

Conducting Cultures of Thinking Snapshot Observations

Many principals will be familiar with the idea of walk-throughs and may even be using them as a tool for understanding what is happening in their schools. Less common is the use of walk-throughs, what I am calling “snapshot observations,” as tools for teachers’ professional learning. To use snapshot observations in this way it is important to understand both the goal and the mechanisms of this kind of walk through:

Goals: A Snapshot Observation is first and foremost an opportunity to reflect on teaching and learning practice. It is not an assessment, evaluation, or appraisal of a lesson or of the teacher. In a snapshot observation, the learning is primarily for the observers and occurs in the follow-up discussion immediately after the snapshot observation. From observing others, teachers will find themselves reflecting on their own practice and effectiveness in their own classrooms. The entire CoT Snapshot Observation process is designed to be completed in a single class period so that scheduling and release time are minimized while learning is maximized.

Protocol:

- *Set up:* One does not need a lot of time to get a feel for the culture of a classroom and in fact staying too long can put the focus more on the lesson than the culture. A visit of between 5 and 10 minutes is sufficient. Ideally, schools will establish a professional learning culture in which observation is the norm and not seen as threatening. When this is the case, a small team of observers (2-5) won’t need to make appointments and can just drop in to a class. You want to see what actually is going on and not as it is set up for you.
- *Focus.* The observing team will focus your observations on the first three prompts below. The team may also collectively pick a 4th prompt about which they are curious. It is important to focus your observations for a rich discussion afterwards.
- *Observe.* Reacquaint yourself with the three prompts, but take nothing with you as you enter the classroom. Paper and note taking can sometimes suggest evaluation. Be as close to a fly on the wall as possible. Enter quietly and make no eye contact with students or the teacher and without greeting the class, as this will disrupt the lesson. We want students to recognize that teachers study teaching and learning constantly in order to grow.
- *Make Notes.* Upon leaving the observation take at least five minutes to gather notes for each of the three or four prompts before discussion.
- *Reflect in Dialog.* The reflective dialog that follows the observation will focus on each of the observation prompts. To keep the focus on analysis rather than judgment, it is useful to use the language of “I noticed...” rather than “I liked....” It is important that the focus not be evaluative but reflective in nature, focusing on each teacher clarifying for him or herself how they are making sense of the teaching. One person may see the class as being learning oriented while someone else sees it as work oriented. The learning occurs in the discussion about what each was seeing and why they were interpreting things that way. Over time, a group of teachers will develop greater clarity about teaching in general and their teaching practice specifically.
- *Close.* The CoT Snapshot Observation closes by having each observer write a brief thank you note (or email) to the observed teacher sharing how the observation and subsequent discussion is causing them to think differently about their own teaching and or what they are taking away. It is important NOT to give feedback and NOT to use “I liked how you...” statements. Focus only on your own learning. The group then reads their thank you notes aloud by way of closing.

Prompts for observation:

1. Expectations: Are the students working, avoiding working, or learning? How do I know? What do I see and notice that tells me this? Where and how would a student pick up on the fact that the teacher is concerned with learning over work, understanding over knowledge, depth over surface, nurturing independence, and developing a growth mindset? What other messages about learning/school/teaching are being sent?
2. Opportunities: What are the opportunities for learning here? Are they deep and rich or surface? What am I basing that on? What would take these opportunities to the next level?
3. Thinking: What's the thinking students are required to do? How is it being promoted and encouraged...or being left untapped and unsupported? If routines are being used, how are they facilitating students' deep thinking and rich exploration of content? How might they be enhanced even more? How was students' thinking made visible?

Additional Prompts. Pick no more than one additional prompt to add to your group's observation focus.

4. Environment: how does the environment contribute to and enhance the learning? How is it being used effectively? What other potentials exist?
5. Interactions: What significant student-teacher or student-student interactions occurred? Why were these significant? Where was effective listening and questioning being employed? Where was it needed?
6. Modeling: As a model of thinking and learning, what is on display from the teacher? Students?
7. Language: What are you noticing about how teachers and students are using language in the classroom? What language moves might be facilitating a culture of thinking? What language moves might be inhibiting a culture of thinking?
8. Time: How was time being used in the classroom? What about its use felt effective and facilitative to the learning? Was there anything about the use of time that felt constrained or limiting? What different decisions might have made to further enhance the learning?
9. How is the teacher attending to our school's Cultures of Thinking "target of advancement" or other school-wide initiative in this snapshot? What practices are helping to move our target/initiative forward and what practices might be standing in the way? What might the teacher try or insert to take things to the next level.

A note about privacy: To build a culture of thinking for teachers, we need to develop trust and respect while honoring the complexity of teaching and learning. That means we should not gossip or share stories about others teaching or individual learners that might be disrespectful. When talking with colleagues not participating in a Snapshot Observation, the best approach is to focus only on one's own learning and the discussion. For example, "Our discussion has got me thinking more about..."