

Organize and Facilitate a Teacher Monitoring Process

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Introduction

Doctor training, secretarial training, teacher training, dog training, nurse training, management training. Do any of these terms irritate you? If not, perhaps the approach used when you learned to teach was amenable to your educational growth at the time. But at some point in your career development, you need to think about why you are teaching the way you do, why you are teaching what you teach, and even why you are teaching at all. Not doing this results in being a teacher technician. Some educators may think that teaching puppets are what schools want, but this attitude is part of the problem that has caused the inadequate state of most educational systems today.

In this paper I will describe, briefly, a self-directed approach to teacher development that provides an opportunity to experiment and grow in intellectually stimulating circumstances by using several techniques and instruments. Advocates of the Self-Monitoring Process (henceforth SMP) process have become enthusiastic, critical thinkers, involved in classroom research, and continually expanding or improving their ideas and approaches to teaching. They have learned how to interpret the interaction in their classrooms, and then manage this interaction in a way that encourages learning. Important components that lead to this kind of understanding include classroom videotaping, peer observation in classrooms, and group discussion sessions. Several other techniques will be enumerated which were deemed to be successful by different groups involved in the process. But the key in this process is the attitude of the teachers who decide it is an excellent approach to teacher development, and who want to study the philosophy behind it and get it started in their own teaching environments. Some books and articles listed at the end of this paper will help teachers start this process.

Background

First, since this is a practical article, I will not give the research background for this approach, although there has been a growing interest in this kind of teacher

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development since about 1980. The suggestions presented are based on a review of research in professional development and an on-going study conducted during the last few years with the help of teachers at a few schools and universities. I will relate some of the innumerable benefits that resulted for the teachers, the students, and the school. Then, I will suggest several techniques and instruments that could be used and the roles teachers should assume during the process. Finally, some steps on how to start the process will be described. This information is not presented in detail since it is evident that most teachers, with help from some of the instruments and techniques described, have enough insight and creativity to construct a SMP and adapt it to their teaching situations. Nevertheless, for full benefits to emerge from the SMP, a critical spirit and an awareness of the variables affecting teaching environments is paramount to change and improvement. In devising this process the psychology of adult learning and the diversity of professional and personal factors affecting teachers was considered at each stage.

Teacher self-monitoring through this group process may be a better approach to assessment and development than any other form of professional advancement since: (1) It can be initiated and controlled by teachers; (2) It can be individualized to teachers' specific needs; (3) It is efficient due to the reasons stated above, and also because they are choosing their specific foci, members, interventions, etc.; (4) It is effective since teachers realize benefits immediately due to interventions chosen, and due to collegial feedback, support and camaraderie; (5) It is not expensive and time-consuming since teachers are pooling their accumulated knowledge and sharing their wisdom; (6) It is a process that may promote broad changes within the school and the community; (7) It is efficacious since it has specific and individual teacher goals. The significance of these seven benefits, especially their viability and plasticity, is that they lead teachers towards a feeling of control and ownership of the process.

If teachers have less formal teacher education, this approach can still be adapted to their needs since it begins with the immediate needs of the teachers, then proceeds along the lines they define as necessary for future development. In these cases more direct instruction with many opportunities for guided practice, including the assistance of experienced mentors, workshops, and outside experts will be necessary.

The Self-Monitoring Process or SMP--What is it?

The self-monitoring process is a three-way, interactive monitoring system which considers the immediate needs of teachers, students, and the school as a whole; the teachers however are the primary features since they are the agents who are more knowledgeable concerning the reality of the classroom and what can occur there to

improve classroom learning. The students also become involved due to the implementation of classroom research and other changes initiated by the teacher. The administration of the school becomes involved through their support of the SMP projects and attendance at specific sessions to which they are invited.

The SMP is based on the principle that teachers need to systematically and critically observe, study, reflect, and analyze what occurs in the classrooms where they teach in order to understand what kinds of plans they can implement to improve instruction. The process assists them in following through with these objectives using their own personalized plans (their SMP) which incorporate various techniques, whether they be peer classroom observation, structured and intense discussion sessions, or persistent collegial support.

