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FEATURE

A clearer view of the classroom

Video emerges as an advanced evaluation tool that offers more depth to teachers and administrators

By: Deborah Yaffe

District Administration, May 2015

The classroom video camera saw it all.

Watching the playback, one teacher realized that she gave her students too little time to answer the questions she posed. Another teacher finally understood why her supervisor found her pacing was too slow. A third teacher used the footage to seek help managing a disruptive student who had spent the lesson bouncing a golf ball off the chalkboard.



A fourth grade teacher at Cornelius Elementary School in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools is evaluated by video.

Those educators were among hundreds participating in Harvard's recently concluded Best Foot Forward Project, which studied a new approach to [teacher evaluation](#): Using teacher-selected classroom videos instead of the traditional drop-in observation by a principal.

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emerging as one tool for standardizing and enhancing the sometimes perfunctory ritual of classroom observation.

Anecdotal evidence supports the approach, and preliminary results of Harvard's randomized, controlled trial are promising, says Miriam Greenberg, project director at Harvard's Center for

“Teachers got more from the feedback they got, and trusted it more,” Greenberg says. “This process is really professionalizing and exciting for teachers who are seeing themselves grow.”

Although statistics on how many districts are using video-based evaluation are hard to come by, superintendents who have introduced video into their evaluation systems praise its convenience and reliability, and say it enriches conversations about professional practice.

“Teachers want feedback—all professionals want feedback,” says Sandi Jacobs, vice president of the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ). “If you’re doing a good job, you want to do a great job. This is another mechanism that can help us help teachers move forward.”

Rewinding the tape

Classroom observations are a linchpin of teacher evaluation in nearly every state: all but six require observations, a 2013 NCTQ report found, and nearly half the states require multiple annual observations for at least some teachers. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation’s 2009-12 Measures of Effective Teaching study found that multiple observations conducted by multiple observers yielded the most reliable ratings of teacher performance.

Using video for the professional development of teachers is not a new idea: the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards requires teachers to include short video clips in their applications for board certification. Teacher-educator Doug Lemov, author of *Teach Like a Champion*, relies on video in his development work.

“Teaching happens fast,” Lemov says, “and having a video means you can watch a moment, roll it back, watch it again, think about it, roll it back, watch it again and study it in a way that respects the rigor of the decisions that teachers make in the classroom.”

But using videos for evaluation, in place of classroom visits, is a newer development, encouraged in part by the Measures of Effective Teaching study, which found that classroom videos were reliable indicators of teacher quality, even when teachers chose which clips to show their principals, and excluding other clips.

One advantage of video is its flexibility: finding time for multiple required classroom visits can burden

Using video to train administrators

Video can serve as a substitute for the traditional unannounced classroom observation, but it also has a role to play in training administrators to conduct those observations.

Evaluators-in-training can watch video of teachers at work and learn how to apply assessment standards to particular teaching techniques. By contrast, there’s no guarantee that trainee evaluators will encounter the technique they need to study when they are sent into classrooms.

“You can’t have 30 people watching the same lesson, except through video,” says Steve Cantrell, senior program officer at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and co-director of Gates’ 2009-12 Measures of Effective Teaching study. “Video allows you to standardize your training.”

Two years ago, as New Jersey prepared to launch a new teacher evaluation system, the 1,100-student Eatontown Public Schools began piloting an approach based on education researcher Charlotte Danielson’s Framework for Teaching.

To train observers in the new method, district leaders turned to Teachscape, which has an online evaluation management

overstretched principals, but videos chosen by teachers and uploaded to a secure server can be viewed and scored outside of school hours.

“Some people do the observation work in their pajamas on a Saturday,” says Greenberg, of Harvard’s Best Foot Forward study.

Deep reflections

Using video also has greater benefits, say district leaders that use it. Teachers find themselves reflecting deeply on their practice as they view recordings of their lessons and decide which videos to send to the principal.

“You learn a lot about yourself when you watch yourself teach on video,” says Scott Muri, deputy superintendent of Georgia’s 96,000-student Fulton County Schools, where 150 teachers participated in the Best Foot Forward study.

Already, principals whose schools were not included in the study have begun using video in their teacher evaluation process, Muri says.

And with video evidence settling arguments over what did or didn’t happen in the classroom, the principal-teacher conversations that follow the observations are more productive and less adversarial.

