

## **Moving Embers: On Partner Observations**

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“When I use the word *center*, I am always referring to a physical set, a distinct physical system, which occupies a certain volume in space, and has a special marked coherence. Even when the center is a social or cultural center, it is still ultimately spatial as well; it occurs in space, and always has a spatial locus” (p. 84).

Too often as professional development support staff, we travel to these *centers*, classrooms, alone. Our experiment over the past year has been to travel in partnership with classroom teachers to different classrooms. We call these observations, partner observations.

### **Background of Partner Observation Idea**

When we read Christopher Alexander's explanation of *centers* as “a certain volume in space...{that} has a special marked coherence,” as educators our minds immediately turn to the centers of classrooms, the centers found in schools (p. 84). Alexander's definition of centers is presented here in an architectural sense. In his book, *The Phenomenon of Life*, he writes extensively about the role that centers play in understanding and appreciating structures, design and art. In

the same chapter he writes, “I use the word center to identify an organized zone of space - that is to say, a distinct set of points in space, which, because of its organization, because of its internal coherence, and because of its relation to its context, exhibits centeredness” (p. 84). At the root of Alexander’s theory is the premise that centers play a critical role in the successful design of buildings, cities and even art and gardens. The time we’ve spent in classrooms supporting teaching and learning makes it clear that *centers* also play a vital role in educational systems.

When walking around campus, observing and supporting teachers in classrooms, the definition of Alexander’s *centers* is extremely applicable. Like many other educators around the country supporting teachers in the classroom, we often find ourselves sitting in the back of a classroom tapping away on a keyboard or scribbling notes on a paper trying to capture the teaching and learning we are observing in order to give feedback to the teacher being observe. As temporary outsiders in the sacred space of classrooms, we clearly see the classroom as a *center* around learning.

Moving sometimes between fifteen or twenty classrooms a day, the *centers* of classrooms are the spaces where groups of individuals (typically a teacher and students) gather around a lesson, activity or project. With Alexander’s *centers* firmly planted in our minds, we started to clearly see classrooms as hearths, with the fire of teaching and learning as the centerpiece. We were solo travelers moving between campsites of different tribes.

During weekly meetings and daily check-ins, our support team shares what we have observed around campus, often sharing anecdotes

about what we learned, about the innovative strategies and techniques we saw in action. In a sense we were bringing embers back to our own fire, our own center of the support team. We wondered, how could this transfer of embers be more immediate for teachers?

We value the traditional constructs of teacher observation. Nothing is more powerful than being in the space where teaching and learning are happening. We have witnessed amazing lessons. We dare even say that we've seen magic in these *centers*. Amazing teachers making over 200 decisions within a time-span of 55 minutes to ensure that students not only achieved the objectives, but were able to apply, analyze and transfer that learning to other content areas. We have seen literal "ah ha" moments when students blurt out, "I get it now!"

It was during moments like these, while observing a teacher alone, that the support team realized we must somehow make this a shared learning experience. Of course, it is a shared experience for the students and teacher (and briefly the observer), but we started to wonder about the possibility and power of having that observation (that experience) shared with other teachers, not second-hand, but directly. During trainings and individual meetings with teachers, these classroom anecdotes that we gather through solo observations are often translated and shared, but nothing can replicate the experience of being at the hearth witnessing the event.

After reading an article by William Sterret and Matthew Haas (2009) in *Educational Leadership*, we started to combine what we found to be best practices in the professional development literature with our own daily experiences. Sterret and Haas stated that, principals in their

district performed frequent “four-minute walk-throughs,” observing the teachers in their buildings. During those meetings with the professional development team, they participated in the walk-throughs together, and shared insights. In the article they go on to say that, “These observations ground our conversations in instructional supervision” (p. 79). The conversations Sterret and Haas had at the administrative level mirrored the debriefs that our support team was having on a regular basis; we also found this incredibly valuable and grounding, however something seemed to be missing.

It became clear that the professional development offered through partner observations is a crucial addition to supporting teachers in their craft. The next step was to include classroom teachers, not just administrators, in the observations. What would be the impact of having members of the professional development support team traveling with classroom teachers to these *centers* of learning and teaching around the school? What would be the enduring value of actively and purposefully having conversations about what we were seeing, thinking and wondering?

