Classroom Walkthrough Observation: Leading Edge Instructional Leadership

by

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Instructional leaders need to know what is happening when the bell rings and the door closes--in every classroom, in every building, every day.

Introduction

The research is clear. The single most powerful, school-based factor influencing student learning is quality of teaching delivered each and every day (DuFour, 2009; "Teachers Matter," as cited in Forsberg, Jenkins, & Gillespie, 2015). Furthermore, Charlotte Danielson (2009) states, "Of all the approaches available to educators to promote teacher learning, the most powerful…is that of professional conversation…In these conversations, teachers must consider the instructional decisions they have made and examine student learning in light of those decisions" (p.5).

In order to conduct meaningful professional conversations, instructional leaders need data. Classroom walkthrough observations can produce this data. Classroom walkthroughs are a program of brief but frequent observations based on a consistent, clearly articulated set of expectations (e.g. student friendly objectives, access to prior knowledge, checks for understanding) for teaching and learning (Protheroe, 2009). As opposed to emotional or subjective suppositions, these data become the basis for collaborative dialogue. Ultimately,

classroom walkthroughs can produce the valid, reliable data necessary for the kind of dialogue that will nurture continuous improvement of instruction.

Teachers need feedback on teaching practice. Ideally, this feedback, in the form of instructional data collected in real-time, should be delivered instantaneously. These data will serve to both motivate and support self-reflection and professional conversation. This is feedback for growth. Teaching will improve and learning will increase.

An additional noteworthy benefit of classroom walkthrough observation is the positive influence of the process on teacher retention. With a steadily declining number of new teachers entering the profession, and the nationwide revolving door of teacher turnover, instructional leaders must take action. Walkthrough observation nurtures collaboration, self-efficacy, and a positive work environment that supports teachers in their professional growth. Actionable feedback, as delivered through walkthrough observation data, are proving to positively affect teacher retention among both veterans and new or less experienced educators (Cole, 2015).

When best practice walkthroughs are implemented in a culture of reflective inquiry, and when all participants and stakeholders experience clarity of the process and the expectations, the rewards are great. In fact, "we believe that student achievement is directly linked to collegial collaboration, which is clearly supported by classroom walkthroughs" (Kachur, Stout, & Edwards, 2013, p.3). "The greatest value of walkthroughs comes from sharing observation data via reflective conversations and taking subsequent actions to improve teaching and learning" (Kachur et al., 2013, p.53). "The goal is for all teachers to move toward self-reflection, self-analysis, and self-direction in the choices they make as they teach (Downey, Steffy, Poston, & English, 2010 as cited in Kachur et al., 2013, p.53). This is instructional leadership at its best. This is leading edge instructional leadership.

