

# Chapter 8

## The Feedback Conference

### Author's Note

As a student in the 1930s and 1940s I remember feedback as the squeal you heard from placing a microphone in front of a loudspeaker. Another example was what a thermostat sends to a furnace. The advent of computers brought new meaning to the word. Another milestone was reached at Stanford in the early 1960s when teacher interns received feedback from videotapes of their lessons in microteaching and in regular classrooms.

When given feedback from observers, students, and videotape, teachers appeared to choose students first, then videotape, and then observers (supervisors). An observer who employs the techniques discussed in the following chapter can overcome this disadvantage. Information that teachers regard as objective, free of bias, useful, and coming from a competent friend can have desirable effects.

KAA

*Perhaps the best measure of whether a [feedback] conference has been useful, in Teacher's framework, is whether it has left him with something concrete in hand, namely, a design for his next sequence of instruction.*

—Robert Goldhammer<sup>1</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

Several things must take place before a successful feedback conference can occur. The teacher and supervisor should have

- established a climate of mutual trust.
- determined the teacher's concerns and self-improvement goals.
- translated the concerns and goals into observable behaviors and products.
- selected an observation instrument and types of classroom behavior to be recorded.
- discussed relevant contextual features of the classroom situation that is to be observed.
- collected and—if appropriate, summarized—the observational data.

If these things have happened, you will have laid the groundwork for a successful feedback conference.

In the feedback conference itself, the supervisor and teacher review the accuracy of the observational data. Next, they interpret the data, looking for significant patterns—especially those involving teacher behavior and its effect on students. They also try to explain the patterns, possibly invoking values, beliefs, and formal theories of human behavior.

Then, the teacher and supervisor make decisions about the next steps. These may involve trying alternative strategies, changing curriculum objectives, treating particular students differently, or setting goals to learn new instructional skills. Also, the teacher and supervisor might see the need for more observational data of the same or different sort. In fact, the feedback conference that completes one cycle of clinical supervision often initiates the planning phase of the next cycle. (Although planning can be initiated, we still recommend a separate planning conference, however brief, shortly before the next classroom observation.)

These procedures in the feedback conference are only useful if the supervisor's purpose is to help the teacher become a reflective, self-regulating individual focused on personal professional growth. Unfortunately, this is not always true of actual clinical supervision, as we find in a research study conducted by Miriam Ben-Peretz and Sarah Rumney.<sup>2</sup> They observed feedback conferences in Israeli teacher-education programs and discovered that the conferences were

*in most cases very one-directional, the teacher making comments and the trainee agreeing. The majority of remarks concerned shortcomings of the student teachers. For instance, the teacher would say: 'You should have taught this in a different way,' or 'I do not agree with your explanation of this word,' or 'Why didn't you follow my instructions?'*<sup>3</sup>

Ben-Peretz and Rumney concluded from these and other research findings that, "cooperating teachers perceive the student teachers not as novice professionals but as 'students' whose primary duty is to listen and learn."<sup>4</sup>

It is helpful to keep in mind that preservice and inservice teachers will be on their own once the prescribed period of clinical supervision has ended. Teachers might listen to, and comply with, the supervisor's directives and recommendations, but this does not mean that they will internalize them. For this reason, we believe it is best if the supervisor and teacher get "on the same page" in terms of collecting and interpreting observational data.

For this to happen, the supervisor must understand how the teacher makes sense of classroom phenomena; conversely, the teacher must understand the supervisor's sense-making. Additionally, both must come to a shared understanding and agreement that the ultimate goal of clinical supervision is to help the teacher generate alternative instructional approaches and test them in action.

Reaching these shared understandings in planning and feedback conferences requires time. However, Ben-Peretz and Rumney found that feedback conferences led by cooperating teachers were quite brief. Ten to twenty minutes was the typical duration. Feedback conferences led by university supervisors were substantially longer (thirty to forty minutes); there was also more reciprocal communication and more generation of alternative ideas for teaching. Although Ben-Peretz and Rumney's research was limited to Israeli

→  
Cont.

teacher education, our experience indicates that the same situation exists in the United States and elsewhere.<sup>5</sup>

→ Finding time for the feedback conference—and other parts of the supervisory cycle—is no easy task. Nonetheless, finding time should be a major priority, given that teachers' professional growth is at stake.

