



How Can Classroom Observations Support the Development of Teachers' Formative Assessment Practices

E. Caroline Wylie and Margaret Heritage

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This brief provides a complement to the discussion on the role of peer-led classroom observations to support teachers' improvement of formative assessment practice at the AfLC virtual meeting on March 17, 2025.

We are all too familiar with the sighs and groans that might accompany the announcement of a mandatory professional learning day to take place just before the new school year gets started. For some teachers the content will be irrelevant, for others too basic, and for others still, the lack of practical guidance around implementation means they will never think about the topic again after the conclusion of the learning session, even if it was interesting.

RESEARCH ON SUSTAINING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Simon Sims and his colleagues (2024) conducted an empirical review of the literature and identified four mechanisms of effective professional development:

- Motivate teachers to make changes to their practice;
- Provide insight about teaching and learning;
- Provide techniques for putting these insights to work; and
- Embed change in practice.

They concluded that *“the number of mechanisms incorporated in a PD programme is associated with greater impact of the PD on test scores”* and *“balanced PD programs [those that include all four mechanisms] do have higher average effect sizes than imbalanced PD programs”*.ⁱ In other words, attending to all four mechanisms generally leads to more successful learning outcomes. This research helps us understand why PD events like the one described above are not successful: teacher motivation is unclear, and while the content may have provided insights about teaching and learning, the absence of practical guidance or opportunities to put ideas into practice in an ongoing way resulted in a one-and-done professional learning event that will have little lasting impact.

HOW CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS CAN SUPPORT PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

In this AfLC session we were specifically interested in the ways that well-supported classroom observations, conducted by peers for peers, can meet the mechanisms of effective professional learning and thus contribute to teachers' improving their classroom formative assessment practices. Table 1 illustrates ways in which classroom observations can support each of these four mechanisms.

Table 1: How Classroom Observations Can Serve as Effective Professional Learning

Characteristics of Effective Professional Learning	Ways in Which Observations can Support This
Motivate teachers to make changes to their practice	Seeing other teachers have success with aspects of formative assessment can provide local existence proofs which can be motivational.
Provide insight about teaching and learning	Rubrics that define a range of quality of practice can help more fully articulate a definition of formative assessment.
Provide techniques for putting these insights to work	Rubrics, exemplars, and seeing other teachers' practice can expose a teacher to ways of enacting the formative assessment process.
Embed change in practice	• Setting up mechanisms to support regular observations – whether walk-throughs or sharing video of classroom practice for feedback with peers can create feedback cycles that support teacher learning. • Feedback prompts reflection on own practice

As should be clear from Table 1, for classroom observations to serve as effective PD, there [needs to be appropriate structures in place](#) such as rubrics and exemplars to guide and inform observations, along with practical supports such as technology tools to record lessons or coverage for teachers to visit each other's classrooms. Research studies have demonstrated that there are benefits for teachers who can engage in these practices, as observations are less threatening than formal teacher evaluations, can occur more frequently, and may be more motivating when feedback is reciprocal.

[Research Studies](#)

A couple of notable studies were discussed. One larger-scale, [two-year, experimental study of low-stakes teacher peer observations](#) was implemented in the U.K. with 82 schools.ⁱⁱ Teachers were assigned to observer and observee roles. The study found that peer observations and discussions had a positive, meaningful impact on student learning outcomes.

Kohut and colleagues demonstrated that [teachers valued both observer and observee roles](#) and felt the process held the potential to improve teaching and learning, through either direct feedback or by helping them better engage in self-assessment of their own practice.ⁱⁱⁱ

Another longitudinal study examined the [impact of voluntary peer observations](#).^{iv} Teachers from 18 schools in Portugal worked in groups of four to complete observation activities. After each observation, they completed reflection prompts to describe what they learned from the process. The authors examined more than 500 reflections and found that the majority referenced the benefits of the collaborative learning process and improvements in the participating teachers'

learning and development. For example, teachers identified changes in teaching practice made within the groups of four teachers and also how the ideas generated spread to other teachers within the schools.

COMMONALITIES

Across the various studies of classroom observations and supported teacher learning, some common features or considerations include the following:

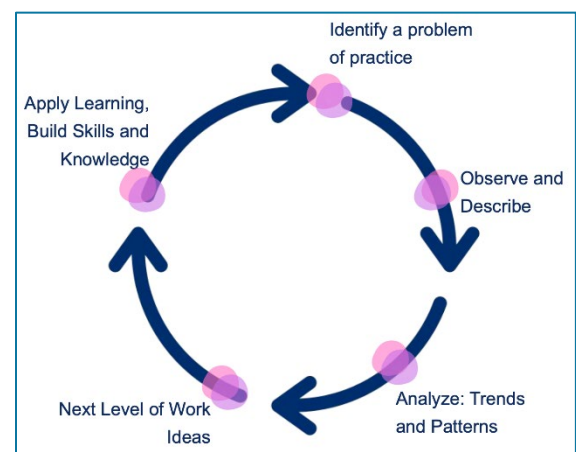
- Use of look-fors or rubrics to establish boundaries of the observation.^v
- Observer Training to improve the quality of feedback.^{vi}
- Pairing of teachers: same or different subject areas (may be constrained by practicalities)
- Consider teacher agency and provide freedom to select a partner or area of focus.^{vii}
- Specific training on how to communicate about what was observed and provide feedback. Helen Timperley noted confusion among student teachers when mentors communicated with them indirectly or obliquely, rather than directly, often providing advice without a rationale. As a result, students were unclear about what problem the feedback was addressing.^{viii} Timperley used several strategies when training mentors including:
 - basing dialogue on observed data;
 - sharing responsibility for identifying strengths and challenges;
 - discussing reasons for particular practices being strengths or problems.
- Importance of reflection and planning next steps.^{ix}

