to move the recipient forward) is mostly ignored. In *Embedded Formative Assessment* (p. 109), Dylan Wiliam reveals that combining grades with careful diagnostic comments is a waste of time. When handed feedback and a grade, students first look at their grade. Second, they look at the grades of their classmates. Third, they ignore their feedback.

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 suggests that teachers know how to differentiate but have decided not to do so, while the former statement promotes inquiry and thought -- it is written as a question and gives teachers a clearer idea of possible instructional shifts. 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

Unlike specific feedback, targeted feedback involves any observations related to current school or district initiatives. The form should reflect these initiatives with specific "I can" statements. "I can create higher-order thinking routines that promote deeper understanding of texts" is preferred to the ambiguous "Higher-order questioning."

A few more points to consider for specific or targeted feedback:

- Write in bullet points instead of paragraphs, making it easy for the reader/teacher to pull out key points and ideas. In general, this makes the content less overwhelming.
- Less is more. Consider a range of 1-4 bullet points. Keep in mind that targeted feedback cannot apply to all walkthroughs, as classroom instruction and learning won't always relate to school or district initiatives.
- Feedback should focus more on student learning than classroom instruction. In *Visible Learning for Teachers* (p.86), John Hattie equates observations of effective learning with determining the best teaching method.

4. Teacher Reflection/Action Plan

If the form provides teachers with an opportunity to reflect upon the lesson and develop a four- to five-sentence brief action plan, eventually most teachers will not have to rely on administrator feedback to know what their next steps should be. Hattie calls this becoming the "evaluators of our impact" (p. 166) when teachers (and students) have the abilities to continuously assess the effectiveness of their work and

adjust their actions accordingly. This section also gives teachers an opportunity for responding to administrator comments without a face-to-face conference.

5. Multimedia

In this section of the form, administrators can add multimedia (photograph, video, drawing, comic strip, etc.) related their feedback. Motivations might include piquing teacher interest or triggering laughter. These multimedia files could be dropped into a shared folder (such as Google Drive or Dropbox) for anyone in the same school or district to access. Images evoke emotion, making audiences much more likely to remember the content that accompanies it. This approach follows the ideas in *Made to Stick*, in which Dan and Chip Heath 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 by just this multimedia section of the walkthrough form (or by all five sections that have been discussed).

Additional Factors

Revamping an inadequate walkthrough tool isn't enough to single-handedly transform school or district walkthrough procedures into success. There are many other factors to consider, such as administrators making time to visit classrooms, capable instructional leadership, clear expectations and common language around 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?