Framing Discussions About Teaching

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A streamlined version of the widely used Framework for Teaching can empower professional conversations.

Communication—it's the lifeblood of any organization. If we think of the school as a person, communication would be the bloodstream, circulating through the entire body to nourish educators, students, parents, and the community. When communication is interrupted or ineffective, it's as though there's a blockage in the blood's circulation.

Professional conversations aimed at improving teaching practice are a particularly important type of communication, and they hold a central role within schools. Conversations about teaching occur between teaching partners; between teachers and their mentors, coaches, or supervisors; and within teaching teams or professional learning communities. In the Danielson Group, our consultants hear again and again from educators that when it comes to professional learning, "it's all about the conversation." Whether educators are discussing observation data, assessment results, the rigor of activities and assignments, or student work samples, what they value are not the data per se, but the conversations they have about the data.

To get sustained benefit from such discourse, however, educators need to have a common language and a shared understanding of what constitutes good teaching. What should educators talk about? How are they sure, when they use a term like *engagement*, that they all mean the same thing? After all, teachers in any school received their professional preparation from a number of different institutions and programs; there's no guarantee that those programs rest on a common understanding of student learning or of the instructional practices that are likely to produce that learning.

A Tool for Common Language

Since 1996, the Framework for Teaching[1] has provided a common language for practitioners. The framework divides the complex activity of teaching into 22 components (and 76 smaller elements) clustered into four domains of teaching responsibility. It rests on the concept of teaching as high-level cognitive work.

The framework recognizes that teachers make—literally—hundreds of decisions each day. Teaching is not a matter of following a prescribed set of procedures, like a recipe, but a matter of juggling multiple demands involving many students,

each with his or her own background and characteristics, to create an environment in which students display high levels of energy and responsibility for learning.

In other words, teaching is a thinking person's job. Therefore, conversations about teaching must be about cognition: How did a teacher decide to do X, rather than Y? Has she ever tried Y? What happened? Are there any circumstances or any purposes for which Y would be a better choice than X? Because of the complex nature of teaching, teachers need a repertoire of practices, and perhaps even more important, they need the judgment to know when to do what. An agreed-on framework for teaching provides the context for these conversations.

Through such conversations, teachers (in collegial groups or with mentors, coaches, or supervisors) engage with problems of practice—challenges in their teaching (for example, a struggling student or the search for better ways to engage students in understanding a challenging concept) that can benefit from the perspectives of others. The Framework for Teaching has, for nearly 20 years, served as a foundational document to structure these conversations. In many schools, it has changed the professional culture, as conversations conducted in an environment of trust and problem solving yield positive outcomes and teachers find they benefit from a deprivatization of practice. Multiple studies[2] have found that educators cite having a common language to describe practice as the fundamental contribution of the framework to their professional interactions.

Many educators tell us they love the framework. They appreciate its respectful tone and its comprehensiveness; they find the specific language at each level of performance for each component to be useful as they strive to improve their practice.

For some educators, however, it's just too big. They find that, even when they "speak the language of the framework," there's just too much detail to permit them to focus on the important ideas about teaching. When observing a lesson, whether as part of a coaching relationship or for evaluation, they find that it's too cumbersome for everyday use.

Therefore, I've come to believe that a somewhat revised organization of the framework can help structure professional conversations even better than the original did. This new organization retains all the 22 components and their elements, but rearranges them into six larger clusters, representing the big ideas of teaching:

Cluster 1. Clarity of Instructional Purpose and Accuracy of Content

To what extent does the teacher demonstrate depth of important content knowledge and conduct the class with a clear and ambitious purpose, reflecting the standards for the discipline, and appropriate to students' levels of knowledge and skill?

To what degree are the elements of a lesson (the sequence of topics, instructional strategies, and materials and resources) well designed and executed and aligned with the purposes of the lesson? To what extent are they designed to engage students in high-level learning in the discipline?

Cluster 2. A Safe, Respectful, Supportive, and Challenging Learning Environment

To what extent do the interactions between teacher and students, and among students, demonstrate genuine caring and a safe, respectful, supportive, and challenging learning environment? Is the environment safe for risk taking?

