

HIGH QUALITY TEACHING AND LEARNING:

DO WE KNOW IT WHEN WE SEE IT (AND WHEN WE DON'T)?



EN BREF Le lien entre la qualité des enseignants et l'apprentissage des élèves a été intensément débattu. En effet, les enseignants en exercice et les chercheurs universitaires tentent de comprendre ce qui compte le plus pour améliorer les résultats des élèves. Nous savons, grâce aux recherches récentes, que la qualité des enseignants importe. Bien que le bon sens porte à croire que les éducateurs professionnels savent à quoi ressemble, en pratique, un enseignement de qualité, ce n'est pas nécessairement le cas. Enseigner à une classe pleine d'apprenants est un phénomène social techniquement exigeant et comportant de multiples aspects. Il est parfois difficile d'en voir et d'en comprendre toute la complexité. Nous devons devenir des consommateurs avisés d'enseignement et d'apprentissage, capables d'observer des classes occupées et dynamiques et de déconstruire ce qui s'y passe au nom de l'apprentissage des élèves. Les dirigeants pédagogiques doivent appuyer l'amélioration de l'enseignement en décelant les limites pédagogiques spécifiques et en instaurant et en alimentant des systèmes de perfectionnement professionnel qui rehaussent l'efficacité des enseignants auprès de tous leurs élèves.

HOW DO EDUCATORS KNOW, WHEN WE WALK INTO CLASSROOMS, WHETHER THE INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES WE OBSERVE THERE ARE LIKELY TO PRODUCE ROBUST FORMS OF LEARNING?

WE HOLD A RATHER straightforward proposition regarding school and district improvement: *If we improve the quality of instruction, we can improve student learning.*

When we discuss this notion with school and district leaders, it does not produce consternation or debate; people nod as if it were a long-held and self-evident truth of schooling. In fact, the link between teacher quality and student learning has been debated intensively, as practitioners and scholars have struggled to understand what matters most for improving student achievement. What we do know now, thanks to recent research, is that teacher quality matters. It helps explain the relative differences in student achievement across nations, and it helps explain variation of student learning across classrooms. In the words of Wright, Horn, and Sanders, teacher effectiveness is a "dominant factor affecting student academic gain."¹

The implication for educators is straightforward: district and school leaders must support improvements in instructional quality. What is not so straightforward is how to discern 'quality'. How do educators know, when we walk into classrooms, whether the instructional practices we observe there are likely to produce robust forms of learning? It may seem common sense that most professional educators would know what quality teaching looks like in practice, but our work with thousands of educators and hundreds of districts suggests otherwise. In this article, we suggest three aspects that make teaching difficult for educational leaders to analyze but that are necessary to understand if school and district leaders are to lead effective large-scale instructional improvement.

QUALITY RELATIVE TO WHAT?

In a dark conference room, 63 leaders, including superintendents, assistant superintendents, principals, assistant principals, and teacher leaders, watch sixteen minutes of a Grade 10 writing lesson.² In the lesson, the teacher instructs his students on how to write a narrative in which the protagonist solves a problem, but that solution creates additional and unexpected problems. The teacher, through a series of questions, helps students see this narrative pattern at work in a novel they recently finished. Together they invent a real-life version of this pattern, outlining their ideas

on the chalkboard. The teacher then tasks students to work in teams developing their own stories. At the close of the lesson the teacher provides summative statements and directions for the work to follow, ultimately calling upon a student to read aloud his story.

At the close of the lesson, the 63 leaders are asked to grade the quality of the lesson on a scale from A+ (high) to F (low). These responses are graphed, revealing wide variation (A- to D-). Participants are then asked to explain the grades they gave. After 30 minutes of small- and whole-group discussion, what emerges is amply summarized by the statement of one principal: "It seems that we, who are supposed to be instructional leaders, do not agree about what good instructional practice looks like!"

The exercise we just described is one that we conduct regularly as part of our leadership development work at the Change Leadership Group. The results of the exercise – the wide variation in grades provided and the disparate accounts of why it was a strong, mediocre, or weak lesson – are consistent across hundreds of trials. As leaders explain their scores, their answers seem reasonable, even in the face of multiple and opposing perspectives. Some participants begin to believe that grading the lesson is like judging art: quality is in the eyes of the observer. Occasionally, a participant introduces into the conversation a different criterion, one that shifts the quality and focus of the conversation because it provides a common reference point – the demands of society upon our graduates. "All of these qualities you are describing are well and good, but at the end of the day, are these students going to leave this lesson, this unit, and the year better prepared for the world outside of high school? Are they going to be ready for the increasingly complex social and economic demands we are putting on graduates?"

