

# TROUBLE AREAS OF EVALUATION FOR BEGINNING TEACHERS

by Pattie Johnston, Merrie Tankersley, and Megan Civil



## Abstract

*Focusing on two areas that are difficult to demonstrate, the authors advise beginning teachers how to show student engagement and classroom discussion when they are being observed.*

**Key words:** *classroom discussion, student engagement, teacher evaluation*

**T**eacher evaluation systems are intended to allow administrators to discriminate between levels of teacher performance fairly and objectively (Marzano, 2017). This process is well-intentioned, but not without flaws. Foremost, teachers have a limited amount of time to show proficiency in many performance standards. This process is further complicated by having to adhere to a collective understanding between the new teacher and the evaluator's behavior expectations for each standard. A teacher may think that effective instructional skills are being demonstrated, but the evalua-

tor may not. To help clarify the collective understanding of expectations, most major evaluation tools have descriptions associated with the expectations. The descriptions help guide the teacher being evaluated, but there is a last concern: Not all behaviors are equally easy to demonstrate. This concern is the impetus for this article.

As experienced teacher evaluators, two of the authors noticed that there were common areas that interns and beginning teachers had difficulty demonstrating during evaluation observations. This concern prompted them to seek feedback from seven principals to see whether they were finding the same difficulties. Feedback from internship field supervisors and current elementary principals both

overwhelmingly indicated that student engagement and questioning and discussion techniques are components of effective teaching that are the most difficult for new teachers to demonstrate. The difficulty may be attributed to confusion about what the behavior means, or new teachers simply may not know how to demonstrate the expectations clearly.

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With advice provided here, beginning teachers can navigate the two problematic aspects of the formal evaluation process. Descriptions are clarified to enhance the understanding of expectations. Exact activities teachers can implement during a formal evaluation to demonstrate the two areas are described.

## Student Engagement

Student engagement is included on evaluation assessments as an indicator of teacher quality. This indicator may be challenging because teachers and their evaluators must have a clear understanding of what engagement is so that they know how it is best demonstrated. Engagement is often confused with participation. Students who are raising their hands to answer questions and who are on task are generally considered to be engaged. Therefore, if a teacher sees students raising their hands, then the teacher may assume the students are engaged.

Research has suggested that engagement differs from participation because engagement has psychological implications. Newman (1992) noted that engaged students make a psychological investment in learning as demonstrated by being proud of understanding material. Phillip Schlechty (2011), a nationally recognized engagement specialist, suggested that engagement implies a motivational basis for student learning. He operationalized engagement by delineating five levels of student engagement ranging from high to low levels. Descriptions of his levels of engagement are provided in Table 1. The list of engagement levels shown in the table may be used as a basis for a simple checklist to assess student engagement (Johnston, Beaudoin, Jones, & Waggett, 2015). Specifically, student motivation statements, as shown in the third column of Table 1, can be used to

**Table 1.** *Level Descriptions and Student Motivational Statements*

Level	Description	Student Statements
True engagement	Student sees the activity as personally meaningful.	I loved learning today.
Strategic compliance	Student works to get a good grade.	I wanted to get a good grade today.
Ritual compliance	Student works to avoid getting in trouble.	I did not want to get in trouble today.
Retreatism	Student is not doing the work but not misbehaving.	I did not do the work today.
Rebellion	Student is disengaged and acting out.	I misbehaved today.

measure engagement in the classroom for each level.

Teachers can create a clearly labeled table, headed “Student Engagement Today,” that is divided into five sections. Each section can contain a heading with one of the motivation statements. To prepare for observation, and also to improve student engagement, the beginning teacher can teach the lesson and then ask each student to put a sticky note under the statement that best reflects his or her engagement level during that lesson. Data may be aggregated by tallying the number of sticky notes under each of the five categories and then calculating percentages associated with each category. A teacher can improve engagement rates by comparing engagement data across delivery styles to determine what types of teaching are associated with higher levels of engagement. For example, teachers could compare engagement level numbers of lecture lessons versus collaborative learning lessons. This system demonstrates a research-based assessment of student engagement and provides data that could inform instruction.