### CONFERENCE TECHNIQUE 8: PROVIDE THE TEACHER WITH FEEDBACK USING OBJECTIVE OBSERVATIONAL DATA

Many teachers feel defensive as they enter the feedback conference, because they see it as an evaluation of their competence. Their defensiveness will worsen if they perceive the observational data to be subjective, inaccurate, or irrelevant. Therefore, an objective record of classroom events—such as is provided by videotaping, audiotaping, or selective verbatim—is crucial. Teachers might be surprised by what the data reveal, but they generally will accept the data as valid and instructive.

It is important to realize that observational records are never perfect. For example, videotaping provides an excellent record of classroom events, but it cannot capture everything. Furthermore, the judgment, skill, and biases of the person operating the video camera will affect the recording.

A teacher might be tempted to dismiss the observational record because of these imperfections. As a supervisor, you can acknowledge the teacher's concern, but go on to note that, while all data are imperfect, some data are better than others. If the data achieve a certain level of objectivity, there is much to be learned from them. You might wish to invoke the time-honored saying, "let's not throw out the baby with the bath water."

We have found it best to present the observational record to the teacher as soon as possible in the feedback conference. This approach is neutral and professional in tone. A statement like, "Let's look at the data we have collected," is usually sufficient. If the data are numerical or involve the use of symbols, you first might need to refresh the teacher's memory of what they mean.

During or after the teacher reviews the observational record, you can ask the teacher to *describe*—not *evaluate*—what the record reveals about the lesson. For example, suppose a teacher looks at a video recording and says, "Wow. It took me too long to get the class settled down." Your response might be, "Let's see how many minutes passed from the time the bell rang to the time instruction began." Once the minutes are known, the supervisor and teacher can discuss whether the minutes are too many and what a reasonable time limit for settling the class down might be.

As another example, consider the teacher who examines a selective verbatim (see Chapter 9) and says, "I didn't explain the Malthusian theory of population growth very well." As a supervisor, your response might be, "You're not happy with your explanation. But before we make any judgments about it, let's try to understand how you went about explaining the theory to the class. So, looking at the selective record, would you walk me through the explanation?"

By asking the teacher to focus on description, the supervisor is revealing that understanding is the priority rather than a "rush to judgment." (If the teacher's description is confused or incomplete, the supervisor can help out by clarifying particular features of the observational record or by asking clarifying questions.) This approach reduces the threat

of the feedback conference for the teacher and provides a better foundation for developing a plan for improving the teacher's instruction.

Interpretation of the observational record follows naturally from a careful descriptive analysis of it. The teacher and supervisor together can look for possible causes and consequences of observed teacher behavior; theories, values, and beliefs to explain the cause-effect patterns; and alternatives to try in the future. For example, observation of students' at-task behavior during a class period might show their interest in an instructional activity waning after 20 minutes. The teacher might interpret these data as indicating a weakness in the activity or as a normal consequence of students' limited attention span. Depending on the interpretation, decisions for change will vary. If the activity is judged inappropriate, it can be modified or changed substantially in future lessons. If it is interpreted as appropriate but too long, it might merely need to be shortened.

Deciding what changes to make in future instruction can take many forms. Decisions can relate to any elements discussed in the planning conference. For example, the conferees might conclude that one or more of the following should be changed:

- the objectives of the lesson or unit.
- what the teacher does during the instruction.
- what students do during instruction.

Decisions vary in magnitude. At one extreme, the teacher might decide to leave teaching as the result of systematic observational feedback. (We have seen instances of this.) At the other extreme, the teacher might decide not to change a thing. (This has not happened, in our experience; teachers who believe they are perfect must be very rare.) More often, teachers think of several aspects of their instruction that can be changed. The teacher might decide to experiment with these changes one at a time and analyze the effects. Usually the effects can be observed by the teacher without repeated visits by a supervisor, but in some cases a supervisor will be needed.

Occasionally a teacher reaches a decision as the result of viewing data without making any comments during the feedback conference. For example, a teacher might resolve to get rid of an annoying mannerism noted in watching a videotape or to spend more time working with a particular student after analyzing observational data about the student's behavior.

