



Should supervisors intervene during classroom visits?

More and more, administrators are tempted to jump in and get involved during short teacher observations.

By Kim Marshall



As more administrators shift from traditional, full-lesson teacher evaluations to short, frequent, unannounced classroom visits, an interesting question has come up: Should supervisors get involved during a lesson if they see an opportunity to improve or affirm teaching and learning?

On-the-spot interventions rarely happen during formal evaluations, but with short observations, supervisors might be inclined to speak up at a variety of times:

- If they have an interesting idea or anecdote that will enrich the lesson;
- If they want to draw attention to something particularly praiseworthy;
- If the teacher is missing an opportunity to make an important point;
- If some students seem confused and the teacher isn't noticing;
- If the teacher makes a consequential error (for example, mixing up perimeter and area); or
- If a student's behavior is seriously disrupting instruction.

Here's an example: A middle school U.S. history teacher finishes explaining a Civil War event and asks, "Is everyone with me?" A student says, "Yes," and the teacher starts to move on, but the principal at the back of the room senses that many students lack some essential prior knowledge. He asks the teacher, "Do you mind if I ask your students a couple of questions?" The teacher nods, and, in a few minutes, the principal is able to fill in the gaps so students will understand the rest of the lesson. The teacher sees her mistake and is able to improve the remaining classes she teaches that morning.

Advocates of real-time coaching believe that there are lots of teachable moments like this and that praising or redirecting a teacher on the spot is a powerful way to bring about short- and long-term improvements. A leadership coach I know likens this to coaching in professional baseball, football, and basketball games. Real-time coaching has become the go-to supervisory model in some schools, espe-

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cially charters, with principals routinely jumping in during teacher observations and sometimes taking over the class to model a more effective approach.

A district in Arizona took the idea a bit further. Three supervisors — the principal, assistant principal, and an instructional coach — visited classrooms together, observed for 5-7 minutes, and then asked the teacher to pause the lesson. The coach kept an eye on the class while the administrators took the teacher out into the corridor for immediate feedback. When they returned, the coach demonstrated with students how that lesson segment should have been taught.

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Every time I discuss real-time coaching with groups of principals and teachers, I hear several concerns. Won't correcting teachers during a lesson undermine their authority and embarrass them in front of students? Aren't interruptions likely to throw teachers off stride and compromise planned lessons? Won't students be distracted from curriculum content as they tune in on interesting adult dynamics? In addition, when visitors get involved, doesn't that change what they're observing, producing less-accurate snapshots of everyday instruction? (In physics, this is called the observer effect — the instrument of measurement changes what's being measured.) Finally, isn't it possible for teachers to game the process, nimbly showcasing what they know the supervisor is looking for — check for understanding; ask higher-order questions — but not changing the way they teach day to day?

Keep 'em zipped

The overwhelming consensus I hear is that unless safety is an issue, supervisors should zip their lips and give feedback afterward. And in fact, this is the way most athletic coaches work with their players, talking privately to the pitcher or quarterback between plays. One former Alaska principal and superintendent summed up his concerns: "Improving adult practice is complex and requires lots of trust,

time, and care. I fear advocates of real-time coaching are looking for a silver bullet, an easy way.” A veteran Ohio teacher was more passionate: “To praise or correct a teacher in front of students drives a stake into whatever relationship the teacher and the students have. Even if it’s praise, it’s demeaning.”

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Advocates of real-time coaching disagree. Seize the moment, they say. When supervisors wait until the postobservation conference, feedback loses its immediacy and won’t have nearly as much effect. Besides, postobservation conferences are cumbersome and bedeviled by checklists and rubrics, and people are so busy that several days may pass before they meet, if they meet at all. Supervisors need to help teachers improve their practice now when the situation is fresh in their minds. This is especially important with teachers whose undeveloped skills in classroom management and content mastery urgently need to get better. One observer in New York City said that critics of classroom interventions are too concerned with teachers’ feelings and should be focusing on the students whose education is being compromised by ineffective teaching.