## Questioning and Discussion Techniques

Most teacher evaluation tools also examine the questioning and discussion techniques

used in the classroom to deepen student understanding of a topic. Quality questions tend to be divergent rather than convergent—structured in ways that encourage students to form opinions, make connections, or challenge their current views (Boyd, 2016). These types of questions promote thinking, encourage students to make connections between prior knowledge and new concepts, and help them arrive at new understandings of multifaceted material. Class discussions should be lively and thought-provoking to get students excited about learning and to increase their knowledge base.

Questioning and discussion techniques may be another difficult indicator for beginning teachers to demonstrate. Some teachers confuse discussion with recitation. Recitation is demonstrated when students provide answers to a teacher’s (usually low-level) questions. In a true discussion, the teacher skillfully enables all students’ views to be heard on a topic and successfully engages students in discussion directly with one another and not always mediated by the teacher.

To extend recitation, a teacher should ask mostly open-ended, higher-level thinking questions that are correlated directly with the lesson objectives and that challenge students’ thinking. Experienced teachers may be able to ask

these questions spontaneously. Newer teachers should take the time to write these questions on an index card. To generate the questions, they can use Bloom's or Costa's question stems. For example, if they are teaching character traits, they can ask, "How did the main character's traits affect the other characters in the story?" This question represents the analysis level of Bloom's Taxonomy (Kelly, 2019). An example of Costa's level 3 would be "What evidence supports student A's response that the main character is selfish?" (Wolpert-Gawron, 2010). Teachers should ensure that there are multiple possible answers and that the answers may spark differences in opinion. To have a meaningful conversation, teachers will want to make sure that students have the necessary knowledge base or previous content knowledge to apply to the questions.

Another tip to extend recitation is to remember to give "wait time." A teacher should not call on a student until after he or she has asked the question and waited 5 seconds. One technique is to ask a question, then hold up a fist. The teacher slowly opens the fist one finger at a time. This should take a full 5 seconds. Students may not raise their hands to answer the question until the fist is open and the hand is in the position of a high five.

Another reason new teachers may have trouble demonstrating effective questioning and discussion is because they have a few students who like to dominate discussions. This domination violates the underpinnings of good interactions that call for shared student responsibility. Teachers can use a variety of techniques to ensure that all students participate in the discussion.

To counter dominance by some students and get everyone involved in the conversation, new teachers can enhance

discussion through accountable talk stems (i.e., stems that remind students to base their responses on evidence) posted in the room, turn and talks, and talking chips. *Talk stems* are sentence starters that encourage responses to other students' comments. For example, "I disagree with [student's name] because . . ." *Turn and talks* require students to turn to a partner and dive deeper into a concept instead of just one student responding to the teacher's question. *Talking chips* are manipulatives (e.g., counters, paper tokens) given to students during small-group discussions. Each time a student wants to speak, he or she "spends" a chip by placing the chip in the center of the group's table. Usually, each student is given two chips, and once the chips are used, that student cannot take them back out of the center until everyone has "spent" his or her chips. Teachers can also use coins and call it putting in your own "2 cents." The teacher may also want to try calling on students randomly by pulling a Popsicle stick with a student's name on it from a jar (or by using a student selection app) rather than having students raise their hands.

Meaningful discussions foster students' talking among themselves without ongoing intervention by the teacher. Think of a basketball game in which the students are passing the imaginary ball of questions to one another instead of a ping pong match between the teacher and one student at a time. It is also helpful to have the students prepare for discussion in advance by answering preliminary questions independently or by completing a graphic organizer; then have accountable talk question stems posted in the room. This preparation may not always be necessary if the students have strong content knowledge and the teacher is hoping for a genuine discussion; but if the topic is

complex or if a student needs accommodations, it may be critical.

## Teacher Takeaways

One of the more difficult experiences for a beginning teacher is to demonstrate proficiency in his or her first formal observation for evaluation. This article provided guidance and direction from experienced evaluators for two of the more problematic areas. In addition to these, the authors recommend two overarching strategies. The first suggestion is that teachers clearly label everything so that the evaluator does not have to guess what is being demonstrated. As mentioned earlier, the engagement table with the five motivation statements should be labeled "Student Engagement Today" so that it is perfectly clear what the teacher is demonstrating. There could also be a table with provocative question stems that is clearly labeled "Accountable Talk Question Stems" for the same reason. The teacher should make it very easy for an evaluator to recognize which instructional standard is being fulfilled. Secondly, teachers should practice these suggested activities before formal observation so that the students are familiar with the process. Teachers should be prepared and take a deep breath! ■

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