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Teachers engage in independent instructional improvement

Self-directed staff development

By Gerald D. Bailey

Leading experts in education contend that staff development is the counterpart of pre-service education for career teachers and supervisors. It is during this in-service period that staff development becomes the major vehicle for accomplishing change, renewal, quality education and professional competence.¹ Interest has steadily grown in the area of staff development. However, almost all educational experts have viewed staff development as a concept which is "imposed" on faculty or staff.

In the past, only a handful of educators have suggested that the individual teacher should, or could be responsible for directing personnel staff development activities. Marks et. al., in *Handbook of Educational Supervision* strongly suggested that teachers should consider self-direction, self-guidance and self-supervision as a method of professional development.² Even earlier, Flinders and Amidon had much the same vision for self-directed staff development with reference to the use of observation instruments. They foresaw the necessity of precise instructional improvement tools and strategies for educators once these teachers were operating independently in a school system where there would be few opportunities for external assistance.³ Ironically, there are few staff development programs which emphasize self-directed staff development at the present time.

In part, the minimal activity observed in self-directed professional development can be traced to the pessimism expressed by researchers concerning the teacher's ability to become self-directed in instructional improvement activities. Studies by Fuller, Veldman and Richek;⁴ Morse, Kysilka and Davis;⁵ Tuckman, McCall and Hyman⁶ and Young⁷ have suggested that a third party (e.g., administrator or supervisor) needs to guide the teacher if significant change in behavior is to occur in professional development activities. The sizeable review of literature done by Popham and McNeil⁸ and Peck and Tucker⁹ in the late 1960s showed that teachers lacked the skill and knowledge to become self-directed in staff development. In the main, research has painted a pessimistic picture of self-directed self-improvement activities.

The reader must be cautioned that much of this research has focused on isolated strategies; almost none of the research projects studied individual feedback strategies in the context of a self-help program. Few, if any, of the studies have looked at teachers who understood the principles and philosophy of autonomous self-help. A much more positive conclusion was drawn about teacher self-assessment as a program of staff development by the author. In a five year follow-up study, approximately 200 teachers were studied who had previous training in self-assessment skills. The findings showed that teachers (1) continued to value self-directed self-help skills, (2) remained competent in self-help skills but (3) engaged in fewer self-directed staff development activities since training was terminated.¹⁰

What is Teacher Self-Assessment?

Teacher self-assessment is a systematic, comprehensive program where teachers engage in independent instructional improvement. In brief, it is a self-directed staff development program. The basic assumption in a self-directed staff development program is that the teacher can function in an autonomous fashion. However, the teacher's ability to function in a self-directed manner is contingent upon acquiring a number of self-help skills or strategies. As a consequence, self-directed classroom staff development does not and cannot occur without intensive training.

Teacher self-assessment as a method of self-directed staff development can be understood by viewing the process as a stair-step program. There are basically eight different steps in the program (see Figure 1).

Step One: Gaining a Philosophical Overview of Teacher Self-Assessment.

To engage actively in self-directed staff development activities, the teacher must possess a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of teacher self-assessment. This step can be accomplished by looking at a number of myths associated with self-assessment.

Myth A: Teacher self-assessment and teacher evaluation are synonymous activities. Teacher evaluation should be viewed as a summative judgment of a teacher's effectiveness. Evaluation can lead to retention, merit pay, salary increments, promotion or tenure. Teacher self-assessment does not necessarily need to be tied to evaluation. Teacher self-assessment or improvement of instruction should be directly concerned with the teacher assessing strengths and weaknesses and working toward the end of improving upon past instructional performances.

Myth B: Teacher self-assessment is best learned through personal experience or trial and error. The available research indicates that teachers do not learn how to engage in self-help when left to their own resources. Teachers, apparently, do not have the inherent skills of self-improvement; hence, they must be taught how to engage in systematic self-assessment practices.

