

CHANGE: Four Teachers' Perspectives on TPEP

My grandfather thought he was teaching my mother to swim when she was about 6 years old – he picked her up and threw her into a deep, cold creek. It was sink or swim for her! After that startling experience, she took formal swim lessons and became an excellent swimmer. I tell this anecdote because my being excited to be among the first here to blaze a TPEP trail for the staff is matched, unfortunately, by my frustration at being asked to swim without lessons. Planning a statewide program on the drawing board is one challenge; parceling it out piecemeal for teachers to implement is another. (Duane)

As Bob Dylan (1963) said, “For the times they are a-changin’.” We four teachers have found ourselves sinking and swimming as we have encountered and worked with the Teacher-Principal Evaluation Program (TPEP) the past two years. Last school year, our district was accepted into the second wave of TPEP training – the Regional Implementation Grant (RIG) 2 at ESD 101. RIGs were established in 2011 to increase “the number of districts involved in the new evaluation system” (<http://www.tpep-wa.org>). Initially, Ellen and Duane volunteered to help our principal Ken Schutz pilot the teacher evaluation portion of the program. Then Marianne joined us as the junior high representative. We three will go through the short version of the evaluation while Seth, who joined us this year as the new high school science teacher, will undergo the full evaluation.

While we recognize that this reform process is still quite fluid and that nothing has completely settled down yet, it has caused us some frustrations as even our superintendent noticed (S. White, e-mail communication, Nov. 21, 2012). We have come to understand in two years’ time that the TPEP process allows teachers to have direct, hands-on involvement with

their own evaluation. This is a paradigm shift for us all, teachers and principals alike, in the state of Washington. Never in the past had we been asked to take a collaborative part in our evaluation or talk with the principal in depth about what was taught and why. Never had we been asked by our principal to reflect on our teaching or to set goals for improvement. As National Board Certified Teachers, Marianne and Duane had an inkling of what to expect in regard to reflection and evidence gathering. Now we four are asked to collaborate with our principal, making the evaluation far more valuable by giving us ownership and voice in the process and accountability for reflecting upon successes and finding ways to improve our craft of teaching. This is the aspect “worth savin’,” for we fully intend to swim, not sink.

Overview

Ellen and Duane, along with their principal, Ken Schutz, began the formal process in Fall 2011 by attending presentations at the state principals’ conference on the three teacher evaluation frameworks—Danielson, Marzano, and UW CEL (See <http://www.tpep-wa.org>). Ken, Duane, and Ellen also listened to Dr. Charlotte Danielson present her views on teacher evaluation. By mid-year, we had all reached a consensus that the Danielson framework seemed the better fit for our district (<http://tpep-wa.org/resources/instructional-frameworks/danielson-framework/>). Many districts in our area had also chosen the Danielson evaluation framework as well, so it was natural that we would all work together. However, given the fluidity of a system undergoing change, some of the other districts switched to the Marzano framework. From 2011 onward, Ellen and Duane made sure to keep the K-12 staff fully apprised about our TPEP work and what it would later mean for them.

The 2011-2012 school year was the time period when we got our feet wet, so to speak.

This was a big step, as Seth recalled:

I wondered what I had blundered into after being introduced to our “framework” in an ESD workshop prior to my first day of school. I still wonder. From our meeting with our principal, I have come to the following conclusions: We have a framework but no guide, guidelines, or guidance. We have a deadline but no timeline, and for many of us, no time.

Despite the challenges, over time we became quite familiar, even comfortable, with the Danielson framework. We had read this framework and talked to each other about it, and shared ideas and insights with the staff. At one point, however, we thought we would all sink. In May and June of 2012, concerns were raised about the Danielson contract with Teachscape, the exclusive electronic provider for the Danielson framework for teacher observations, evaluation, and development. Because Teachscape had the sole proprietary rights for teacher evaluation with the Danielson framework, we wondered how that would affect the state’s own evaluation system. We put everything on hold, worried that we would have to change frameworks mid-stream. After all, we were a year into the Danielson system when this obstacle loomed on the immediate horizon, threatening to sink our efforts. We were confused by this twist in the process and frustrated with something that was beyond our control. In early June, however, we learned that the Danielson framework would be incorporated in the state eVAL Management Tool, a free online education management tool to manage the teacher and principal evaluation data as developed by ESD 113, WEA, and OSPI. We were relieved, hoping no more obstacles would foist themselves on us. As it was, despite our growing familiarity with framework and tools, implementation of the process felt overwhelming. Ellen noted:

Trying to do this is like trying to cook a new meal, knowing what it is supposed to look like but not having the recipe(s) to follow. I have been to a few meetings and have been given a format to follow which helps, but how to implement or make sense of it all, I am lost. There are so many categories and subcategories in the state's new evaluation system that it is like that recipe for a 20-course meal for 20 people with different allergies.

