




Classroom Walkthroughs as a Catalyst for School Improvement

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School leaders search for effective and practical ways to enact what research tells us makes a difference in student learning. Research literature is easy to embrace theoretically; but it is much more difficult to turn research into compelling, collective action. How do we create a climate where trusting members of a “professional learning community” improve the results of their practice? What does it take to become a “small learning community” that includes students, parents, and educators? What can we do to harness the positive power of “community” to transform the learning and achievement of all students?

The UCLA School Management Program classroom walkthrough protocol provides both a process and a tool for inquiry-based professional development, community engagement, and ultimately student self-direction. It starts with a school’s commitment to build an inquiry model that assumes the capacity for extraordinary learning on the part of students, teachers, administrators, and families. The protocol can be employed narrowly—to guide improving the practice of a couple of teachers with a passion for biology, for example. Or the protocol can be employed more broadly. Many of the schools we work with chose the classroom walkthrough protocol as a frame for schoolwide professional development that led to exceptional growth in learning and student achievement.

Classroom walkthroughs enable teachers to get to the heart of what students are doing and understanding in a different and holistic way. The protocol works because it is based on teachers’ own questions about student learning—building on teachers’ desire to become better teachers. Through conversations with colleagues, focused talk about individual teaching experiences becomes shared learning about effective instruction. Successful participation in productive professional conversations increases the capacity of the group to be a professional learning community—a safe place to ask hard questions about the links between results, content, and teacher practices. Finally, the walkthrough protocol is a tool that a learning community can use to deepen its collective understanding of instruction—moving beyond identifying and “fixing” problems to identifying and enhancing student mastery of content and skills.

But no amount of data or understanding will, by itself, move a system toward improvement in a purposeful way. The energy and knowledge generated by walkthroughs needs to be directed toward continuous improvement.

Using the Classroom Walkthrough to Drive a Cycle of Continuous Improvement

The evidence collected from a classroom walkthrough can drive a cycle of improvement by *focusing on the effects of instruction*. Most schools are fairly skilled at collecting and analyzing student assessment data, which provides them with useful information about student content knowledge. Most schools are also fairly skilled at choosing curricula and instructional programs that will deliver the appropriate content to all students. What is missing from this picture, however, is the opportunity to *observe the effects of the delivered program on students*. While we are comprehensive in our efforts to ensure teachers are “doing it right” and delivering curricular programs with fidelity, we have no formal method of ensuring we are “doing the right thing” by reflecting on how students are understanding and embracing both the content and skills we want them to have.

We all use continuous improvement as a process in our daily lives to achieve goals that are meaningful to us. Think about how you chose your undergraduate college. You probably

read a few things about the “best” colleges out there, and while *Newsweek* or the *Peterson Guide* may have informed your decision, they didn’t make the choice for you. You created your own desired future by putting some thought into what careers you were interested in or how close or far away from home you wanted to be. You gathered data on possible schools—maybe you even conducted your own “walkthrough” by visiting the school and talking to current students.

Likewise, most of us employ some elements of this cycle in thinking about professional goals that are important to us. The chart below illustrates what we believe to be the important elements in a cycle of improvement—and we suggest this as a way to formalize or structure your discussions about moving your “next steps” into reality and incorporating meaningful, positive changes into the daily practice and culture of your school.

Walkthroughs as Part of a Cycle of Improvement



- **Define a desired future.** Clearly defining and stating a “desired future” is a powerful way of describing what your students are capable of achieving. It allows you to visualize and describe success. It makes a statement about what is important to you as an individual, as a member of a grade- or content-level team, or as a member of a larger educational community.
- **Gather data.** Before you can move effectively toward your desired future, you need a firm understanding of where you are. Gathering data helps you understand and describe your current reality. Materials from state assessments, district benchmarks, classroom work, and teacher professional knowledge are all important contributions. Evidence gathered from a walkthrough is particularly valuable at this stage because it is often the only formal structure you have to collect evidence of student engagement in their work.

We tend to think of *data* as something that is gathered to *answer* a question. However, when we work in an environment of continuous improvement, data is more likely to *create more questions*. The evidence collected during a walkthrough and the patterns that are identified often suggest ideas about how to improve practice and move closer to your desired future. All too frequently we stop at this point, believing data has provided us with an answer.

- **Hypothesize.** In the cycle of inquiry model, this is the time to structure your ideas about different ways of working that *might* have a positive influence on the behavior or outcome you are trying to change. It is critically important that you tie this idea to the positive behavior you hope it will cause, and that the idea arises from a collaborative discussion of the data you have generated.
- **Implement.** Here is the opportunity to test out your hypothesis by doing something in a coordinated, collaborative fashion. In the example above, you and your group might decide to read and discuss a book together (like Marilyn Burns' *10 Big Math Ideas*), trying out a few of the suggested activities in the classroom. Remember this is a cycle of inquiry, so you understand you are trying out a *possible solution* at this point, *not implementing a known solution*. Colleagues may try different activities, in different ways, with different groups of students.
- **Reflect on implementation.** Times and settings are deliberately built into this process to reflect on what has been implemented. It is the time to share successful strategies for implementation, certainly, but also to reflect on your original hypothesis and to see if you still believe you are on the right track toward your desired future. This may be an appropriate time to plan another walkthrough to gather evidence to make your reflection process richer and more student-based. It is likely that you will find yourself going back and forth between the implementation and reflection steps in an iterative process until you find yourself with something that appears to be moving you closer to your desired future. This little victory should be appreciated and acknowledged.
- **Next steps.** Your small experiment in changing practice has been tried, probably in different ways with different people, and you have had the chance to reflect on implementation as well as gather evidence on how these changes are affecting students in your classroom. You may decide you are on the wrong track and it is time to go back and create another hypothesis. More often, you will have learned something fundamentally important about delivering instruction in your classroom, and it is time to search for ways to share the good news with your colleagues and administrators. This is your opportunity to make recommendations and advocate for changing practice and to have a real effect on the culture and efficacy of your school.

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On the Same Page

Here are suggested questions that principals and teachers can use to spark discussion about how to apply the points made in this article to their particular schools.

1. What is our vision of effective student learning in our school?
2. How can classroom walkthroughs serve as a catalyst for taking action that results in the continuous improvement of teaching and learning?
3. What are some of the areas we might want to focus on during classroom walkthroughs?
4. What are the elements of the cycle of inquiry advanced by the authors?
5. To what extent do you believe that focused conversations with colleagues regarding instructional practice lead to student mastery of content and skills?

6. What are the features of classroom walkthroughs that make it an effective vehicle for professional development?

—Created by **Stephen Gould**, who is co-director of the National School Leaders' Network (NSLN), a leadership coach in private practice, and a consultant for the National Institute for School Leadership (NISL). He has more than 30 years experience as an elementary school principal and assistant superintendent.