We describe the lesson-rating exercise and the discussions that follow to underscore a critical point: Discerning instructional quality is less about observing the behaviours of teachers than tracking what students learn and are able to do as a result of their participation in class. Student engagement, rigour of academic content, and lesson design – criteria participants predictably use to justify the scores they provide in rating the lesson – are meaningless unless



they generate learning that enables students – all students – to thrive in the society they will graduate into. This is not an academic point; it is a moral one. There is surprising agreement among college professors and employers about the skills (such as critical thinking, complex problem solving, and effective communication) students need to have when they graduate from high school. However, few schools are currently designed and run to emphasize student development of these skills. Given the inequitable results our schools produce for students of poverty and colour, it is reasonable to expect that the impact of a wide variation of teaching and learning quality will land most heavily upon students we have historically not served well.

TEACHING IS ROCKET SCIENCE

Teaching and learning in the classroom is, as Marilyn Cochran-Smith notes, “unforgivingly complex.”³ The sheer number of considerations that must be made to optimize learning among two dozen students of disparate academic backgrounds and learning styles so that each student masters complex content are too numerous to count. The intricacy of the social dynamics in a classroom that are necessary for learning is daunting. The teacher’s understanding of his or her content area must be deep and sophisticated so as to lead students into enduring understandings of that content. Teaching a classroom full of learners is a multifaceted and technically challenging social phenomena, and as such it is sometimes difficult to see and understand it in its full complexity.



We notice that when participants in our lesson-rating exercise explain why they rate the writing lesson as they do, some seek to simplify the complexity of what they have seen. In their efforts to maintain and apply very clear criteria for judging quality, they look for features that are easiest to observe. For example, it is common to hear participants note that the teacher in the lesson does not adequately articulate the learning objective, indicating poor instructional practice. However, many of these observers, when probed, concede that the students seem to understand the purpose of the lesson, regardless of the teacher’s explicitness. Some observers even admit that they understood the unspoken objective but still provided negative assessments of the teaching and learning because it wasn’t stated or written on the board. A more complex criterion for determining the lesson quality might be the degree to which all students fully grasp the lesson’s purpose and the significance of that purpose in the context of the course’s learning objectives. But determining whether this is the case is harder to do, and it is not indisputably clear from the 16-minute clip.

FURTHER COMPLICATING OUR ABILITY TO SEE POWERFULLY INTO INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICE IS OUR LACK OF A POWERFUL PROFESSIONAL LANGUAGE FOR DESCRIBING WHAT OCCURS IN THE CLASSROOM.

Observers also oversimplify the lesson by relying on their intuition or personal opinion to make inferences about the lesson. For example, early in most conversations, someone will make the claim that students in the classroom were ‘engaged’. When asked to provide some evidence, many sit quietly, trying to find an answer. Commonly, we will hear versions of “well, you could see it in their faces” or “you can just tell by watching them.” These educators struggle to provide the specific and concrete data to substantiate their claims. In fact, as the group gradually lists the student behaviours they did see, they acknowledge that much of the data is difficult to interpret convincingly, and that they have more questions than answers.

Further complicating our ability to see powerfully into instructional practice is our lack of a powerful professional language for describing what occurs in the classroom. When participants begin to justify their scores, most use terminology related to one of the following five categories: rigour, relevance, relationships, engagement and lesson design. On the surface, the emergence of these agreed-upon categories seems positive, suggesting some agreement about the criteria we should be using to make judgments of instructional quality, but it quickly becomes clear that there is little agreement about what any of these terms mean or what they look like in practice. For example, the two quotes that follow come from two different administrators in the same district. Each employs the criterion of rigour, only to define it differently and make dramatically different judgments about the lesson.

I gave this an A- because of its rigour. The teacher is making these students think. His lesson gets students to take learning from a novel and apply it to a novel, personal situation. That is high-level reasoning.

Well, I gave it a D. That may be a generous score. What troubles me is that this is a lesson we would do in the second grades of our elementary schools. Where is the academic thinking? When do students have to think?

If these district leaders, both with over a decade invested in their district’s improvement efforts, differ dramatically in their assessment of the quality of the lesson and in their definitions of what rigour is, rest assured that variation exists within and across all the schools in the district.