We recall one teacher, who was using a low-key style during a videotaped session, display a very dynamic style during the next observation (also videotaped). The supervisor asked about the obvious and abrupt change in teaching style—a matter that had not been mentioned in the previous conference. The teacher replied, "It wasn't until after I saw that first tape that I realized how undynamic I was. I swore I'd try something much different the next time!" Such a radical change is unusual, but this teacher found he was capable of a more energetic approach to teaching—at least occasionally.

Science makes use of accurate, objective data to understand, predict, and control. Similarly, when presented with accurate, objective data rather than a supervisor's opinions and criticism, the teacher is in a position to use the data to propose changes in his or her instruction and predict their effects on students. The supervisor provides verbal feedback during this process, but it is focused on the objective record, and it emphasizes efforts to understand rather than to evaluate.

Some teachers work through the process described above and then do not follow through by making the changes in their instruction that they proposed. The infrequency of classroom observation by supervisors, colleagues, coaches, or others increases the likelihood that this will happen. Another contributing factor is lack of discussion of professional development opportunities in the feedback conference. Therefore, as a supervisor, you should have a professional-development model in mind as you review the observational record with the teacher. (One such model is presented in Chapter 2). You should also be aware of opportunities for professional development that exist in your immediate geographical area and beyond.

### CONFERENCE TECHNIQUE 9: ELICIT THE TEACHER'S INFERENCES, OPINIONS, AND EMOTIONS

One way for a supervisor to open the feedback conference is to ask, "How do you feel your lesson went?" In response, cautious teachers hesitate to say, "Great!" for fear the supervisor will contradict or disagree. On the other hand, if they say, "Lousy," they run the risk of having the supervisor agree. "Some parts were good; others could be improved" is a safe answer for the teacher, but this is what the conference is about anyway.

The observer can choose a less threatening opening question, after the teacher has had a chance to inspect the information, by asking, "What aspects of the data do you want to talk about first?"

Eliciting the teacher's reactions to the data requires skill and patience. There is always a temptation to jump to conclusions about what has been recorded and observed before the teacher has had an opportunity to reflect on it. A conversation move that works well is to ask the following questions:

- good questions!*
- "What do you see [or hear] in the observational record that you would repeat if you taught this lesson again?"
  - "What would you change?"
  - "What would a student want changed?"

We have asked these questions of hundreds of teachers—primary, intermediate, secondary, and college—who have examined observational data on their teaching behavior. No one has answered all the questions with "I wouldn't change a thing." If "What would you repeat?" gets no response (although it nearly always does; we find things we like in our own teaching), you can proceed to the second question, "What would you change?" If the teacher says, "Nothing," the third question, "What would a student want changed?" should provoke a more thoughtful response. The teacher can be asked to view the instruction from the perspective of different students, say, one who usually has difficulty understanding and one who is usually ahead of the rest.

These questions are phrased in a relatively nonthreatening manner to which most teachers are able to respond openly and with insight. In response to the third question, one teacher said,

- "Which student?"
- "What do you mean, which student?"

"Well, the slowest, the brightest, the least interested?"

"OK, the slowest."

"All right. What I see that teacher doing is talking too fast, using vocabulary I don't understand, discussing topics that don't affect me. I don't think she likes me; she almost never calls on me even when I know the answer."

This was a good insight for the teacher to develop. The anecdote points out that one function of the supervisor is to serve as a catalyst, that is, to help the teacher make productive use of the available information for self-improvement as a professional.

For most teachers, the steps in the feedback conference are reasonable and appropriate: providing objective data, analyzing and interpreting it, and drawing conclusions with the teacher taking equal part in a collaborative process. Unfortunately, some supervisors reverse the process. They provide their own conclusions and then search the observational record for evidence to substantiate the conclusions. Alternative interpretations might not even be considered.

For a small percentage of teachers, a "conclusions first" conference approach is justified. For example, it might be more effective to say, "You've been late for work twelve times this month. This has got to stop, or there will be serious consequences!" rather than to say, "Here are some data about your punctuality. Do you find anything of interest?" An alternative move might be to ask, "What do you propose to do about this record of tardiness?"

