



Feedback & Coaching NOTES

Using Cause & Effect to Deepen Classroom Observation and Improve Feedback

Specific feedback is more memorable, valuable, and impactful than general feedback. The advice columnist Ann Landers advised her readers that to make a compliment more meaningful and memorable one must make it specific. “That sweater has an eye-catching texture and it really matches your scarf” is a much more memorable compliment than “nice sweater.” “Good meeting today” is not nearly as meaningful as “The way you invited everyone to speak but didn’t allow anyone to dominate the discussion really made for a productive meeting today.” Hear the difference? Classroom observers do well to follow Landers’ advice. “Smooth transition today” is not nearly as meaningful and memorable as “You took the time to teach the steps to the transition today and check for understanding before you asked the students to move. Because of that, they were able to get right to work with no wasted time.”

Specific feedback can only follow specific observation. One way to enhance specificity is to observe classroom happenings using the frame of cause-effect. Things the teacher does, says, designs, or allows can be viewed as causes. Effects can be thought of as the resulting impact on learners and/or learning. A simple cause-effect expression might sound like this: “When the teacher asked all students to count by threes out loud and all together (choral response), the energy level in the classroom increased.” Or, “When the teacher asked students to use a Venn diagram to compare and contrast fiction and nonfiction, students confused these two types of writing less often.” It is also important to note that any one cause can be linked to several observable effects. For example, a teacher might ask students to use their personal white boards to solve a math problem; then, at the “show me” signal, hold their boards high so the teacher can see all the responses. This single cause can have multiple effects

An observer might note that the energy level in the classroom increased, and that the engagement level of the students increased, and that the information available for formative assessment was more plentiful, and that off-task behaviors decreased. In this case a single cause produced four observable effects.

Cause-effect is a useful frame for enhancing specificity in an observation, but it should be used with care. Observing and expressing classroom cause-effect is an inexact science at best. The web of causes and effects in any classroom is complex, interwoven, and dynamic. Effects are often hidden, subtle and/or delayed in time and space. We overreach when we declare with too much confidence that any particular cause was solely responsible for any particular effect.

Still, it is worth the effort to observe carefully and attempt to uncover the connections between specific teaching actions and specific effects on the learning and learners. A helpful analogy can be found in the way investment experts attempt to analyze the stock market. A financial analyst might hypothesize that company A's stock increased in value as a result of rumors that it may merge with company B. The analyst sees and expresses cause and effect. The cause is merger rumors. The effect is a rising stock price. It is likely not that simple. The stock market is incredibly complex. Each day's results are a function of millions of buy/sell orders from millions of investors across multiple time zones. To say with absolute certainty that one event caused one response in the market is to grossly oversimplify reality. Since the stock market is important to the economy, and individual fortunes can be quickly lost or gained based on its fluctuations, analysts don't simply throw up their hands and say, "It's too complicated." Rather, they do the best they can, recognizing the complexity, but still identifying likely causes and possible effects.

The same is true with classroom observations. We seek to see cause and effect because what happens in classrooms is too important for us to simply throw up our hands and declare "It's too complicated." Rather, we consider the complexity, and still seek out important relationships between teaching actions and learning results. A skillful classroom observer might say "when the teacher quickly circulated through the classroom to check on student work, the sense of accountability in the room increased."

It's easy to spot the cause and effect in this expression. Can you also spot the respect for complexity? The observer doesn't claim to see the entire web of causes and effects, or to understand the entire range and degree of all the effects. The observer simply expresses a likely relationship. When one thing happened, another thing increased or decreased in value—like a stock price. Classrooms and stock markets are both complex. To profit, one need not account for all the complexity. It's enough to see and appreciate the general direction of the effects.