Myth C: Quality teacher self-assessment materials are easy, simple, short and readily available. While there is a substantial supply of self-help materials available to the teacher, most are inappropriate to classroom teacher self-assessment. Most of these materials are in the form of checklists, or surveys which require the teacher to reflect about past instructional performance. Unfortunately, much of this material is superficial or does not relate to the specifics of instruction. In short, they do not allow the teacher to engage in in-depth instructional analysis.

Myth D: Personal reflection or memory recall is an effective strategy in teacher self-assessment. Personal reflection is one of the least effective methods of self-assessment because teachers have a misperception of their own teaching abilities.¹¹ Other objective measures must be utilized to measure accurately personal teaching qualities.

Myth E: Objectivity is impossible to achieve in teacher self-assessment. Subjectivity is a troublesome problem in self-help activities. However, audiotape and videotape recorders, observation instruments, as well as other tools, can be utilized by the teacher to minimize subjectivity. Total objectivity may not be obtainable; however, the teacher must seek ways to minimize subjectivity.

Myth F: Effective teaching can not be identified. While there is not universal agreement on the definition of effective teaching, considerable information exists which suggests that specific characteristics of effective instruction can be identified and modeled. This kind of information can be extremely valuable to the teacher in the search for personal teacher effectiveness.

All activities found in Step One are aimed at helping the teacher become more acutely aware of the nature of teacher self-assessment. Recognizing what teacher self-assessment is, as well as what it is not, is extremely important in teacher self-assessment.

Step Two: The Use of Media in Teacher Self-Assessment.

The second major step or building block in teacher self-assessment is learning how to use an audiotape or videotape recorder for self-analysis purposes. Without some form of recording device in self-help, the teacher must rely on personal memory during self-help exercises. Since misperception of actual teaching performance is not uncommon, the use of media becomes a critical skill. The use of media in analyzing instructional performance is important because it (1) minimizes the potential for teacher subjectivity when analyzing personal teaching and (2) provides a permanent record which can be preserved and subjected to analysis over a longer period of time.¹²

The teacher employing media for self-assessment practices needs to recognize the strengths and limitations of the audiotape and videotape recorder. Obviously, the advantages of the videotape recorder is that it captures both verbal and nonverbal cues while the audiotape recorder captures only the audio medium.

It is also vitally important that the teacher possess a working knowledge of the mechanical operation of media equipment. Self-operation for self-examination purposes is critical since the presence of a third party operating the equipment can foster unnatural teacher and student classroom behavior.