Even stronger examples can be given for medical settings where the teacher needs to point out to the student, intern, or resident that the patient being discussed is at risk of harm. In schools and colleges, there are also persons (namely, students) "at risk."

Several assumptions are involved in a procedure that encourages teachers to come to their own conclusions, based on objective data and thoughtful analysis.

- Few teachers set out deliberately to do a bad job. Most want their students to learn and develop.
- Most teachers can generate alternative teaching strategies, if encouraged to do so.
- We don't see ourselves as others see us. Being able to view our teaching from a new perspective can be an enlightening experience.
- Those insights we discover for ourselves tend to be internalized and acted on with more energy and better spirit than those we are given by others.
- Many teachers prefer a collaborative, collegial approach rather than one in which the supervisor is regarded as "superior."
- Good data can be more persuasive than mere admonishments.

At first glance, the last assumption in the above list seems questionable. How can data, in themselves, persuade a teacher to change? Yet, in our supervisory experience, we have found that this is often the case. A teacher, after studying a seating chart on which an observer has recorded which students were responded to by the teacher (and in what ways), began to understand why some students feel "turned off" and began to plan activities that create opportunities to respond in positive ways to those students. Many teachers who have analyzed charts of their direct and indirect behaviors (using Flanders's

categories, which are described in Chapter 12) have modified the indirect-direct ratio. Teachers who have had access to verbal flow patterns on seating charts (who talks to whom) have been stimulated to experiment with different seating arrangements.

A high school science teacher studied observational charts that showed what percent of his students were at task for various time periods. The percentages were strikingly high, which might have been expected to please this instructor. Yet the teacher concluded that they were too high. Every year a number of students dropped this course; after the teacher saw the data, he realized he was "keeping their noses to the grindstone" so much that the course was unduly punishing. He decided to restructure the course.

Most teachers experience emotions as they teach and also as they examine the observational record of their teaching. While teaching, they might experience panic when students spin out of control or when a planned lesson ends well before the end of the class period. They might feel burned-out at the end of the school year or after years of a stressful school situation or lack of intellectual stimulation. They might experience joy when they see students get excited by a teaching activity or experience an insight. They might experience disappointment when the observational record presents them with data very discrepant from their image of themselves as a teacher. Or they might experience elation when the observational record demonstrates improvement in a troublesome aspect of their teaching behavior.

It is important for you as a supervisor to be aware that teachers have emotions, to bring the teacher's emotions into the feedback conference as appropriate, and—most importantly—to accept, without judgment, whatever a teacher might tell you about these emotions. For example, we have had preservice teachers whose field placements are not going well. They are anxious that they will fail the placement, and so they react to observational data with fear about what they might reveal. Also common among preservice teachers is anxiety about standing up in front of a class of students and having sole responsibility for their instruction.

Some anxiety can facilitate positive changes in teaching behavior, but if the anxiety is too severe, the teacher can "freeze" and be unable to process the observational data and learn from it. In this situation, it is helpful for the supervisor to surface the teacher's anxiety and discuss it. This process by itself can relieve the teacher's anxiety. Also, a frank discussion about the anxiety can suggest things that the teacher and supervisor can do to solve the problem that is producing the anxiety. For example, we have had student teachers who were very anxious about how they were perceived by the class for which they were assuming responsibility. Once this anxiety was out in the open, we were able to work with the student teacher and the cooperating teacher so that the latter could better prepare the class to accept the student teacher's legitimacy as its instructor.

As a supervisor, you should be just as aware of a teacher's positive emotions as of the negative emotions that interfere with teaching. We have seen teachers become very excited when they discover a new theory (e.g., the theory of multiple intelligences) or curriculum that increases their effectiveness with students. In supervision, we have seen teachers express pleasure at observational records that confirm their effectiveness in the classroom or that make visible a vague concern that they have had about some aspect of their instruction. It is important for you to acknowledge, validate, and reinforce these positive feelings. Indeed, these feelings are what sustain many teachers through periods of stress and stimulate them to become better at what they do.

