THE CRITICAL IMPORTANCE OF A COMMON LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION

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A common language/model of instruction provides a framework for a way to talk about instruction that is shared by everyone in the state, educational service agency region, and at the district or school level. Principals and teachers use a common language of instruction to converse about effective teaching, give and receive feedback, collect and act upon data to monitor growth regarding the reasoned use of the strategies identified in the framework, and align professional development needs against the framework.

While the focus on teacher effectiveness must be centered on improving student learning, a complex evaluation system must focus on improving the expertise of the teacher across an entire system and provide clear mechanisms for teachers to improve their instruction. A well-articulated knowledge base is a prerequisite for developing expertise in any systematic way (Marzano, 2009). Marzano (2009) notes that while there have been many attempts to identify the knowledge base regarding effective pedagogy, few have identified the characteristics of expert performance. The challenge, therefore, is to first develop a viable tool for fostering expertise in teaching and to classify it in a way that identifies the context or situations in which specific strategies should be used (Marzano, 2009). The second critical strategy is to provide opportunities for deliberate practice within a comprehensive professional learning system in which there are clear and focused tasks, clear criteria for success, and motivation to improve within the context of mentoring and professional development (Marzano, 2009).

Schools and districts often struggle with defining effective teaching within the context of multiple and competing approaches to teaching and learning while also creating challenging curriculum and robust assessment systems amidst differing philosophies, unclear performance measures, and fragmented professional development. Unfortunately, teachers bear a disproportionate burden within misaligned systems, hindering their growth and effectiveness in working with their students. Current approaches to monitoring classroom instruction, such as walkthroughs, typically use narrow checklists that do not reflect the complexity
of the teaching and learning process. Teachers are rarely provided immediate and specific feedback to improve their teaching, which is not always aligned with teacher evaluation or support processes. Given what we know from research, a common language/model of instruction must:

» Accurately reflect the complexity and sophistication of the teaching/learning process

» Identify the key strategies revealed by research for effective teaching

» Go beyond a narrow list of “high yield” strategies

» Identify which research-based strategies are appropriate for different types of lessons or lesson segments

» Include rubrics or scales with clearly defined continuums of implementation and evidences sufficient to impact student learning

» Allow for flexibility for districts to adapt and adopt the model to reflect local needs and priorities yet retain the common language

As shared understanding is developed based upon a common language of instruction, the next critical process is for teachers to engage in deliberate practice using the common language of instruction. Citing the work of Ericsson and his colleagues (Ericsson & Charness, 1994; Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Romer, 1993; Ericsson & Smith, 1991), Hattie (2009) notes that the key difference between novices and experts is that experts engage in deliberate practice or relevant practice activities at appropriate levels of challenge, focused on improving particular aspects of their teaching. Deliberate practice is a mindset that requires teachers to precisely attend to what they are doing in the classroom in order to identify what is working and what isn’t, and determine why students are learning or not learning. While there are quite possibly hundreds of possible teaching moves that teachers make on a daily basis, teachers can identify “thin slices” of teaching behaviors, derived from a common language of instruction, to focus on a specific area for improvement.

A major component of deliberate practice also involves clear and frequent feedback against a common language of instruction to enable teachers to make real-time adjustments in their teaching. Rubrics or scales aligned to the common language provide a viable means for teachers and supervisors to both celebrate, reward, and replicate effective teaching as well as provide a clear path for improvement. Feedback, then, can come from various forms of self-assessment, mentor, peer, and supervisor feedback using a common language with scales or rubrics.