Digital eWalkThrough System

Southwest Plains Regional Service Center in Sublette, Kansas delivers "professional learning…innovative solutions." As such, the team designed, built, and has now trademarked, the Digital eWalkThrough® System to support research, best practice in classroom walkthrough observation. This system has been perfected over the last eight years, utilizing a continuous improvement model with feedback from the field. The focus is to intentionally and authentically connect instructional leadership and excellent teaching with student success (see Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1 - eWalkThrough Connects: Instructional Leadership, Excellent Teaching, & Student Success
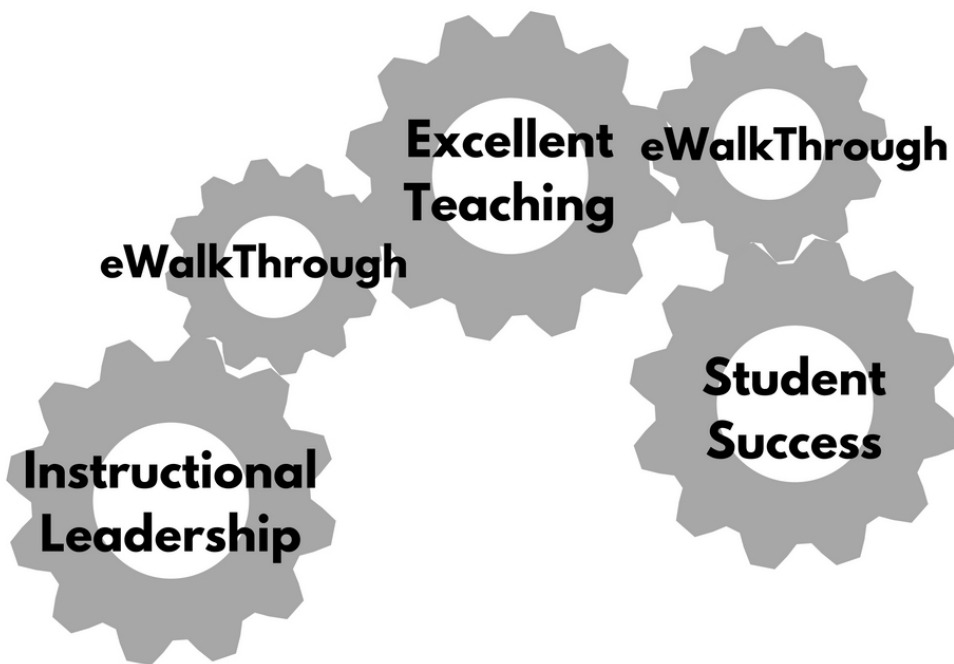
The Digital eWalkThrough® System (Southwest Plains, 2015) has been used to observe 13,643 educators in 727 schools, to date (168,000 observations completed; 7.3 million data points). This article highlights key lessons learned during this process. Each customized eWalkThrough® tool has built-in capability to disaggregate and analyze the data as evidence for

growth. Data may be exported for advanced statistical analyses. Research is currently underway to develop a statistical model to ensure validity and reliability of eWalkThrough® data for the express purpose of its use as a formative assessment. In her new book, *#eWalkThrough®: Digital System for Instructional Leadership,* Dr. Kelly Gillespie (2016) describes the details to effectively observe educators where expectations meet practice – in the classroom.
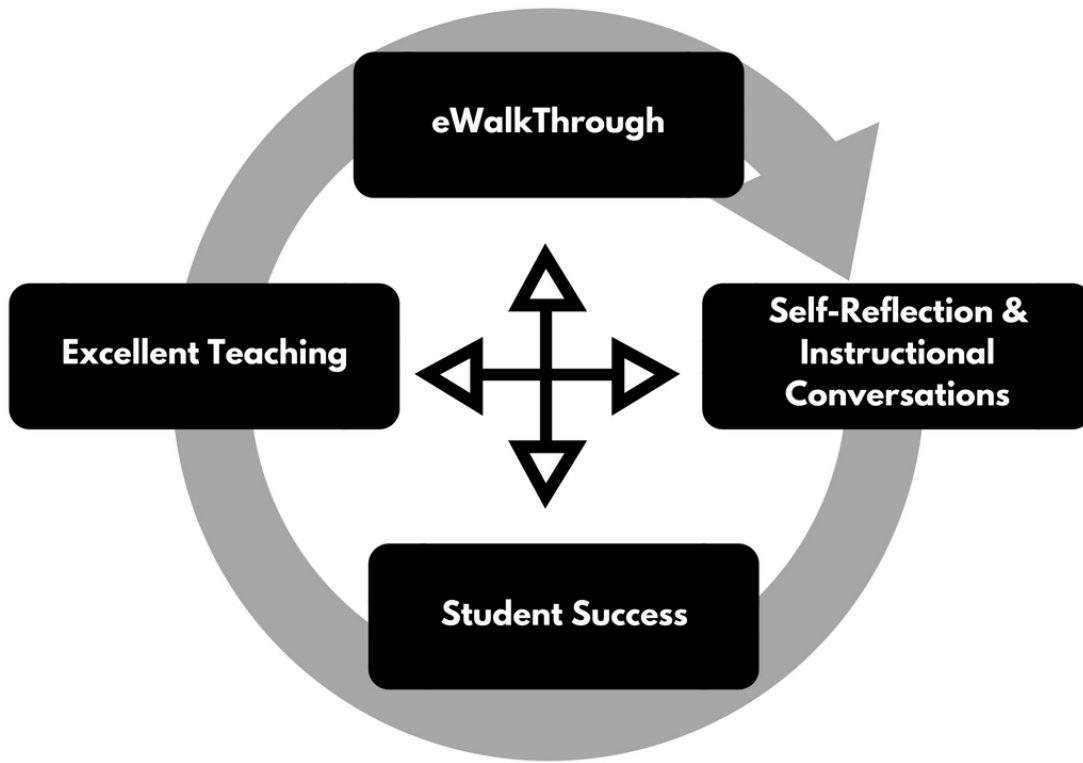
Walkthrough Observation