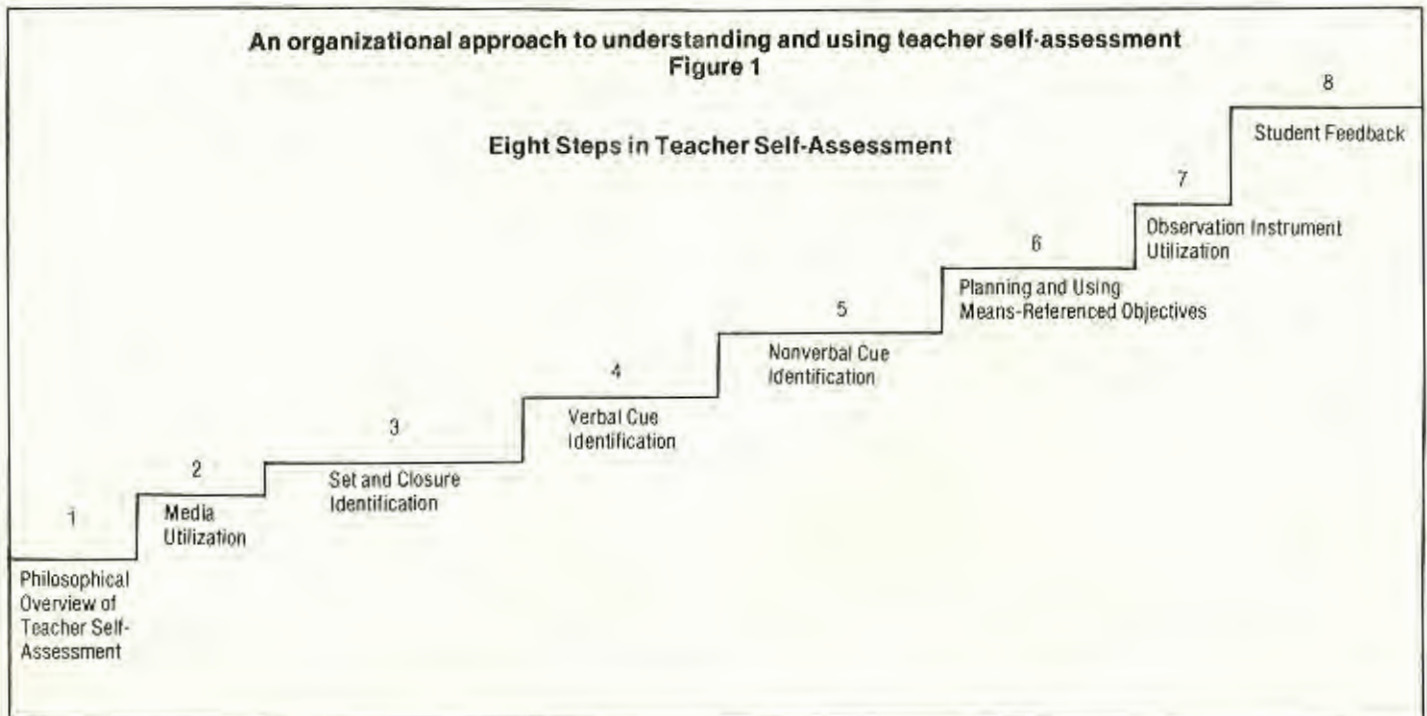
Other major considerations must be made in relation to the use of media equipment in self-assessment. Some strategies which assist in minimizing unnatural student reaction to the presence of media include:

- * explaining the purpose of equipment in relation to teacher self-assessment.

An organizational approach to understanding and using teacher self-assessment

Figure 1

Eight Steps in Teacher Self-Assessment



- * using the media equipment on several occasions for a variety of purposes.
- * permitting the students to listen or watch themselves prior to taping for self-assessment practices.

Systematic and intelligent use of media in teacher self-assessment is vital. However, merely possessing the knowledge of how to operate an audiotape or videotape for self-help is insufficient. Those teachers who are interested in in-depth analysis will need to employ other specific skills found in self-help.

Step Three: Identification of Basic Skills: Set and Closure in Teacher Self-Assessment.

Thus far, the use of media has been suggested as a specific strategy in gaining proficiency in self-assessment practices. However, merely listening or watching yourself with media can only provide a limited amount of information. Media as a single approach in self-help is incomplete. In self-help exercises, the teacher must be able to pinpoint specific behaviors found in classroom interaction. There are three basic units which are found in the act of teaching: (1) set, (2) instructional body and (3) closure.¹³ These three distinct units prove a framework for a teacher which allows them to look at personal instruction. Set and closure are two of the most important skills that teachers can focus on in the initial stages of self-assessment. (The examination of the instructional body should be considered a separate activity.) Set is defined as those activities which are designed to prepare students for upcoming learning. Closure, the logical companion to set, is defined as those activities designed to act as a capstone to learning that has occurred.

In teacher self-assessment, the teacher must learn to identify and study these two important skills in-depth. The teacher who desires to become more proficient in teacher self-assessment will ultimately have to ask the following questions:

1. How aware am I of my set and closure?
2. Am I using appropriate forms of set and closure?
3. Am I using a variety of sets and closures in my teaching?
4. How can I improve set and closure which results in a higher degree of student motivation?

Step Four: Identifying Generic Verbal Cues in Teacher Self-Assessment.

In the teacher's quest for self-improvement, a detailed framework for studying personal behavior is necessary. The verbal and nonverbal behaviors are found in the instructional body of classroom interaction. While it is important to study both verbal and nonverbal behavior, it is necessary for the teacher to be able to separate the verbal from the nonverbal domain. Otherwise, observation and study of the combined behaviors becomes too complex even for the best trained observers.