ROBUST DATA

As states and districts design and develop solutions for determining teacher effectiveness that are inclusive of qualitative and quantitative sources of academic student achievement data, we propose that a major challenge will be balancing the use of leading indicators and lagging indicators to inform their decisions. We suggest that leading indicators related to teaching and learning can be defined as measurable factors of teacher behavior in the area of pedagogy that signal change and may be predictive of the future performance of student achievement trends and patterns. Leading indicators include a teacher’s daily practice as noted by self-assessments; peer, mentor, and supervisory observations; formative assessments; and student surveys that provide opportunities to intervene and change practice on an ongoing basis. Lagging indicators can be defined as behaviors that change after an event has occurred. They confirm trends and patterns and have minimal use as a predictive tool. For our purposes, lagging indicators would include what teachers do after achievement scores are received to adjust or change their instructional practices. A robust evaluation system with leading and lagging indicators can provide constructive, specific, and focused feedback for teachers and principals to connect teaching and learning to student achievement.
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Teachers will need professional development as they receive feedback regarding their effectiveness from multiple sources of data such as self-assessments, peer and mentor observations, student surveys, and frequent and regular feedback from walkthroughs, observations, and instructional rounds. This professional development must be targeted, aligned, and differentiated to meet the various needs of teachers.

The National Staff Development Council (2009) challenges teachers and administrators to design a professional development system in such a way that “every educator engages in effective professional learning every day so every student achieves.” This challenge urges schools and districts to create ongoing, sustained, and results-driven professional learning experiences for teachers. Designing professional learning in the 21st century subsequently will require different designs that incorporate traditional means of professional development (e.g., workshops and conferences) with 21st century methodologies. Use of popular media (e.g., classroom videos), print and digital resources (e.g., articles and text), online learning, wikis, and virtual learning communities will provide a viable means for schools and districts to provide multilayered, differentiated, and integrated professional learning for teachers. The best professional development experiences for teachers occur when they interact about what worked, what didn’t work, and why with a particular set of students INFORMED by evidence collected via observations and student data.

GETTING IT RIGHT

Marzano (Interview, 2008) has suggested that the educational field is lacking a common language/model of instruction to describe effective teaching. Having a comprehensive model in which everybody talks about teaching in the same way communicates a message that “we are serious about good teaching, we talk about teaching in this way, we expect you to think about teaching in this way and to use this model to examine your strengths and weaknesses and create a platform to allow for real reflective practice. In this way, the school or district becomes a place where you get better at teaching.”

If a common language/model of instruction is the foundation of a performance evaluation system, then a more sophisticated view of the use of research-based instructional strategies within a robust framework must be considered. Over the last 40 years, Marzano (2007) has identified 41 categories of instructional strategies. (See Appendix A – 41 Key Strategies Identified by Research for Effective Teaching and Appendix C – Meta-Analytic Synthesis of Studies Conducted at Marzano Research Laboratory on Instructional Strategies.) Focusing on any one of these areas alone misses the big picture. Effective teachers, by definition, use a complex model of teaching in their heads that varies from novice to expert teachers. This complex model, however, can be organized in elegant and simple ways that fall into segments that occur in the classroom: routines, content, enacted on the spot (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2 | Fundamental Lesson Segments (Marzano, 2007)
The 41 categories of research-based strategies can be organized into three fundamental lesson segments, allowing teachers and their observers to have a framework for identifying which set of research-based strategies is best used with different types of lessons or lesson segments (see Figure 2). This organization also helps teachers appropriately focus on a “thin slice” of instruction by engaging in deliberate practice with a target strategy. Teachers can select target strategies by using observation feedback and self-assessment data to identify focus areas of improvement. (See Appendix B — Marzano Suite Tools, pages 6-11)

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This begs the question, why the variation? How can the use of a research-based strategy vary from depressing student learning to generating substantial gains? There are several factors that can have a dramatic effect on the probability of raising student achievement with the use of research-based strategies. First, not all strategies are appropriate for all types of lessons. Certain strategies are more effective within different types of lessons. Second, each strategy has varying levels of implementation. If a teacher is using a strategy at a low level (incorrectly or with errors), the strategy most likely will not have the desired effect on student learning.

We propose Dr. Marzano’s Art and Science of Teaching Observation and Feedback Protocol powered by iObservation for consideration as a robust, research-based common language/model of instruction. It is the only one of which we are aware that identifies which research-based strategies are appropriate for different types of lessons. (See Appendix B: Marzano Suite Tools, page 7) As Figures 2 and 3 illustrate, for teachers to improve their instructional effectiveness, it is critical that they know when to use certain strategies with different types of lessons or lesson segments.
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