Of course, real-time coaching can be done in less intrusive ways. A supervisor can whisper in the teacher’s ear while students are doing group work (“This would be a great time to mention that Essential Question on the wall”), slip the teacher a note (“The kids over by the window are not engaged”), gesture unobtrusively at a student who is having difficulty (“You might want to come over and help her”), or quietly intervene with a noncompliant student. (A Massachusetts principal described how she beckoned a surly adolescent to step out, learned he had been up late the night before at a family wedding party, and told him to pull up his pants, fix his face, and do his best back in the classroom.) Another approach is for the supervisor to raise his or her hand like a student, get called on, and ask a question that subtly redirects the teacher (“Maybe it’s just me, but I didn’t get that; can you please go over it again?”). A principal can also text the teacher from the back of the room (time to check for understanding) or even talk quietly into a cellphone, coaching the teacher via a Bluetooth earpiece. This is akin to an on-air

newscaster getting pointers from the producer that the TV audience can’t hear.

Optimizing instruction

But, even using these kinder and gentler approaches, is real-time coaching a good idea? In the absence of good research, school leaders need to think this one through. Let’s start at the 30,000-foot level: What is the ultimate goal of supervision and evaluation? It’s getting effective and highly effective teaching in more classrooms more of the time. How can we best accomplish this? Since even the most energetic supervisors observe teachers only about 0.1% of teaching time, we need to create intrinsic motivation in teachers to use effective practices the other 99.9% of the time. How can school leaders optimize day-to-day instruction and instill a continuous-improvement mindset for those who don’t already have it? Here are some possibilities, in approximate descending order of effect:

- Hiring and retaining teachers with an inner drive to get good results, a willingness to constantly reflect, and a growth mindset about improving practice;
- Orchestrating teacher teamwork that produces high-quality unit and lesson plans and fosters ongoing reflection about content and process;
- Ensuring that teacher teams and instructional coaches regularly look at assessments and student work, identify best practices, and constantly improve instruction;
- Creating a professional culture in which teachers visit each others’ classes and engage in nondefensive discussions about what’s working and what isn’t;
- Providing helpful professional development; and
- Conducting official evaluations.

Why is teacher evaluation ranked last? Because research tells us that, with a few exceptions, traditional evaluations have not played an important role in improving teaching and learning. Alas, administrators’ time is often consumed by documentation, evaluation, and compliance — and the myriad other things they need to do to keep their schools running smoothly.

Real-time teacher coaching is a well-intentioned attempt to improve this dismal record. The idea is that when supervisors correct less-than-effective practices on the spot (and praise what’s working well), the feedback is much more likely to stick in

teachers' minds. On-the-spot interventions are also very appealing to busy administrators because they take less time. Teachers and administrators are busy and anything that gets feedback to teachers more quickly is a boon.

But might real-time coaching be a false efficiency? There are several reasons to doubt its effectiveness as a supervisory tool:

- #1. Scoping out what's going on in a classroom during a short visit is complex and demanding work, and coming up with wise and helpful feedback on the spot is a high bar. Supervisors enter with some knowledge of the teacher, the students, and the curriculum, but there's a lot they don't know about a particular lesson. They need to watch and listen carefully, examine what's on the board or screen, look over students' shoulders to understand the instructional task, check in with one or two students (What are you working on today?) when the teacher is not interacting with the whole class, and jot some notes to remember key points and quotes. To decide on the best coaching points usually takes a few minutes of reflection, preferably in a quiet place outside the classroom. Shooting from the hip during the class seriously risks getting it wrong and undermining the kind of trust that's essential for teachers to be receptive to the input.
- #2. Supervisors who speak up during classes tend to focus on classroom management problems and teachers' tactical moves and not deeper curriculum and pedagogical issues. During short classroom observations, visitors can only guess at what occurred before and after the visit and may not understand the broader curriculum goals or a teacher's on-the-fly adaptations. Having a copy of the unit and lesson plans is helpful, but the best way to get missing information is to have a private chat with the teacher, who can fill in important contextual information (why that girl was upset; why it seemed wise to depart from the lesson plan; how the discussion changed after you left; why I'm having a bad day). Hearing from the teacher greatly improves the quality and credibility of the supervisor's feedback, but it's simply impossible to delve into classroom dynamics, student work, and effective practices during an actual lesson.
- #3. Real-time coaching can come across as a power trip by administrators: Not only can I walk into your classroom any time, but

