***Open Class & Lesson Study – Hong Kong***

Imagine you have to teach a complicated lesson with a large class in front of a dozen visitors. The visitors have been instructed to give you feedback and you know that some of this will be critical in a very direct way and will be presented in front of all the other visitors and your colleagues. How would this make you feel?

Welcome to Iris’s 8th Grade English class at Fanling Secondary School in Hong Kong, way out from the city, right on the border with mainland China. Iris is teaching her students how to write a formal email to a professional – the school’s social worker – about a personal adolescent problem like name-calling. With her class of over 30 students, Iris’s lesson consists of several precisely timed and sequenced components and it moves at a blistering pace.

Since Self-regulated Learning was introduced into the first year of secondary school at Fanling five years ago, a lot of the learning has been organized into multiple steps in which students demonstrate what they have been learning in real time. Students listen to the teacher, engage with questions set out on her whiteboard, work in pairs for 20 seconds to brainstorm adolescent problems worth writing about, and respond to the teacher’s questions by jumping to attention and calling out “let me try, let me try,” as they raise their hands enthusiastically. Then, in carefully designed mixed ability groups, they discuss how to express their problems formally, write them down on little shared chalkboards known as iBoards, circulate and give feedback to another group’s iBoard writing, then present what they have learned in front of the whole class – all in about 50 minutes! The whole lesson flies by. It’s a whirlwind of orchestrated activity.

The really remarkable thing is that Iris is teaching this complex class in front of a dozen or so visitors. Every year, on two occasions, Fanling opens around half of its classes to outside visitors – up to 100 or more of them. It’s what the school calls *Open Class*. On the day Iris is teaching her class about formal emails, she and her colleagues – about 28 of them – are teaching in front of principals and teachers from other schools. Once each class is over, there is a post *Open Class* “conference” where visiting professionals are invited to give their feedback to Iris.

Some of the feedback is complimentary: the objectives and structure were very clear; there was lots of peer learning. More than a bit of the feedback is also unambiguously critical: Why did the teacher only call on a small number of students to volunteer answers? Was the pace of the lesson too fast for some students? The lesson was brisk, but don’t there also need to be quiet moments when the teacher can tap into what her students are thinking?

This is a lot of criticism for any teacher to endure, especially in public. Some teachers at Fanling remember what it felt like being observed when they were in other schools, or earlier in their career. One said that when she was “very green” she “got very upset about feedback.” So how does Fanling invite and manage all this criticism without destroying the confidence of its teachers?

First, Marco, the senior teacher leader, gives a PowerPoint presentation on their *Open Class* procedures to the visitors. He presents five essential principles and protocols of constructive professional feedback to guide the observers: mutual respect, equal participation, focus on self-regulated learning, understanding the teacher’s situation, and sharing honestly. The feedback is facilitated. No single person or point of view will dominate. The feedback will be neither too blunt nor too bland. Observers are directed to focus not on the personality of the teacher, but on the task they are performing. Marco and Iris divide the observers into groups – one concentrating on the objectives and the learning guides or workbooks; the other focusing on teaching strategies and student participation. Each group also gets their own iBoards and writes down four key ideas. The visitors are very engaged with the task and hang up their iBoards when they have finished, just like the students.

Iris isn’t just stoic about accepting criticism. She and her colleagues actively encourage and directly solicit it. Iris accepts it is easy to omit questions from quiet students when others are so eager to respond. Marco explains how concentrating too much on formal grammar and vocabulary can limit other aspects of students’ thinking. Everyone is learning. They “share what they can learn from the visitors and celebrate the learning together.”

It’s not only the protocols that create a positive feedback process, though. There’s also the fact that this lesson is not Iris’s lesson. At least, it’s not *only* Iris’s lesson. Marco has taught it. So have several colleagues in her department. The lesson belongs to all of them. They created, rehearsed and revised it together in the previous week. The lesson is a common product and responsibility. The successes and limitations belong to all of them. In Principal Yau’s words, “No one is perfect but the team can be.”

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