What is important for the success of the SMP is for teachers to realize that they have the potential for self-assessment, self-direction, flexibility, and creativity; that they are not simply classroom technicians, but agents of change in the social, cultural, political, and psychological arenas; and that if they procrastinate in their own development, they will lose an important chance for teacher empowerment. I will attempt to outline how a system could be structured and implemented that could lead to this self-directed empowerment.

The SMP has been designed to be used by small groups of teachers as a collegial, as well as an individual form of self-monitoring. A few small groups of up to seven teachers meet alone, and sometimes, together with the other small groups at predetermined times. There should be one coordinator of all the groups, but the facilitation of each group should be a shared responsibility. Of course, a school could have only one group. The discussion sessions might be compared to *think tank* sessions, board meetings, quality circles, or collaborative team projects; although besides being a dynamic group environment, there is a certain amount of structure, depending on the needs of the teachers. One important advantage between the SMP sessions over the aforementioned groups is that all members have a personalized plan (their SMP) they create together, suited to their specific needs.

Several schools and universities in the United States and Canada are using some form of self-monitoring to encourage teachers to enhance their teaching; some are teacher-initiated and others are started by their administrators. Terms used to look up research in this area include: collegial interaction, peer- or mentor-tutoring, peer-coaching, teachers teaching teachers, collaborative learning, action research, career and professional development, burn-out remedies, self- and peer-evaluation, etc.

Benefits of the SMP

Six overall benefits are outlined below, but many more will become evident as the teachers become involved in the process. For instance, if teachers are from different countries, a tapestry of cultural experiences on education will be exchanged; if they need oral practice in a second or foreign language at a more intellectual level than classroom discourse, the discussions that ensue will provide this aspect; if they need more self-confidence in their classroom management behaviours, it will be provided by the diversity and stimulation of the SMP tasks. The following features are the more salient advantages of the SMP.

- (1) One paramount feature of this process is that the teacher development projects emerge from the faculty themselves, rather than being imposed by administrative levels. Teachers will share their concerns and needs, thus identifying the most significant dilemmas where they teach. The influence of the more dynamic and creative teachers will be felt by the others in the group, but a camaraderie, respect, and more tolerance for each other will flourish in this process.
- (2) Teachers choose the instruments and techniques which are the most conducive to their specific teaching environments, and they all share the responsibilities needed to use the instruments or techniques, which have the effect of building group cohesion.
- (3) Implicit in their choice to be involved in this kind of process is the concept of voluntary career development, which inevitably leads to a better professional self-concept. Their teaching may become easier, exciting, and even excellent.
- (4) Also implicit in the SMP is the important understanding that teachers will be giving and expecting honest feedback and lots of intellectual and emotional support from others in the group.
- (5) During the discussion sessions, teachers will develop a personalized plan for self-monitoring of their teaching situations with help from their colleagues. They will discover new techniques to improve their teaching that often become a regular aspect of their teaching repertoires. For example, writing pertinent notes during class in their lesson planning notebooks for future research projects, subscribing to and reading more professional journals, or videotaping classroom interaction, revising *curriculum* writers are some actions that were taken by SMP teachers. Self-reflection and risk-taking are two of the important behaviors which usually increase; and, with these behaviors come noticeable and positive attitudinal changes.
- (6) The SMP is a user-friendly project that is not difficult to start, re-establish, and continue in some form after it has been used for at least one semester. One or more teachers in the group usually become enthusiastic about the process; hence continuing or re-starting SMP among teachers, rather than it being initiated and structured by

administrators, becomes something teachers want to do, for their own benefit. For some teachers it becomes a panacea for professional burnout.

Techniques and Instruments Involved in the SMP

The specific techniques and instruments used to achieve self-established goals depend on the needs of the teachers involved. The two primary techniques include discussion sessions which include up to seven teachers, and videotaping of teachers in their classrooms and/or classroom observation by colleagues. Division administrators, TESOL graduate students, or SMP teachers could substitute teachers' classes while they observe a colleague's class.

Observation of teachers has specific guidelines that should be investigated, reported to the group, and discussed. A portfolio of observation notes and other written materials should be kept by each teacher, since all observations should be discussed before and afterwards, either in pairs or in larger groups.

