

Terrible Trope Tuesday #9: Staff Data Meetings

The weekly series where we break down long standing norms of teacher professional development sessions to get better results.

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If our instruction was data-driven... No wait, data-informed... I mean, data-centered... You know, if we applied our knowledge of students and utilized strategic differentiation to ensure that instruction was minimally prior-outcome parallel... Sigh...

Let's take a step back. Let's pretend for a moment that you are a teacher. You are knee deep into a mathematics concept that you have taught dozens of times using eight different programs during the past decade. You've just asked a question to your group of nearly 30 students and you see the same five hands shoot up for the hundredth time. As you look across your room, you see red, yellow, green and blue dots floating translucently over the heads of each student. Having reviewed, charted, discussed and planned using recent state assessment and quarterly benchmark data you feel like you know the students color designations even better than you know their names. That is when it happens. Your site coach and administrator enter the room. You panic. You remember the meetings, you remember the data, you remember the goals. You know the questions that they will want to ask in the day when they want to debrief. But just like every other observation, you are teaching the lesson the best way you know how. You aren't holding your best tricks back. If there is a way that will get better results, you honestly just want to be told what it is...

Or let's assume you are the coach. You watch. You desperately want this lesson to be "the one." The one that you walk away, pump your fist and quietly cheer that the instruction you just witnessed happening met the needs of every student. You want to see the transformative, complex and sophisticated discourse that your trainings have told are possible in classrooms. You remember the data meetings. You recognize what is being taught based on your conversations but the way you pictured the instruction being implemented doesn't match what is actually being done.

Or maybe you are the administrator. As you leave the room, you see the not-so-hidden frustration on the faces of both your teacher and your coach. You think back to when you were in the classroom and remember that it wasn't this hard. Testing wasn't this rigorous. But you also know that if student outcomes don't improve, there will be a new principal assigned to the site. So you schedule yet again another round of grade-level data meetings to show your supervisors that you are addressing the problem. In reality however, you are just as frustrated as your coach and your teachers to have yet again the same meeting for the hundredth time about yet another performance indicator only to see what is actually being taught looks strikingly similar to instruction you have seen before.

Let's be honest, teacher, coach or principal, we have all sat through meetings related to data that have been run on the

assumption that a better understanding of charts will yield greater results. And in some cases, these meetings can be beneficial. But so often, these meetings tell us no more than what a simple anticipatory question at the beginning of instruction could tell us. Which students walk into the lesson ready to learn? Which students walk in needing background support? And which students are ready for more than what the currently planned lesson can possibly offer them?

Does this mean that we should discontinue the use of staff data meetings? No! On the contrary! It means that data meetings are more important than ever before but not for the purpose and not in the way you are probably utilizing them. Let's look now at how three small changes to your current grade-level data meetings would realistically support teachers and accelerate student outcomes.

Look For Variance Not Outliers

The impetus of most data meetings is outcome. On its surface, this makes perfect sense. The teacher with the greatest results must have the greatest skill. However, this philosophy assumes that all other variables are equal. We could debate the equality of opportunity vs. the equality of outcome for entire tomes. However, for simplicity, let's assume that different groups of students have fundamentally different needs. If this is the case, we should assume that if all teaching was equal, it would result in varied outcomes based on varied student ability and thus rendering the meetings useless.

Therefore, if we are to hold the student variable constant, we shouldn't look merely for the apex outcome as the given classroom may have been populated with a disparate number of apex performers. Instead, we should look for performance indicators with abnormal variance. When looking at a particular performance indicator or standard, if the variance is abnormally expansive compared to other indicators, one could infer that the quality of instruction would also be varied. By looking not at which teacher had the best overall outcome but by looking at which standards had the greatest difference in outcome we can target particular teaching skills that can be improved.

Acknowledge Differences of Skill not Preferences of Structure

As an administrator or coach, it is easy to fall into the instructional preference trap. We often look for teacher strategies or lesson structures that mirror the most recent training or inservice that we have attended or that mirror the way we would have chosen to instruct if we were to lead the lesson personally.

A focus on structural preference often leads to a discussion about the use of materials and not skills. A teacher might work with students using pencil and paper while achieving similar results to a teacher utilizing computers. While two other teachers who both utilize computers achieve strikingly disparate outcomes. A focus on preference will often focus recommended changes on what needs to be used as opposed to how well a structure or material is being used. This reality often leaves teachers feeling both frustrated and helpless as better outcomes are always dependent buying more materials or on the next silver bullet that they will be asked to implement at the next training session or data meeting.

During the discussion of teacher practice and the planning of future instruction, we should see preferences in lesson structure as neutral. We can then focus on differences of how the lesson is implemented and the differences in the observed outcomes of each practice. If an observed practice has consistently yielded a greater positive student outcome, then the generalization of the practice across classrooms should also yield a similar pace of student learning.

Actions Speak Louder Than Words

There is a word for conducting the same meeting again and again while expecting a different result... But we can and will break the pattern. At your next data meeting, try this.

1. Identify a standard or performance indicator with an obvious variance of outcome.

Look at this data, not as a success or a failure. Look at this data as a point of reference that shows different practices yield different results. Much like fitness, if ten people lost 50kg with a particular nutrition system and ten people only lost 5kg using the same system during the same period of time, it doesn't necessarily mean some people tried harder. It might mean that by changing even a small difference in practice, one could yield a better result.

2. Choose a specific aspect of a lesson related to the identified indicator, direct instruction, guided practice, small group intervention, etc. (achievable in 10-15 minutes)
Have the team of teachers co-plan the specific aspect together so that they all feel that they are on the same page for what needs to be taught. The goal is for every teacher to equally understand and be able to articulate what they will need to do in order to deliver the given aspect of the lesson.

3. Bring a small group of students into the meeting. Ask each teacher to take turns teaching the small group of students the lesson that was just planned while the others observe. Think of this as a rotating center. The same group of students participating in a lesson that has been delivered using each teacher's understanding of the group planning session. As each lesson is delivered, the coach and other teachers observe for differences not in *what* is instructed but differences in *how* the instruction is implemented and the quality of corresponding student responses.

After each of the teachers deliver the same portion of a lesson with the same students, you can have an open discussion about the differences in instructional skills. This is not a who-did-it-better contest. It is a conversation about cause and effect. "When we did _____, they were able to _____." "You will be surprised how the teachers will begin to independently identify alternate opportunities for instructional change."

In most districts, data meetings tend to focus on disparity of outcome. This conversation both punishes teachers and shuts down the conversation for the purposes of change. By focusing on differences in practice through a neutral lense, opportunities for growth are illuminated, follow-up demonstration lessons are seen as valuable, and co-teaching opportunities are often welcomed because teachers actually get to see, often for the first time, that even though they all teach the same thing, they don't all teach it the same way. And because of this this simple truth, they often get different results.