AFLC MEMBERS USING OBSERVATIONS

Three examples of practice were shared by AFLC members.

From [San Diego County Public Schools](#), John Spiegel and Melissa Spadin shared their use of an [Instructional Rounds Model](#) to support teachers in determining instructional and assessment areas of focus that will increase student engagement and learning. The focus of the observations is on collecting specific evidence of what students are engaging in learning.

Jenna Fisher, Anna Mackinnon, and Jeremy Zuniga shared work taking place in [Chicago Public Schools](#), in



which school leadership teams are observing classroom which has lead to some principal-facing learning sessions focused on formative assessment to deepen leaders knowledge so that they in turn can become more effective instructional leaders.

In Michigan the FAME program is a long-term, multi-faceted professional learning program focused on formative assessment. [Mary Helen Diegel presented on the role of classroom observations as part of the work of FAME learning teams.](#) Teachers can use the four-stage rubric for any of the elements both as a self-assessment practice and as a focus for a peer observer. Peers know in advance the specific element(s) of focus which bound the scope of their comments.

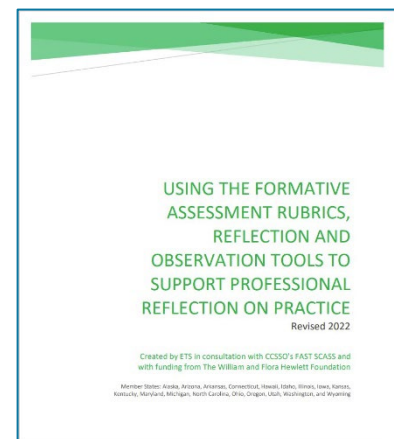
Table 1: FAME Components and Elements

Guiding Questions	FAME Components and Elements
<i>Where are we (teacher and students) going?</i>	Planning 1.1—Instructional Planning: planning based on knowledge of the content, standards, pedagogy, formative assessment process, and students. Learning Target Use 2.1—Designing Learning Targets: the use and communication of daily instructional aims with the students 2.2—Learning Progressions: connection of the learning target to past and future learning 2.3—Models of Proficient Achievement: examples of successful work for students to use as a guide.
<i>What does the student understand now?</i>	Eliciting Evidence of Student Understanding 3.1—Activating Prior Knowledge: the opportunity for students to self-assess or connect new ideas to their prior knowledge 3.2—Gathering Evidence of Student Understanding: use of a variety of tools and strategies to gather information about student thinking and understanding regarding the learning targets from all students 3.3—Teacher Questioning Strategies: the intentional use of questions for students to explain their thinking or to connect their idea to another student's response 3.4—Skillful Use of Questions: a focus on the purpose, timing, and audience for questions to deliver content and to check students' understanding
<i>How do we (teacher and students) get to the learning target?</i>	Formative Feedback 4.1—Feedback from the Teacher: verbal or written feedback to a student to improve his or her achievement of the learning target 4.2—Feedback from Peers: feedback from one student to another student about his or her learning in relation to a learning target 4.3—Student Self-Assessment: the process in which students gather information and reflect on their own learning in relation to the learning goal. Instructional and Learning Decisions 5.1—Adjustments to Teaching: teachers' daily decisions about changes to instruction 5.2—Adjustments to Learning: students' use of feedback for improvement.

Source: FAME Learning Guide: Developing and Implementing the Formative Assessment Process in Michigan, Michigan Department of Education. (Kintz, et al. 2018).

RESOURCE

One resource that has been used by several states is *The Formative Assessment Rubrics, Reflection and Observation Tools to Support Professional Reflection on Practice* (FARROP). FARROP has ten dimensions (e.g., presentation of learning goals, use of classroom questions to elicit student thinking). The associated rubrics describe the quality of practice on that dimension, from beginning to extending, with the intention to support both teacher self-reflection and peer feedback.^x



Located at: https://www.oregon.gov/ode/educator-resources/teachingcontent/Documents/FARROP_Rubrics_Revised_2022.pdf

QUESTIONS FOR AFLC MEMBERS TO CONSIDER

1. How could we further explore with our AfLC colleagues, the role of classroom observations to support teacher practice of formative assessment in schools?
2. From a district perspective, what opportunities could be leveraged or barriers need to be reduced to make effective use of classroom observations?
3. From a state perspective, are there examples of district-level practices related to classroom observations that could be shared?
4. Are there common tools that would support this work?

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