The school administrators should provide teachers with a suitable room for the discussion and video-reviewing sessions, and a SMP portfolio to hold observation notes and other project materials. The teacher/administrator interaction depends on the dynamics of the particular school; an ideal SMP process could result if there were no conflicts between the two.

Other techniques used and topics discussed during the process which have been tried might include:

- (1) one-to-one video-reviewing sessions with a trusted colleague or an objective consultant.
- (2) small-group (3 to 4 teachers), study, discussion, or video-reviewing sessions.
- (3) teacher journal writing, which could also be called interim SMP summaries, research project reports, critical reflections, self-observation, etc.
- (4) reports to the group on new classroom ideas, techniques, innovative materials, or methods a teacher wants to try or to perfect, or to adapt to a different group of students.
- (5) papers or workshops given by group members to practice and perfect a convention presentation.
- (6) feedback on research a teacher wants to write and publish.
- (7) sharing of ideas from conventions or workshops attended by group members.
- (8) collaborating on research projects.
- (9) short summaries of pertinent and provocative journal articles for discussion purposes.

- (10) sessions to practice new classroom techniques, games, etc.
- (11) workplace conflict discussion sessions.
- (12) solution-oriented complaint and tension-release sessions.
- (13) colloquiums or workshops presented by outside professionals on topics and techniques teachers consider necessary.

All of the above situations and sessions actually occurred in SMP projects among teachers. Some of the instruments teachers used were: recorders to audiotape their own classroom teacher-talk and/or student discourse, self- and teacher-evaluation checklists, classroom interaction questionnaires, thought-provoking pedagogical videos, and timetables for SMP goals and events.

Students are usually included in certain aspects of the process; this has the effect of increasing their motivation. Their involvement and input will also increase the teacher's motivation as they work on projects together.

Responsibilities and roles assumed by members

The roles listed below should be shared by the teachers involved for it to be a success. Each teacher will volunteer to assume some specific roles that contribute to the implementation of the various chosen techniques. For example, some are essential roles and should be shared, while others are roles that will be naturally assumed by the members who have expertise in certain areas.

- (1) Set-up and organize the SMP projects with a timetable listing when sessions will occur. Send memos and session agendas to teachers concerning upcoming sessions.
- (2) Monitor and lead the various kinds of sessions.
- (3) Inform members about group dynamics and leading a group.
- (4) Help teachers organize and write their SMP program, analyze the feasibility of each teacher's goals and recommend viable options, especially if goals are not clear, too unrealistic, etc.
- (5) Serve as a resource for readings, videos, and other materials, such as well-known observation instruments.
- (6) Record noteworthy factors and results of teacher's SMP projects and discussion sessions (however small they seem) in order to analyze the effectiveness of the sessions. If agreeable to the teachers, some sessions could be recorded on audio- or video-tape for analysis.
- (7) Act as sounding boards for objective peer feedback.
- (8) Analyze the effectiveness of the various sessions.
- (9) Guide each other toward more effective sessions.

- (10) Recommend options and share ideas to enhance and improve the monitoring process of all the groups.
- (11) Provide a supportive and stimulating atmosphere.
- (12) Arrange or recommend professional workshops.
- (13) Encourage teachers to try to practice new techniques.
- (14) Organize and prepare meeting places for the sessions.

Teachers will find other roles or new dimensions to those listed above which are suited to their teaching situations; and as they become involved, they will develop more commitment to their chosen roles. Perhaps the roles could be formalized by giving them titles, such as session monitor, librarian, session recorder, materials developer, colloquium or workshop committee, linguistic consultant, administrative consultant, public relations expert, video technician, etc.

Starting the process

Promoting and advertising the process requires a special teacher or teachers who have the professional savvy to do this in their particular schools. After a needs assessment, which would be addressed at the first discussion session, the group will decide on the instruments with which they want to begin. As the process evolves, typically several instruments will be chosen, and perhaps, later discarded as ineffective for the group as a whole or for particular teachers.