Classroom walkthrough is the process of observing educators in action. It is the observation of teachers conducting their work, the delivery of instruction to students on a minute-by-minute basis. Fundamentally, walkthrough observation is "focused on specific 'look-fors'…[that provide] valuable information about what's working--or NOT working" (Protheroe, 2009, p.30) in the classroom.

Because classroom walkthrough observation has such potential as a catalyst to support both excellent instruction and a positive shift in learning ("Walk-Through as a Powerful Learning Design," 2008-2009), this process is establishing itself as best practice in educational circles (David, 2008; Hopkins, 2010). When real-time observation data are analyzed, used to support reflection and collaborative conversation, and, ultimately, when these data become the basis to drive professional learning, the results are clear (Protheroe, 2009). Program initiatives are actualized. Instructional strategies improve. Students become engaged and student success

increases (see Figure 1.2).

Figure 1.2 - eWalkThrough: Model for Student Success

Classroom walkthrough is the intersection where expectations meet reality. It is a strategic method of observing and providing feedback on instruction. It is a system to monitor practice and expected outcomes. It is a system that generates dynamic data to drive decision-making and to support adjustments, as needed, to meet program standards in a continuous improvement model (Cervone & Martinez-Miller, 2007; Downey, Steffy, English, Frase, & Poston, 2004; Glasgow, Jenkins, & Gillespie, 2014).

The driving question behind classroom walkthrough observation is "What should we see in every classroom that makes a difference in student success?" The answer to this question becomes the customized content for the observation rubric. This content should be research-based, locally driven, and collaboratively identified (see Figure 1.3). This content is a set of look-fors that becomes a common language communicating instructional priorities (David, 2008). Example look-fors include: climate for learning, clear learning objectives, cognitive level, student engagement, teaching strategies; assessment techniques, and technology

Figure 1.3 - eWalkThrough: Model for Creating Data Points
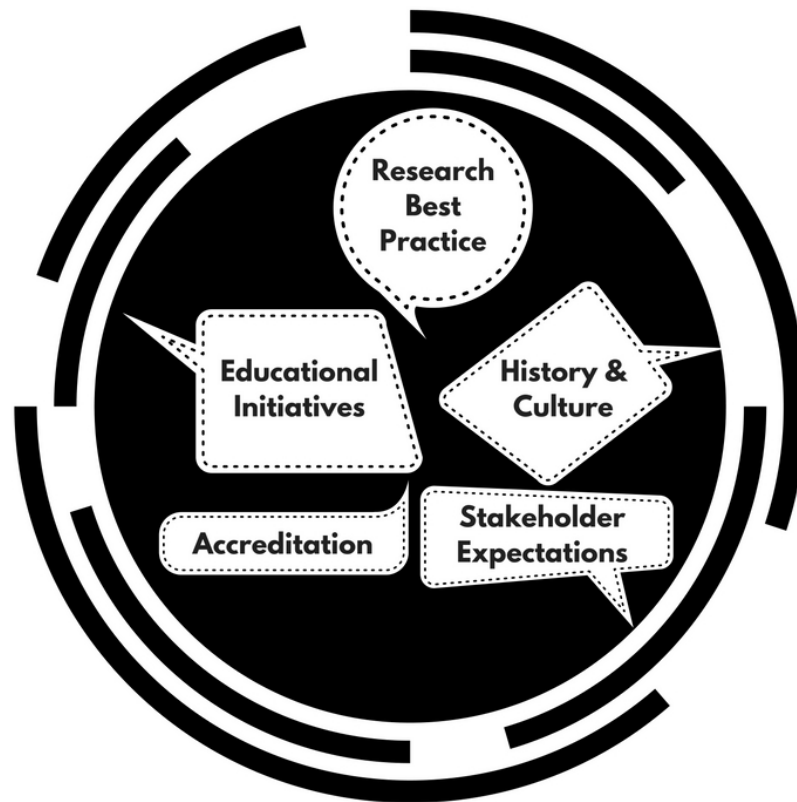
integration. Ultimately, this content describes the conditions that, when present, enable students to improve learning levels, increase achievement, and experience student success.