As our frustrations continued (as expressed by Ellen's observation), we faced an additional challenge during the 2012-2013 school year when we learned there would be no more teacher trainings on the evaluation system. The state's focus and limited resources shifted to training principals about the evaluation systems rather than continuing to support teachers through the process. Despite the sinking sensation that settled in again, we decided we would swim with our principal and push the process forward in the district despite diminished support from the state. So, from September 2012 to January 2013, without any more teacher trainings, we proceeded with our own self-imposed TPEP work with the teacher self-assessment survey form prepared by the Danielson Group.

In the fall of 2012, Ken Schutz was given a copy of this survey by a colleague at a principals' meeting. He had heard about the survey, but had not seen it (K. Schutz, private conversation, March 28, 2013). Labeled as "Danielson's Framework for Teaching Rubrics by State Criteria with Critical Attributes" on the Washington State Teacher/Principal Evaluation Project website, this survey tool allowed us to proceed with our work. With Seth now on board, the four of us completed the self-assessment. It took each of us about two hours spread over a month of reflection and critical self-analysis to finish before we individually conferred with Ken and set a goal for improvement. We felt that this system was far superior to the previous

evaluation system because it allowed the principal to collaborate with us on how to improve our teaching craft and enhance student achievement. Our sense of fairness in the evaluation's objectivity matched what American Institutes for Research (AIR) reported in its January 2012 study, "74.6% of teachers agree that the teacher evaluation system is more objective than before" (Weber, 2012, p. 11).

By the end of January 2013, ESD 101 was able to offer the RIG 2 some additional teacher TPEP training. Ken, Marianne, and Seth went to a review session and learned how to categorize visible teaching practices using Danielson's Domain 2 (Classroom Environment) and Domain 3 (Instruction). Seth and Duane reported on the new teacher observation-evaluation system in February to the school board, and in mid-March Ellen, Marianne, and Seth attended a teacher evaluation scoring training at ESD 101. Even though the year is not over, we are preparing for the final lap—our summative evaluation for the year. At this point we now have a sense of progress, as Marianne noted:

Imagine that you are going to be evaluated on the quality of the work you do, and there are no clear guidelines. That was what the state's new evaluation system seemed like at the beginning of the year. That was the scenario that we faced this year in piloting and setting up an evaluation system that will fit the state's criteria as required by the legislature. Together, we are reading, discussing, and beginning to craft what will eventually be a coherent, fair and comprehensive evaluation that can be efficient to administer.

What We Have Learned

The AIR Report of February 2013 indicated that teachers and principals want “information about the successes and challenges of districts that have already pilot-tested new evaluation systems” (Brown-Sims, 2013, p. 2). With this in mind, even though we have more to learn before this year ends, this is what we have learned so far:

1. **Change takes time.** Any time a system shifts from one process to another, the interim is fluid and ever-altering, frustrating but challenging. It is second-order change, as our principal said. According to the National Academy for Academic Leadership (2013), “Second-order change is deciding—or being forced—to do something significantly or fundamentally different from what we have done before. The process is irreversible: once you begin, it is impossible to return to the way you were doing before.” What we hoped would take five to seven years to fully understand and become comfortable with has been compressed to three years. Next year may be the full implementation year for us. We are making the best use of the time we have to do this piloting right. There is no turning back.
2. **Change takes thought.** This new teacher evaluation system constitutes a major paradigm shift. The old ways of thinking and doing for teachers and principals alike need to be set aside so collaboration and partnership can push us forward to a better evaluation approach. We are learning how to re-think what learning is and how the craft of teaching can be better fine tuned. Even our principal has seen a change in his classroom observations and conversations with us and all the other teachers as he told the school board at its March 2013 board meeting. We are engaging now in thoughtful discussions, staff and administration working together.

3. **Change takes patience.** Yes, there have been times we have been frustrated with various aspects of the process—training gaps, communication problems, unforeseen obstacles. Even thoughts of bailing out have surfaced. But through perseverance we have learned that this process is doable. We decided early on that we were going to swim, not sink like a stone, when faced with difficulties. We did not let obstacles sink us, and we swam along, mostly at a steady pace, knowing that state decisions could change our direction at any time, but that we would continue to push toward the new shore.

If your time to you is worth savin’

Then you better start swimmin’

Or you’ll sink like a stone

For the times they are a-changin’

--Bob Dylan, 1963

Bob Dylan is right. Change is upon us. If we four teachers in a small, rural school can make the needed changes, then others in the state should take heart and know that they can manage this change, too.

References

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