If we can't see it, we can't talk about it, if we can't talk about it – precisely with a shared vocabulary – we likely can't help others get better at it. We believe this is our instructional leadership challenge. We need to become savvy consumers of teaching and learning, able to look into busy, dynamic classrooms and deconstruct what is occurring in the name of student learning. We need to help others see and understand the complexity of what is occurring in the classroom. Instructional leaders need to support the improvement of teaching by diagnosing specific instructional limitations and by introducing and nurturing professional development systems that help teachers become effective with all students. We need to help the communities we lead begin to de-privatize practice and to develop a precise and shared vocabulary for the development of rigorous standards of instructional practice.

TOO CLOSE TO HOME

Teaching is an all-too-familiar, culturally-embedded activity that educators have been socialized into since our own experiences in kindergarten. As such, we have come to accept certain assumptions about schooling, teaching, and learning as givens, unquestionable truths that require no reflection or scrutiny. Many observers of the Grade 10 writing lesson struggle to make critical judgments about the lesson because it is all-too-familiar – it contains many qualities of teaching and learning that we experienced as high school students and that we see in the high schools in which we lead. Those who score the lesson highly often do so because the lesson illustrates some of the teaching practices and student behaviours they see and expect to see whenever they visit a classroom.

We have come to realize that the existence of a foil – a dramatically different lesson in terms of fundamental pedagogy and overall quality – helps educators see the Grade 10 lesson in new ways. At the close of the lesson-rating exercise, we ask observers to watch a second lesson that challenges their expectations of teaching and learning practice, a Grade 4 math lesson in which the students demonstrate sophisticated reasoning about the concept of fractions.⁴ On occasion, observers have spontaneously applauded this lesson, indicating their appreciation for the thoughtful facilitation of learning and the rigorous student thinking evidenced in the classroom discourse and in the academic work Grade 4 students produced. At this point we ask the participants to describe what they see in the lesson. We encourage them to use only descriptive

language, avoiding vague and evaluative comments. Through the course of the discussion, small groups build a collectively-shared account of what actually occurred, often in great detail. Frequently, they find themselves comparing and contrasting the two lessons they observed, and as a result, coming to see aspects of the writing lesson they failed to see earlier. For example, many recognize that in the Grade 10 writing lesson, the teacher – not the students – was doing a considerable amount of the cognitively demanding work. They also notice that, in contrast to the Grade 4 lesson, the Grade 10 students were given no tasks that required higher-order thinking. After observing the Grade 4 lesson and the complexity of thinking required of students, the original disagreements over the degree of rigour in the Grade 10 lesson fall away; the observers begin to see how little the teacher was asking of his students.

Recently, we have begun to ask the observers a new question: Who among you would change the grade you first gave to the Grade 10 writing lesson? Though our sample size for this question is small, the pattern has proven consistent. Each time we have solicited these data, at least 60 percent of the observers report they have changed their grade, and all who would change it say they would reduce it. Half of those who would change their grade would lower it by at least three marks (i.e. from B+ to C+). Not only does the presence of a higher standard lead them to lower assessments of common practice, it also helps observers generate new criteria for analyzing lessons, such as the importance of how academic work is distributed, the relative rigour of questioning techniques, the use of time,



ALLABOUTSHOES.CA

Recommended by Curriculum Services Canada!



Khussa, India, 1950

A NEW ONLINE TEACHER'S RESOURCE FROM THE BATA SHOE MUSEUM WILL ENGAGE YOUR STUDENTS AND ENHANCE YOUR CURRICULUM. OFFERING ACCESS TO SEVERAL EXCITING MUSEUM EXHIBITIONS, www.allaboutshoes.ca FEATURES A VARIETY OF CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES AND PROJECT IDEAS. RECOMMENDED BY CURRICULUM SERVICES CANADA!



Italy, 1910 - 1920



Sioux, probably Teton, 1885



Caribou mukluks, 1989



Slavery, 20th century

TO DOWNLOAD EDUCATIONAL BROCHURES, PLEASE VISIT WWW.BATASHOEMUSEUM.CA/EDUCATION



Mexico, 17th century

A FIELD TRIP TO THE BATA SHOE MUSEUM MAKES A FABULOUS CULMINATING EXPERIENCE!
TO BOOK: 416 979 7799 EXT. 242 OR 228

TO LEARN MORE, PLEASE VISIT www.allaboutshoes.ca AND CLICK ON TEACHER'S RESOURCES.



Arviat, Nunavut

© 2008 Bata Shoe Museum
Photos: Pete Paterson
Design: Imaginis.ca



Recommended by Curriculum Services Canada

Project made possible with the support of:





Bata Shoe Museum • 327 Bloor St. West • Toronto • Canada • 416.979.7799 • www.batashoemuseum.ca



Mackenzie River, 19th century

and the complexity of the academic task.