Walkthrough and School Improvement

Importantly, the classroom walkthrough observation process should be an integral component of the comprehensive district and school improvement plan (Kaucher et al., 2013). "When walk-throughs are disconnected from larger improvement efforts, teachers tend to dismiss them as drive-bys or gotchas" (David, 2008, p.2). Therefore, authentic connection between district or school priorities and walkthrough look-fors is paramount. "This connection should be reflected in the specific data that observers collect, the thoughtfulness and quality of the protocols, and the way the results are used" (David, 2008, p.2).

Once these connections are clearly established, it is important that the total package be communicated throughout the district or school and among all constituencies. The classroom walkthrough system is most effective when the purpose is transparent and genuinely understood by all parties (including stakeholders, observers, and those who are observed). Across time, districts and schools that implement a comprehensive walkthrough observation system with fidelity will enjoy the effect of this powerful tool.

Walkthrough Guidelines

Brevity

Best practice for classroom walkthrough centers on an observation that is completed in a very brief time period, typically 3-5 minutes, and rarely more than 10 minutes. With the aid of a well-designed, customized rubric, the walkthrough observer enters a classroom and proceeds to quickly and efficiently check for the identified priorities, the look-fors. There is no need for the observer to linger.

The point of the walkthrough observation is to simply take a snapshot of what is going on in the classroom at that moment and then exit. No interruptions. No discussion. No adjustments. In fact, it is important for observers to understand that it is very unlikely that each and every look-for will be seen during each and every observation. Across time, however, these snapshots will reveal patterns in content, delivery, and assessment surrounding the identified look-fors. Collectively, walkthrough snapshots work together to form a panoramic picture of instruction in a district or school.

Brevity is not a construct that is easily obtained. Districts and schools often have multiple priorities, including state and national initiatives, to which they are obligated. One of the design principles germane to an effective walkthrough is that of simplexity. Simplexity is the combination of simplicity and complexity. Fullan (2011) describes this process as finding the smallest number of high-leverage actions that will unleash the most powerful consequences. Within the walkthrough design, simplexity is the process of extracting focus and importance from a set of multi-faceted variables, priorities, and initiatives. Simplexity assists in answering the following questions:

- What does excellent instruction look like in the district or school?
- What is the focus of effective teaching in the district or school?
- What are the specific instructional expectations and outcomes?
- What are the priorities among the multitude of educational and administrative initiatives in the district or school?
- As an instructional leader, what is the bottom line?

Routine

  Walkthrough observations must become routine, regularly and continually conducted (e.g., once per week, twice per month, or another agreed upon sequence), to generate the most useful data. Ideally, observation in classrooms becomes an expectation. Walkthrough observation becomes habit for the observer. Walkthrough observation becomes typical procedure for the teacher, the observed. Walkthrough observation becomes routine even for the students. When data are regularly and consistently collected, the result will be valid and, therefore, powerful and useful feedback for instructional leaders. Valid data are useable data. Valid data provide meaningful answers. These data support instructional leaders as they, in turn, support teachers.

Unannounced and Unobtrusive

  During initial implementation, teachers and students alike will notice when a walkthrough observer enters the classroom. Attention will naturally be drawn to the observer and behaviors will change. Authentic behaviors and actions, of both teachers and students, will, at the outset, be compromised.