After experimenting with the partner observation model, we have found few practices more effective, rewarding, and meaningful. The power of observing and then debriefing about the instructional design, teaching practices, and student engagement created a renewed excitement for teachers to bring new embers back to their classrooms.

Dr. William Roberson, co-director of the Center of Effective Teaching and Learning concurred: “Easily, peer observation is more valuable than other forms of professional development, if the proper context is created. If done well, it is carried out in a real, practical, immediately

relevant situation. Compare that to attending workshops or conferences in which participants remain at a certain level of abstraction from their own classrooms” (Israel, 2006).

### Examples of Partner Observations in Action

Partner observations are a highly individualized, carefully crafted approach to professional development. We have found the process to be meaningful for teachers, whether it is their first year or their fifth year of teaching. Below are two examples of successful partner observations.

Chuck is a first year teacher in the middle school, teaching Algebra, English, and Science. Chuck self-identified teaching math as an area where he'd like to improve. When approached about doing a partner observation of an experienced math teacher, Chuck was enthusiastic about the opportunity. The classroom teacher was contacted to schedule a time to observe. On the day of the partner observation, Chuck was met in his room and during the walk to the math class, the focus of the observation was established through the following questions:

- How does the teacher utilize technology to impact student learning?
- How does the teacher keep students engaged with the new content during instruction?
- What routines/procedures does the teacher use to reinforce previously taught concepts?

Chuck observed the teacher utilizing Google Docs as part of a daily routine to reinforce previously taught concepts, as well as new content

notes and processing questions. During the debrief, Chuck was excited about the idea of implementing Google Docs into his math lessons. The next day Chuck started his math class with the new procedure of using Google Docs as part of his warm-up activity.

Abigail is in her 5th year of teaching. While she is clearly a content expert when it comes to the material of her subject area, her classroom management and investment of students in the learning objectives was in need of improvement. We scheduled an observation with a teacher, Spencer, who had developed strong management and investment strategies in his classroom. Prior to the partner observation, Spencer identified which of his upcoming lessons would best highlight these strategies in action.

For scheduling sake, a forty minute period is dedicated for the partner observation. This allows time to actively engage in conversation both before and after the classroom visit, specifically establishing a focus.

With Abigail the questions posed included the following:

- What routines and procedures does Spencer have in place that maximize his instructional time?
- How does he address minor misbehaviors?
- What does Spencer do in the moment to invest students in the content and learning objectives?
- What do you think he might have done in prior lessons to create this student investment?

A critical ingredient of the debrief with Abigail was to help her prioritize which ember to take back to her classroom. This partner observation proved to be a vital step in the ongoing support for Abigail.

Conversations conducted during the following weeks were grounded

in the actions that were observed in Spencer's classroom.

As these examples show, embers may be immediately added to stoke the fire of the observing teacher's classroom or they may take some time to ignite.

The rate of success has been high with partner observations. There have been examples where teachers did not take these embers back to their hearth. Through closer examination we realized that there were two stand-out variables hindering success: the assumed background knowledge of the observation objective and/or investment from the teacher. We must meet the teacher where they are and differentiate our approach in order for successful comprehension, analysis and application to occur.

### Suggested Side Bar:

As these narrative examples show, there is a combination of a traditional observation and collaboration in these partner observations.

Support Staff	Teacher (Observer)	Teacher (Observee)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Contacts/communicates with classroom teacher to be observed</li><li>-Thought partner with teacher observer to establish focus of observation</li><li>-Find correlation between teacher actions and impact on student learning</li></ul> <p>10 minute post-observation discussion questions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- What teacher actions worked or didn't work?</li><li>- How did the students respond to</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Show-up with a professional development mind set.</li><li>- Implement new ideas into classroom.</li><li>- Evaluate effectiveness, have ongoing conversation with trainer to refine newly learned instructional strategies.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Be open to observers</li><li>- Plan lesson</li><li>- Teach</li></ul>

<p>teacher actions?  - What were resulting student behaviors to teacher actions?  - What are you going to bring back to your classroom and why?</p>		
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Suggested side bar quote: “You’ve heard it before, and it’s true: we learn by doing. But we also learn by watching. Whether it’s a salsa teacher running through a dance sequence, a tennis coach demonstrating proper serving technique or a science professor conducting a dissection in front of the class, observing an expert at work is an opportunity to hone our own skills” (Paul, 2012).

## REFERENCES

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