## CONFERENCE TECHNIQUE 10: ENCOURAGE THE TEACHER TO CONSIDER ALTERNATIVE METHODS AND EXPLANATIONS

Supervisors often have the strong inclination in the feedback conference to say something like, "Here's what I would do if I were you." This short-circuits the supervision process. If teaching were a straightforward physical skill, then viewing the performance and giving advice like, "Keep your eye on the ball," would be effective. Translated to advice about teaching, this tends to become "Be firm, fair, and consistent." This is undoubtedly good advice, but it does not tell what to be firm about (discipline? standards?) or what is fair and consistent for all (activities for the physically handicapped? individualized academic assignments?). Moreover, there are always reasonable alternatives for teaching anything, so any prescriptive advice might make the teacher question the supervisor's qualifications.

When change is desired, the supervisor should encourage the teacher to generate several alternatives and choose the most promising. Once the teacher has made suggestions, the supervisor can add to them. By having the opportunity to speak first, the teacher feels heard and is likely to be more receptive to what the supervisor has to say.

The ability to generate alternative methods and explanations is critically important to a teacher's potential to grow as a professional. Without this ability, teachers can get into a rut or become rigid in their thinking. In reality, human behavior is complex and is affected by many factors. Therefore, any one explanation for classroom behavior is likely to identify some relevant factors, but ignore others. By constantly considering alternative explanations, the teacher is likely to develop a richer understanding of students, themselves, and their colleagues.

As a case in point, we recall working with an inexperienced teacher at the middle-school level. The teacher was struggling with several students who would not do any seat work. His explanation was that these students were experiencing the turbulence of adolescence, one manifestation of which was rebellion against adult authority. We recommended that the teacher talk individually with each student to see whether their reluctance to do seat work might have other explanations. The teacher learned, to his surprise, that one student was earning a failing grade and figured there was no point in doing any more work in the class; his fate was sealed. Another student said that she was troubled by problems at home and could not focus on her studies. Needless to say, these alternative explanations caused the teacher to think about the students in a different way and to consider new methods for motivating them.

Some teachers hold the implicit belief—below the level of conscious awareness—that their behavior is "fixed." Even if their teaching methods do not produce the results they wish, they do not believe their behavior is amenable to change. By encouraging teachers to consider alternative methods for achieving an instructional objective or other goal, you help them question this belief.

As we explained in Chapter 1, Argyris and Schön, among other researchers, claim that professional practitioners have "espoused theories" and "theories-in-use" that guide their work. If these theories are not questioned, the practitioner is likely to develop a set of work routines that do not change over time, even if they are ineffective. One way to help practitioners—including teachers—break out of these routines is to have them generate ideas about alternative methods of behaving in a certain situation and then test them in actual practice.

For example, one of us worked recently with a team to help a group of secondary teachers consider new ways of teaching their curriculum. Observational data revealed that the teachers, in general, required students to learn a great deal of isolated facts and skills. The teachers had used this approach for so long that they could imagine no other way of approaching the curriculum. The team introduced the teachers to an alternative method of teaching curriculum content, which is called "concept-based teaching," among other names.<sup>6</sup>

Some teachers were skeptical about this teaching method. They thought it would be difficult to implement and would wind up confusing students. However, as they tried the method (with staff-development support), they found that they could continue teaching facts and skills they considered important, but now organized in a meaningful conceptual framework. Some students who formerly learned by rote, if at all, now had better comprehension of the curriculum and were willing to expend more effort on learning.

### CONFERENCE TECHNIQUE 11: PROVIDE THE TEACHER WITH OPPORTUNITIES FOR PRACTICE AND COMPARISON

Some supervisors play a more direct role in the supervisory process by suggesting and demonstrating a particular method or technique in a classroom setting. Curriculum specialists in particular are often asked to do such demonstrations. In this situation, the teacher becomes the observer and records data to be analyzed and interpreted in the feedback conference. For example, an elementary teacher was experiencing difficulty explaining the mathematical meaning of pi and the formulas for circumference and area. She asked a mathematics specialist to take over a lesson while she observed the explanation and recorded student questions. During the feedback conference, information about the specialist's lesson was incorporated into information taken from the teacher's experience and plans.