  Ideally, walkthrough observation should be unannounced and unobtrusive. Minimal or no interaction should take place between the observer and the teacher. Minimal or no interaction should take place between the observer and the students. Within weeks after the observation process is initiated, walkthroughs will become more and more routine, and neither teachers nor students will notice that an observation is being conducted. This is walkthrough observation at its best. This is when authentic observation can take place. These data will genuinely reflect the classroom environment and can, therefore, make a difference in the quality of teaching as

instructional leaders support teachers and the system moves forward with a common vision of excellent teaching.

Structure and Focus

Of utmost importance to the walkthrough process is an environment in which all parties are on the same page. With clarity comes confidence. Instructional leaders gain respect and teachers are well served when walkthrough observation is focused on collaboratively agreed upon priorities, and when that focus is transparent and consistent. A mutual understanding of expectations is paramount for both parties, the observer and the observed.

- Observers must understand exactly what they are looking for and why.
- Teachers (the observed) must understand exactly what is being observed and why.

Both parties deserve clear and detailed professional learning on the walkthrough process, itself, and on the data points or look-fors identified by the district or school.

Structure and focus will support the brevity of walkthrough, as well; therefore, increasing the likelihood that more and more observations will be conducted on a routine basis with minimal intrusion. This process will generate powerful data. These data are valuable for self-reflection. These data empower instructional conversation, coaching, and mentoring. These data support instructional excellence.

Black and White

As much as humanly possible, walkthrough observation should be objective. The observer marks the data point as either observed or not observed. When observation rubrics are well-designed, there is minimal debate and minimal guesswork. The look-for is visible in the classroom, or not. In other words, look-fors should be black and white. They should be

observable. They should be easily identifiable. Consequently, they are either occurring in the classroom or not occurring in the classroom.

In order to collect valid and reliable data, it is important to strive for this level of objectivity. An objective, black and white approach to observation will increase the opportunity to reflect on rich, meaningful data; and, therefore, increase the opportunity to authentically improve instruction.

Supportive

Best practice prescribes that a walkthrough observation system must embody the true meaning of observation, not evaluation. Walkthrough observation is about supporting teachers. It is about giving a teacher a "high five!" It is about nurturing excellent teaching. It is not about "gotcha!" The goal of a walkthrough system is to create a culture that embraces observation, a culture in which teachers actually invite observers into the classroom to experience practice and to provide feedback.

A walkthrough system does not replace evaluation, nor does it replace longer observations often associated with traditional evaluation. However, the feedback provided by the walkthrough observation process becomes the motivation for teachers to ponder, to self-reflect on professional practice, and to engage in instructional conversations.

Interestingly, the likelihood of improved evaluation often emerges as a result of the walkthrough observation process. In this case, observation typically evolves into the coaching and mentoring component of instructional improvement. Evaluation, the traditional form of instructional review, improves as a result of the data-based coaching that occurs during the walkthrough observation process.

Walkthrough Features

In addition to the aforementioned best practice tenets for classroom walkthrough, the following attributes lend to the efficiency and effectiveness of an observation system for instructional leadership.

Immediate Feedback

A walkthrough observation system is most effective when the data are instantly available to both the observer and the observed. Best practice indicates that immediate feedback maximizes potential to nurture self-reflection and to support collaborative dialogue (Danielson, 2009) between the observer and the observed. Immediate feedback is also a critical resource to teams of educators or professional learning communities desiring to collaborate on a common challenge. Bottom line, immediate feedback allows instructional leaders to be appraised of the state of instruction in a school or district, on a minute-by-minute basis.

Powerful Reports

Ideally, a walkthrough observation system includes the ability to disaggregate data and generate reports. Instructional leaders need reports based on selected and differentiated sorting of teachers, teams, or grade levels and content areas, that can be viewed, shared, and printed as the need arises. These reports provide descriptive statistics and summaries from the data and are a powerful visual for the design of individualized professional learning. The reports also serve as evidence surrounding the holistic condition of instruction in the district or school, as well as a resource to support reflection and conversations among colleagues. In many states, digital summary reports of observation data serve as reliable evidence for the accreditation process, as well.