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I will interrupt your teaching when I feel like it. From the teacher's point of view, especially for those who are used to being left alone, supervisors' interjections may seem annoying, disrespectful, and 99% about administrative convenience. A former principal and superintendent told me that if a supervisor had acted this way early in his teaching career, it would have driven him out of the profession.

- #4. Teachers will find observations more stressful if there's always the possibility of being interrupted. Administrators are never going to be invisible during classroom visits — students and teachers are well aware of their presence — but the dynamic is heightened if supervisors frequently jump in.
- #5. Finally, let's be frank, some principals, assistant principals, and department heads don't have a good eye for instruction, lack an understanding of the essentials of good pedagogy, are opinionated about one best way to teach, and lack the skill set needed to have helpful feedback conversations with teachers. In the hands of supervisors like these, real-time coaching can do serious damage to teaching and learning, not to mention faculty morale. Superintendents and their designees need to be aware of problem supervisors and immediately address their shortcomings. How? By regularly (at least once a month) making brief classroom visits with school-based administrators, debriefing, observing or role-playing feedback conversations with teachers, and replacing administrators who are persistently ineffective in this vital part of their jobs.

The importance of timing

But what about the time lag and the bureaucratic nature of postobservation conferences? Doesn't that provide a compelling rationale for real-time coaching? Not if supervisors shift to much shorter debrief conversations and strive to do them within 24 hours of each classroom visit. I've found that 10 minutes is plenty of time for a high-quality feedback chat, provided the supervisor has thought through a few key points, planned how to launch the conversation, and uses language that makes it a genuine conversation about teaching and learning: Tell me a little about your thinking at that moment. How did the lesson turn out? What did you hope I would notice? Let's look at some of the kids' work.

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Coaching suggestions are much more likely to be heard and acted on if the teacher has a chance to explain the context and the bigger picture in a face-to-face conversation. These conversations may include strong redirection (I didn't hear a single higher-order thinking question while I was there), and supervisors can learn a great deal from how teachers react to criticisms and reflect on their work. In short, high-quality debriefs are golden opportunities to get inside teachers' heads and strengthen instruction.

Of course, having this kind of conversation will be difficult if supervisors have too many teachers to evaluate and are required to use a time-consuming evaluation process, which can take four hours or more for one teacher (preobservation conference, full-lesson visit, detailed analysis and write-up, and postobservation talk). Superintendents need to take steps so that each supervisor has a manageable caseload and is liberated from the notoriously ineffective traditional supervisory cycle. Then school administrators can give their full attention to two or three short, frequent, unannounced visits a day, followed by high-quality, follow-up conversations and brief narrative documentation.

Proponents of real-time coaching tend to agree on a manageable span of control and dumping the traditional evaluation process, but they continue to press their point about getting involved during lessons. This can work, they contend, if teachers know what the deal is up front (this is the way we do things in our school), students see it as a model of adults learning together (my principal is a teacher, and my teacher is a learner), and trusting that professional relationships have been established. Some successful charter leaders say real-time coaching is a key factor in high student achievement.

I'm skeptical. Isn't it possible that successful schools using real-time coaching are getting high test scores in spite of this practice, not because of it? That in their impatience to fix problems in the mo-

ment, practitioners of real-time coaching are turning teachers off, undermining trust, and missing out on postlesson coaching that can have much greater effect? That real-time coaching is contributing to teacher attrition, one of the biggest problems in struggling high-poverty schools?