As instructional leaders, we must strive to adopt an anthropological stance in the classrooms of our schools, struggling to make “the familiar strange”⁵ so that we can more readily see and scrutinize the patterns of schools, teaching and learning that we take for granted. Leaders who develop this stance are able to look past what simply appears normal, focusing their attention on meaningful evidence of student reasoning and understanding. Ultimately, we must grow professional cultures that begin to do the same, where communities of educators begin to critically reflect upon the complexity of teaching and learning in a 21st century knowledge economy.

UNDERSTANDING INFORMS ACTION

In illustrating the difficulties of recognizing and discussing quality teaching and learning, it may seem that we have done more to magnify this problem than to solve it. In fact, we have done exactly that if magnifying a problem means that we shed light on its previously unrecognized or misunderstood features. But we also submit that understanding how and why agreement about high quality teaching, and learning is so difficult to come by actually moves us closer to our goal. The difficulty and complexity of analyzing and evaluating just one lesson highlights much about how we might potentially achieve this kind of agreement.

First, we need to regard ourselves as learners, allowing ourselves enough practice and support to develop new habits of thinking and conversation. As we look at teaching and learning together, we need to get better at asking hard

questions, questioning our assumptions, looking for evidence, clarifying our language, and imagining and comparing alternatives. In our experience, educational leaders learn these kinds of habits best when they have opportunities to collaborate regularly with each other. We have worked with some districts in which the leaders have formed Leadership Practice Communities (LPCs), meeting monthly to visit each others’ classrooms, discuss lessons, and develop common instruments for assessing instruction. Not only do LPCs provide the time and space for leaders to focus on the process of teaching and learning, the conversations can help participants engage in the discipline of thinking and speaking more carefully, exactly, and deeply about this process.

Embracing the complexity of teaching and learning, and viewing ourselves as learners, also have important implications for the ways we lead. For example, when we understand that a lesson cannot adequately be evaluated based on simple criteria, we understand that teachers do not improve simply by adopting new techniques and behaviours. Viewing teachers as learners, we see that they need the same learning conditions as leaders (and students). They need adequate time and support to explore new ideas and hard questions, to wonder and experiment with alternatives, to test and revise their assumptions. They need high quality professional development opportunities that allow them to grow both as learners and as practitioners. |

RICHARD W. LEMONS is Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership at the Neag School of Education, University of Connecticut. In addition, he serves as a consultant to the Change Leadership Group, Harvard Graduate School of Education. Deborah Helsing is the Senior Program Associate at the Change Leadership Group, Harvard Graduate School of Education and a Senior Coach for Minds at Work. They are co-authors of *Change Leadership: A Practical Guide to Transforming Our Schools*. They can be contacted at richard_lemons@post.harvard.edu or deborah_helsing@harvard.edu

Notes

- 1 S.P. Wright, S.P. Horn and W.L. Sanders, “Teacher and Classroom Context Effects on Student Achievement: Implications for Teacher Evaluation,” *Journal of Personnel Evaluation in Education* 11 (1997): 57-67.
- 2 This clip comes from Episode 29 in the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) series, *Video Library of Teaching Episodes* (Alexandria: VA: ASCD, 1991).
- 3 M. Cochran-Smith, “The Unforgiving Complexity of Teaching: Avoiding Simplicity in the Age of Accountability,” *Journal of Teacher Education* 54, no. 1 (2003): 3-5.
- 4 A version of this clip is included on a CD-ROM accompanying L. West and F. C. Staub, *Content Focused Coaching: Transforming Mathematics Lessons*. (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003).
- 5 F. Erickson, “What Makes School Ethnography ethnographic?” *Council on Anthropology and Education Newsletter* 2 (1973): 10-19.

Looking for the key to unlock the challenges of teaching at-risk students?

Look to RAPSAs for resources, professional development, and support!



4TH ANNUAL

REACHING AT+PROMISE STUDENTS®
NATIONAL CONFERENCE

February 20-22, 2009 - San Diego

Proven strategies to achieve academic success

Featured Speakers: Dr. Ruby Payne, Erin Gruwell, Dr. Anita Archer, Dr. Lorraine Monroe, Dr. Ron Ferguson, and Franklin Schargel

Visit www.atpromiseconference.org for more information

Reaching At-Promise Students Association (RAPSA) offers

- Practical ideas for content areas, classroom management, reading, leadership, and more...
- Educational research from classroom experts...
- Professional development webinars...
- Plus... Members receive generous discounts off RAPSAs-sponsored conferences, including the Reaching At-Promise Students National Conference.

Join Now! Call 1-800-871-7482 or visit www.RAPSA.org