Data Archiving

A long-term vision for walkthrough observation includes continuous data archiving by academic year. Longitudinal data analysis can now become a reality for schools and districts. Continuous web-based filing of walkthrough observations is ideal. Each and every observation, on each and every teacher, by each and every observer, should be electronically and indefinitely archived. These files can be sorted at the discretion of the user and accessed at any time. This storage feature will support the ability to conduct multi-year data analyses at the touch of a button.

Walkthrough Applications

A classroom walkthrough observation system can be immediately utilized in a variety of applications that are instrumental for effective instructional leadership. The most common of these applications are discussed below.

Self-Reflection

In its ideal state, the walkthrough observation process nurtures metacognition or thinking about thinking. Self-reflection centers on questions that engage metacognition:

- What was my rationale for that particular process and implementation plan?

- What instructional decisions or student behaviors led to that action?

- What would I do differently if I could re-teach this lesson?

- What was the most effective component of the lesson?

- How can I better serve all students in my next lesson?

Self-reflection is the foundation of ever-increasing levels of instructional excellence. In fact, a fundamental precept of a well-designed walkthrough system is that a teacher will (1) review the data; (2) reflect on the data; and (3) adjust professional practice based on the data.

Ideally, this 3-step process will also include collaborative dialogue and professional conversations (as discussed below) between instructional leaders and colleagues.

Collaborative Dialogue

Ultimately, walkthrough observation should result in collaborative dialogue. This dialogue can best be described as rich, professional conversations surrounding instruction that naturally encourage not only self-reflection, but modification of daily practice. Best practice recommends that this dialogue take place as the need is perceived (by either the observed or the observer). At minimum, an instructional conversation is recommended after every 8-10 observations (Downey et al., 2004). Feedback often takes the form of probing and reflective questions such as, "have you ever considered…" or "what if…"

The goal of collaborative dialogue is twofold:

1) Encourage self-reflection among all parties involved (teacher, building leader, district leader, instructional coach, or consultant).

2) Inform professional practice for on-going program design and development (whether between the teacher and building leader/observer OR between the observer and the district leader, instructional coach, or consultant).

In a well-designed classroom walkthrough system, both self-reflection and dialogue, and, ultimately, informed professional practice, can now be based on real-time data. The collaborative dialogue initiated as a result of discussions surrounding walkthrough data can become an integral component of the coaching and mentoring process in a school or district. Walkthrough observation can include new teachers or all teachers, including veterans with extensive experience. Alternatively, it may designed to involve peer mentoring and/or teams and

professional learning communities, as well. Bottom line, feedback is generated and delivered to fuel this powerful process.

Cycle of Continuous Improvement

Providing support and resources to improve teaching and increase student success is the desired outcome of classroom walkthrough observation. Research-based, best practice; expectations of district administration and/or building(s) leadership; state and federal initiatives; and accreditation requirements are among the variables that must be considered as data points are identified and observable look-fors are designed. Data are collected, analyzed, reviewed, and utilized to inform and design differentiated professional learning. The process repeats and "do-reflect-apply" is on-going. This cycle of continuous improvement must be intentional and deliberate.

Summary

"A program of brief but frequent classroom walkthroughs has become an increasingly popular strategy in recent years for informally supervising teachers and observing classroom activities" (Protheroe, 2009, p.30). As the challenge continues to deliver high-quality instruction that results in high-levels of student achievement and student success, classroom walkthrough continues to gaining recognition among education professionals as an effective observation model.

Instructional leaders generate confidence and commitment by implementing a walkthrough process with clarity and transparency. Real-time data focused on teaching and learning are collected. Immediate feedback is provided. Powerful self-reflection and collaborative dialogue can now ensue. Quality of instruction will improve and achievement will

increase. And a bonus, teacher retention will increase. Indeed, student success will move from rhetoric to reality as instructional leaders move to the leading edge!

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