“When you provide someone with evaluative information, oftentimes there’s a desk in between the two of you—the evaluator sitting on one side and you sitting on the other,” says Samantha Fuhrey, superintendent of the 20,000-student Newton County Schools in Georgia. With video, “the conversation is transformed now, where we’re both sitting on the same side of the desk talking about ways to improve.”

Fuhrey’s district, which did not participate in the Harvard study, installed classroom video cameras as a security measure after the 2012 school shooting in Newtown, Connecticut. Only later did the district begin using the cameras to cover one of the two annual observations required under Georgia’s new teacher evaluation system—and even then only for teachers who opted in.

Video also allowed Newton County administrators to work with out-of-state consultants at Insight Education Group, who gave teachers long-distance math coaching that the district—which lacks a math coordinator—could not supply. The video-enabled coaching helped raise student scores on a statewide algebra exam, Fuhrey says.

Unlike in-person observation, video also permits after-the-fact checking of evaluators’ ratings, says Gates Foundation senior program officer Steve Cantrell, who co-directed the Measures of Effective Teaching study. “In terms of protecting the teacher’s rights, it’s superior to any other form,” Cantrell says.

A matter of trust

Introducing video into a teacher evaluation process requires careful planning. Video equipment ranges in cost: Fuhrey’s Georgia district spent \$3,000 per classroom for permanently installed 360-degree video cameras. The Best Foot Forward study used

system. And it includes various videos showcasing the work of teachers performing at different levels on Danielson’s standards.

“For consistency purposes and even for calibration purposes, those online videos are really important,” says Eatontown Superintendent Scott McCue. “It has helped as an administrative team to make sure that, as we’re assigning 1s, 2s, 3s and 4s to teachers, that we’re all on the same page in terms of what that scoring looks like.”

an iPad Mini on a swivel, at a total per-teacher cost of about \$650-\$700. Even smartphones can sometimes record well enough for evaluation purposes, experts say.

Occasional technology glitches, such as dead batteries and failed audio, are inevitable, and both teachers and administrators must be trained to shoot, edit, upload and tag videos. That's on top of the far more extensive work required to train evaluators in scoring teacher performance.

Inside schools, generation gaps can manifest themselves—more traditional teachers may be less willing to be filmed than are their younger colleagues.

“We’re seeing a generation of teachers coming in who are much more comfortable having their image captured,” says Mike Lee, director of outreach and engagement for the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. “They’re taking selfies. They’re not uncomfortable with their image being on film.”

Teachers also worry about their own and their students’ privacy, says Adriane Dorrington, senior policy analyst for the National Education Association.

“It’s one thing for you to come in as an evaluator and sit in the classroom—I know it’s not going to show up on any other site,” Dorrington says. “With a video taping what’s happening in my classroom, I have no idea where this data may eventually end up, how this data may be used.”

Indeed, questions of trust dominate discussions about the use of video in teacher evaluation. In some education circles, the involvement of the powerful Gates Foundation has raised fears about potential corporate profiteering from the public schools: In a 2013 TED talk, Bill Gates suggested that it could cost \$5 billion to install video technology in the nation’s classrooms.

And the tone of the national dialogue around teacher evaluation has left some teachers gun-shy about the motivations behind proposed changes to the process. “When this new round of discussion of teacher evaluation started, it was about getting rid of bad teachers,” Dorrington says. “It was never about improving practice.”

Cultivating buy-in

To soothe such fears, teachers should control access to classroom cameras, choose the videos they submit to evaluators and, if they prefer, stick with traditional classroom visits, superintendents say. “There’s no Big Brother here at all,” says Fuhrey, the Newton County superintendent. “There’s no gotcha feeling to it when you record yourself.”

Every month, Fuhrey’s district hosts visitors from school systems around the country who are interested in using video. Recently, she persuaded a fellow superintendent not to install a camera system designed to let administrators peer into teachers’ classrooms at any time.

“If you have to babysit your teachers like that, then you need new teachers,” Fuhrey says. “The point is for improving professional practice and keeping teachers and kids and school staff safer.”

Consulting teachers in the development of the video-based evaluation system is key to encouraging participation, says Muri, the deputy superintendent in Georgia’s

Fulton County Schools.

“There needs to be buy-in, and so this is not something that I would impose upon teachers if I were the principal,” says Muri. “It’s an opportunity that you offer to teachers, and you allow teachers to opt in to this opportunity. Those teachers that are typically focused on improvement will be the first to raise their hand.”

Deborah Yaffe is a freelance writer based in New Jersey.

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