Forming SMP groups

The groups may be formed according to the topics and techniques on which they want to focus, then other teachers could choose the groups with whom they want to work according to what interests them. Choosing a group with whom one wants to participate and develop their SMP could depend on various criteria. For example, clustering of teachers into groups could depend on factors such as: personalities involved, available time slots, and the dynamics of the pedagogical divisions in the school. But, groups should try to maintain the same members throughout the process to encourage and build a trusting and supportive atmosphere, since an open atmosphere is a necessity for honest discussion of problems teachers encounter.

Sessions: Discussions and video-viewing

Discussion and video-viewing sessions should be scheduled from three to four weeks apart, to preserve continuity in the process. These sessions should last at least

two hours. Each teacher should offer to organize and lead some sessions. The discussion sessions should be held in a quiet and calm environment in which teachers feel comfortable to talk about their teaching problems. There should be no outside noise or interruptions; if there is a lot of noise, classical music in the background may be helpful.

All sessions involve a written agenda that is prepared before the session, generally at the end of the previous session. The agenda for discussion will evolve from the needs of the group and from a natural progression of events, but typically, topics will range from pragmatic themes such as specific classroom techniques to philosophical issues such as the political nature of English language teaching. Or, some teachers may want to discuss tentative weekly lesson plans, and then when they meet again, discuss the outcomes and options to improve their plans. A memorandum should be sent to teachers to remind them of topics to be discussed, articles to be read, or other responsibilities they have assumed for the upcoming session.

Videotaping

Videotaping of each teacher's classes should be scheduled by the teachers themselves, so they can plan ahead for this event. A video-technician or a teacher familiar with using video equipment should discuss with the other teachers the technical aspects and the idiosyncrasies of classroom videotaping. For example, some problems that should be discussed include: how to ameliorate *stagefright*, what aspects of classroom interaction to include in the film, and how often teachers should be filmed. Teachers are encouraged to share selected parts of their videotaped classes with specific colleagues or the whole group to get positive feedback. Groups could analyze videos of classroom teaching by teachers they do not know in order to help them analyze their own videos. A mini-workshop could be organized on classroom videotaping since there are certain aspects of videotaping and reviewing classroom videos that are important to know to insure beneficial results.

Progress sessions

About every two months all the groups come together to share their progress, even if teachers feel there has not been as much as was expected. Teachers should invite administrators to some of these sessions, and of course they should come to show their support of what the teachers are trying to accomplish. Since teachers are a more or less conservative group, it will become evident that the more drastic the desired change, the longer it will take to become part of a teacher's repertoire of behaviors;

and some changes may even occur after the project ends. The SMP is an approach that should be viewed as a long-term means of professional rejuvenation, not an ad-hoc remedy to workplace problems.

The various projects involving collegial interaction will reveal certain attitudes or beliefs of the teachers which may not have been evident to them or perhaps erroneous views will be detected by group members from what a teacher is outwardly expressing. This could become a sensitive situation, but since one goal of this process is to help teachers clarify their espoused beliefs, this should be expected. Teachers operate on several levels: what they think they are doing, what they say they are doing, and what they really are doing. Members of this process must be honest with themselves and with other members of the groups in achieving consistency in these facets of their behavior or the process will not succeed to its fullest extent.

Usually a few teachers involved in the process will become advocates of the SMP and continue it in some form in their teaching environments. Having parts of some discussion sessions filmed, keeping a written record of the progress of members, and filing the classroom videos will help restart the process.

Conclusion

The beauty of this process is that teachers can choose issues that will benefit them in their own teaching situations, but the collaborative and self-improvement aspects will provide the keystone which holds the SMP projects together. Teachers become responsible to the group suggesting solutions or prescribing actions necessary to assure successful implementation of SMP plans. Most teachers are capable of developing a process of self-monitoring specific to their needs, with the help of some of the instruments and techniques mentioned above, but the common denominator are a few teachers who are enthusiastic about initiating and sharing the process with other teachers. During the process teachers will come to realize that they are often their own best source of pedagogical knowledge and inspiration, and that the collaboration and cooperation provided by the discussion sessions and their techniques used in the SMP, benefits each teacher in their individual endeavors. Their successes during this time will result in more satisfied, though critically reflective, teachers, more effective and efficient teacher performance, and ultimately, to more student achievement.

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