Do teachers convey high expectations for student learning and encourage hard work and perseverance? Do students take pride in their work and commit to mastering challenging content?

Cluster 3. Classroom Management

Is the classroom well run and organized? Are classroom routines and procedures clear and carried out efficiently by both teacher and students with little loss of instructional time?

To what extent do students themselves take an active role in the classroom's smooth operation? Are directions for activities clearly explained so there is no confusion? Do students not only understand and comply with standards of conduct, but also play an active part in setting the tone for maintaining those standards?

How does the physical environment support the learning activities?

Cluster 4. Student Intellectual Engagement

To what extent are students engaged in a classroom of high intellectual energy? What is the nature of what students are doing? Are they being challenged to think and make connections through both the instructional activities and the questions explored?

Do the teacher's explanations of content correctly model academic language and invite intellectual work by students? Are students asked to explain their thinking by constructing logical arguments and citing evidence, and are they encouraged to question the thinking of others? Are the instructional strategies and learning activities the teacher uses suitable to the discipline? To what extent do those strategies and activities promote student agency in their learning of challenging content?

Cluster 5. Successful Learning by All Students

To what extent does the teacher ensure the learning of all students? Does the teacher monitor student understanding through specifically designed questions or instructional techniques (such as exit tickets)? To what extent do students monitor their own learning and provide respectful feedback to classmates?

Does the teacher make modifications in presentations or learning activities, where necessary, on the basis of the degree of student learning? Has the teacher sought other resources (including parents) to support students' learning? In reflection, is the teacher aware of the success of the lesson in reaching students?

Cluster 6. Professionalism

To what extent does the teacher engage with the professional community (within the school and beyond)? Does the teacher collaborate productively with colleagues and contribute to the life of the school?

To what extent does the teacher demonstrate a commitment to ongoing professional learning?

To what degree does the teacher take a leadership role in the school to promote the welfare of students?

Those familiar with the Framework for Teaching will recognize that all the framework's components, and virtually all the elements, are captured in this new organization. (A chart showing the specific relationship of each cluster to Framework for Teaching components is available.)

An Evolving Tool

This new organization is not intended to replace the full Framework for Teaching; the full framework as updated in 2013 will continue to be the foundational document. Indeed, this more streamlined tool might be used in combination with the full framework—with all of its components and elements—to inform professional conversations. Here's an example.

A 4th grade teacher has invited a colleague from her professional learning community to observe a lesson because she is unhappy with the level of engagement of a few students in the class. They seem to be remote, not connecting with the subject, and finding other ways to amuse themselves. Both teachers know that Cluster 4 of the streamlined Framework for Teaching identifies student engagement as one of six essential components of effective teaching and learning.

In the conversation following the lesson, the two teachers try to analyze why those particular students are not as engaged as they should be. To do that, the teachers drill down into the components from the full Framework for Teaching that make up Cluster 4. Is the problem that the learning tasks do not challenge the students? Or that the questioning sequence is too teacher-directed? Or that the students don't have the opportunity—or haven't acquired the necessary skills—to be involved in classroom discourse?

In this case, the teachers, drawing on their professional experience and expertise, determine that the learning tasks or activities (part of Component 3c in the full Framework for Teaching) are routine and don't present the students with interesting challenges. They also determine that another element of Component 3c—student grouping—could be strengthened; because the most unengaged students are in the same activity group, the teachers decide that the activity would have been stronger if these students were in separate groups.

The streamlined Framework for Teaching is still under review. Each of the component clusters is accompanied by a one-page description and essential elements for each level of performance. It is available for suggestions and comments on the Danielson Group website.

Endnotes

[1] Danielson, C. (2007). *Enhancing professional practice: A framework for teaching* (2nd ed.). Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

[2] For example, see Sartain, L., Stoelinga, S. R., & Brown, E. (2011). *Rethinking teacher evaluation in Chicago*. Chicago: University of Chicago Consortium for Chicago School Research; and Martin, C., & Mertl, V. (2014). *Teaching to the Core: Practitioner perspectives about the intersection of teacher evaluation using the Danielson Framework for Teaching and Common Core Standards*. Princeton, NJ: Danielson Group.

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