Assuming that the teacher has audiotaped or videotaped the teaching performance, the following verbal behaviors need to be examined closely: (1) accepting/expressing emotion, (2) reinforcement, (3) feedback/building, (4) questioning, (5) information giving, (6) direction giving and (7) criticism. These classifications provide a matrix for analyzing verbal behaviors. All seven classifications have been used by previous researchers and each of

the seven behaviors is common to teacher and student interaction.¹⁴

Accepting/expressing emotion: behaviors which show a teacher accepting or expressing emotion to student or class.

Reinforcement: behaviors which are positive and accepting of student behavior.

Feedback: teacher statements which develop or buttress student behavior.

Questioning: behaviors which solicit student information at different levels of intellectual activity.

Information giving or lecture: statements which provide information to a student in a unidirectional fashion.

Direction giving: behaviors that are commands, orders and statements which the student is to comply.

Criticism or justifying authority: behaviors which are intended to change unacceptable behavior to acceptable behavior.

The isolation and examination of specific verbal behaviors allows the teacher to become more aware of their impact on student behavior which results in learning how to control verbal interaction.

Step Five: Identification of Nonverbal Cues in Teacher Self-Assessment.

After the teacher has become acquainted with media, set and closure, and verbal cues, it is important to identify and study nonverbal cues found in the total teaching performance. While there are hundreds of random nonverbal cues which can be studied, there are approximately 10 generic cues that can be observed with some regularity: (1) eye contact, (2) gestures, (3) mannerisms, (4) teacher travel, (5) touching, (6) facial features, (7) posture, (8) energy level, (9) use of space and (10) silence.

eye contact: establishing visual contact with the student for the purpose of approval, disapproval or interest.

gestures: physical movement of legs, feet, hands, shoulders and trunk which are intended to buttress the verbal message being sent by the teacher.

mannerisms: physical movement of legs, feet, hands, shoulders and trunk which are unrelated to the verbal message being sent by the teacher; these behaviors could be classified as idiosyncratic.

teacher travel: physical movement which conveys reinforcement, concern or control.

touching: physical body contact which is used as reinforcement, concern or reassurance.

facial features: an array of messages conveyed by forehead, eyebrows, cheeks, ears, lips, tongue and chin which assist in delivering the verbal message.

posture: standing, sitting, slouching, stooping or other physical arrangement depicted by the teacher's body.

energy level: the enthusiasm of teacher shown by coordination of legs, feet, hands, shoulders and trunk as well as speed of these physical components.

use of space: the organization of the classroom environment which denotes physical activities as well as expectations of student participation.

silence: the absence of verbal behavior which communicates messages of overstatement, understatement, suspense, deliberation of thought or confusion.

Research and study of nonverbal behavior remains in an embryonic stage; however, the teacher needs to isolate and study those nonverbal behaviors which have an impact on student achievement and attitudes.

Step Six: Planning Methodology Behaviors with Means-Referenced Objectives in Teacher Self-Assessment.

The next logical step in teacher self-assessment is learning how to plan methodology behavior(s) which the teacher deems essential to accomplish classroom goals and objectives. The label given to these kind of objectives is means-referenced objectives.¹⁵ Means-referenced objectives (MRO's) are used by the teacher to identify the exact means that will be used in delivering concepts or content to students. MRO statements specify the exact method or means employed by the teacher to achieve an instructional end. They should not be confused with instructional objectives which identify the exact student behavior desired in learning.

Examples of means-referenced objectives that a teacher might wish to use in planning instructional lessons include the following:

Basic Verbal Cue: Questioning

Means-referenced objective:

In a small group inquiry lesson on population explosion, the teacher will ask more analysis level questions than content level questions. Three out of four questions will be at the analysis level.

Basic Nonverbal Cue: Teacher Travel

Means-referenced objective:

During the 10 minute seat work assignment in mathematics, the teacher will travel (walk) to each student. Criteria: All (15 out of 15) students will have been contacted by the instructor to determine if questions or problems exist.