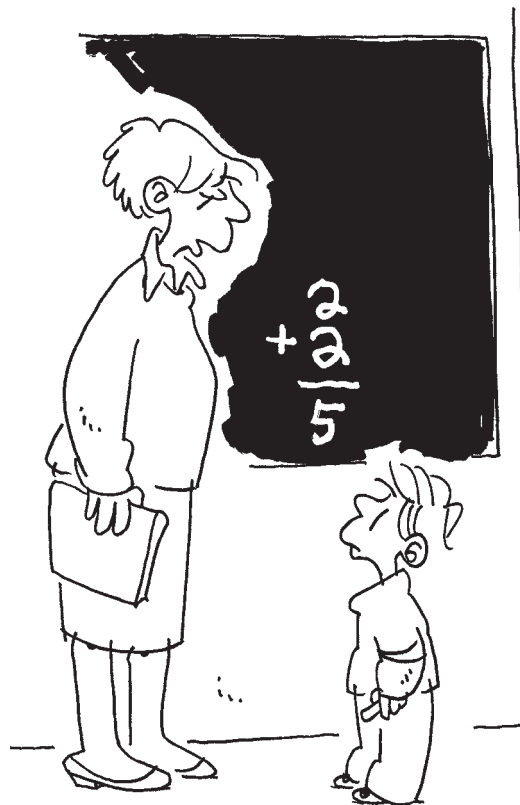
Another way

The bottom line: Supervisors have to exercise great restraint during classroom visits. If I were still a principal, here's what I would explain to teachers and work hard to implement:

- I'd visit each classroom at least once a month so that all teachers receive a timely, coherent stream of support, affirmation, and helpful feedback throughout the year.
- During classroom visits, I would be as unobtrusive as possible, observe carefully, check in appropriately with students, jot a few handwritten notes, and zero in on the most important affirmations and suggestions.
- I would interrupt instruction only in emergencies and, even then, avoid undermining teachers with their students.
- Very occasionally, I might communicate with a teacher via a note or whispered suggestion.
- I'd strive to have a brief face-to-face conversation with each teacher — ideally in the teacher's classroom when students aren't there and within 24 hours — listen carefully to the teacher's point of view, make my coaching points, and follow up promptly with a brief narrative summary.
- I would sometimes take videos of classroom interactions (with the teacher's prior agreement) so the teacher and I could dissect classroom dynamics afterward.
- My feedback would not involve a checklist or rubric scoring, which I've found undermines a good coaching dynamic.
- I would encourage teachers to invite me in to take part in discussions, read to students, or share my own experiences and insights on the curriculum, but such visits would be separate from my short observations.
- I would mesh the classroom observation process with teacher teams' curriculum unit planning, analysis of assessments and student work, and what students have to say about their teachers in twice-a-year surveys.

How would I handle end-of-year evaluations? I'd have teachers self-assess on our rubric at the beginning of each year and set two to three improvement goals; meet for a mid-year check-in to compare each teacher's current self-assessment with my tentative rubric scores; and then repeat that process at the end of the year for the final ratings, which would reflect the myriad interactions I'd observed and heard about throughout the year.

When it comes to affirming and improving teaching, there are no shortcuts. With real-time coaching, the skill threshold is too demanding, the risks of being superficial or getting it wrong too high, the probability of upsetting and alienating teachers too great, and the chances of not having deeper conversations about teaching and learning too real. The good news is that supervisors can avoid these pitfalls by taking a little more time, reflecting a little more carefully, and engaging teachers in face-to-face coaching after each observation. Fitting in these conversations is challenging, and they are sometimes stressful on both sides, but this is the core work of school leaders. Doing it well will result in more effective teaching in more classrooms more of the time. **K**



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"The academic community is divided on many subjects, Leon, but not this one."