Gerald Elgarten conducted an experiment to determine whether modeling by the supervisor facilitates the development of experienced mathematics teachers.<sup>7</sup> In one of the experimental conditions, a supervisor observed the teacher's lesson and identified teaching behaviors that needed to be introduced or changed.<sup>8</sup> The supervisor then taught the same lesson to the teacher's next class while modeling the strengths of the teacher's lesson and also the targeted teaching behaviors. The teacher observed the lesson and responded to three questions:

1. What do I [supervisor] do that you don't do too often?
2. What do we both seem to do?
3. What good things do you do that I don't seem to do?

These three questions served as the focus of the feedback conference. At the end of the conference, the teacher left with a list of teaching behaviors to practice and internalize. In another experimental condition, the teachers received similar supervision, except that the supervisor did not model the desired changes in teaching behavior by teaching a lesson.

The results of Elgarten's experiment revealed that the teachers who had the opportunity to see their supervisor teach a model lesson implemented more of the desired changes than teachers who participated in clinical supervision without this feature.

One explanation for the effectiveness of supervisor modeling is that it gives teachers the opportunity to observe good teaching techniques in a real-world context, not just hear about them. Also, supervisors undoubtedly gain credibility in the eyes of teachers if they can "practice what they preach."

Another effective strategy is to suggest that one teacher observe another in order to compare teaching styles, strategies, and techniques. If the observing teacher has some knowledge of systematic observation and recording, the feedback conference can result in a mutual sharing of ideas and perspectives. In a small group that takes turns sharing videotaped examples, the observers can learn about their own teaching vicariously while watching others.

Time for collecting observational data and providing feedback is always limited. One way to deal with this problem is for the teacher to collect some of the data. This can be done by teacher-made video or audio recordings (see Chapter 11), by students completing checklists (see Chapter 12), or by teacher aides or colleagues using one of the methods described in Unit 4.

If the teacher has collected and analyzed some of the data, the feedback conference can be more efficient. Furthermore, the performance of these tasks can be a learning experience in itself. For example, transcribing a "selective verbatim" (see Chapter 9) from a tape, charting student participation, or plotting frequencies from a student questionnaire can heighten the teacher's awareness of classroom behavior that is effective or in need of improvement.

### SUMMARY OF STEPS IN A FEEDBACK CONFERENCE

The feedback conference is the last step in the clinical supervision cycle. (The first two steps are the planning conference and classroom observation.) Ideally, the feedback conference includes the following steps:

1. The supervisor displays the data recorded during the observation. This is done without evaluative comments.
2. The teacher described and analyzes what happened during the lesson as evidenced by the data. The supervisor simply helps to clarify what behaviors and events are represented by the recorded data.
3. The teacher, with the help of the supervisor, interprets the observed behavior. At this stage the teacher becomes more evaluative, because causes and consequences of classroom events must be discussed as desirable or undesirable.
4. The teacher, with assistance from the supervisor, decides on alternative approaches for the future to attend to dissatisfactions with the observed teaching or emphasize those aspects that were satisfying.
5. The supervisor reinforces the teacher's announced intentions for change by agreeing with them or helping the teacher modify the intentions if there is some disagreement.

Supervisors are often surprised at how easily these steps can be accomplished. When supplied with adequate information and allowed to act on it, most teachers can analyze, interpret, and decide in a self-directed and constructive manner. When things do not go

well in a feedback conference, the difficulties can usually be traced to failure on the part of the supervisor to use effective techniques, such as those we considered in this chapter.

### NOTES

1. Goldhammer, R. (1969). *Clinical supervision: Special methods for the supervision of teachers*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, pp. 69-70.
2. Ben-Peretz, M., & Rumney, S. (1991). Professional thinking in guided practice. *Teaching & Teacher Education*, 7, 517-530.
3. *Ibid*, p. 519.
4. *Ibid*, p. 525.
5. Graybeal, N. D. (1984). Characteristics of contemporary classroom supervisory process. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 45, 07A. (University Microfilms No. AAG84-22846)
6. Erickson, H. L. (2002). *Concept-based curriculum and instruction: Teaching beyond the facts*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
7. Elgarten, G. H. (1991). Testing a new supervisory process for improving instruction. *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision*, 6, 118-129.
8. The experiment had four experimental conditions, but we describe only two of them (the most critical for our purposes) here.

OVERVIEW

OBJECTIVE

SUMMARY