Step Seven: Using Observation Instruments to Qualify Classroom Instruction in Teacher Self-Assessment.

The teacher's ability to identify instructional behaviors such as the verbal and nonverbal behaviors is not totally sufficient in a self-assessment program. There is a need for recording classroom events in an organized, comprehensive manner. There are few precise, organized ways of accomplishing this task without using an observation instrument. Observation instruments are a sophisticated checklist which captures qualities of classroom interaction frequency and sequence. Observation instruments are employed when listening to an audiotape or viewing a videotape replay of the teacher's performance.

Selection and use of observation instruments is not an easy task. Choice of observation tools can be made from hundreds of observation systems. In a broad sense, there are two types of instruments available to the teacher engaged in self-help: expert-prepared and teacher-made observation instruments. Teacher-made instruments are those constructed by the teacher.¹⁶ Expert-prepared instruments are those prepared by those professionals in the field of observation tools. These observation tools can then be adopted by teachers who are interested in

FREQUENCY OBSERVATION FORM DEALING WITH SELECTED VERBAL AND NONVERBAL BEHAVIOR

Figure 2

Directions: Place a tally mark after each behavior when it occurs in the designated 3 minute interval.

	3 minutes	6 minutes	9 minutes	12 minutes	15 minutes
Teacher Travel					
... reinforcement					
... availability					
... control					
Eye Contact					
... approval					
... interest					
... disapproval					
... listening					
Positive Reinforcement					
... single word					
... sentence					
... humor					
... individual student					
... class					

studying their personal behavior.

Flanders' Interaction Analysis would be an example of a widely accepted expert-prepared observation form. Teacher-made observation instruments are not as easily identified. Their value, however, can be outstanding since they are tailored to the individual teacher needs. The example in Figure 2 illustrates how a teacher can develop an observation form suited to personal needs.

The development of teacher-made observation forms requires more time and patience than all the other steps found in teacher self-assessment. Some teachers will find expert-prepared observation forms more suitable while other teachers will find that the teacher-made observation forms are more desirable. An equal number of teachers engaging in self-assessment will find that a combination of both expert-prepared and teacher-made observation forms are imperative for self-help exercises.

Step Eight: The Use of Student Feedback in Teacher Self-Assessment.

Student feedback is the practice of soliciting oral or written feedback from pupils. To date, student feedback has been used more for teacher evaluation than as a strategy in teacher self-assessment. When student feedback is employed in teacher self-assessment, the major objective is to gather information from students about the course and instructor; the data, in turn, is analyzed for ways which allow the teacher to improve instructionally.¹⁷

The major advantage of using student feedback in teacher self-assessment is that the student information can be contrasted with teacher-gathered information. If there is a high degree of congruity between student input and teacher self-information, the teacher could feel confident about the reliability of feedback. If there is a great deal of discrepancy between teacher self-assessment information and student input, the teacher must determine which opinion is inaccurate or why the discrepancy exists.

The availability of expert-prepared student feedback instruments is limited at the elementary and secondary level while there are a number of instruments designed for higher education. However, all teachers have a choice between teacher-made and expert-prepared student feedback instruments. Neither the teacher-made nor expert-prepared instrument should be preferred over the other. Each type of instrument has merit depending on the goals and preferences of the teacher.

Conclusion

Viewed collectively, the eight steps of teacher self-assessment reveal a comprehensive self-directed staff development program. Teacher self-assessment is a proven program which requires the teacher to be responsible for personal professional growth.

The step-by step approach allows teachers to learn how to study, control and improve their own instructional behaviors without external assistance. However, the concept of teacher self-assessment can not be implemented without careful planning and training by the teacher and school district. Unfortunately, there is not sufficient information which documents the length of time that a teacher can sustain an individualized staff development program. Without continual reinforcement from administrators and/or supervisors and periodic technical assistance from experts in the area of instructional improvement, the teacher may well lose interest in self-directed instructional improvement.

FOOTNOTES

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