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## **Questions to Ask in Post-Observation Conferences for a Reflective Practice**

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### **Introduction**

A growing body of research underlines the importance of successful relationships between and among teachers especially in teacher education programs that are often considered as a part of the larger administrative unit. Both in preservice and inservice professional development programs nature and quality of relationships matter simply because practitioners work with the mentors or trainers often in a hierarchical way. Hence, Darling-Hammond (1997:1) acknowledges that “successful 21<sup>st</sup> century schools will be grounded on two very different presumptions: first, that teaching matters and, second, that relationships matter”. Thus, the importance of the nature of relationship between the mentor/trainer and the practitioner/trainee is obvious and requires further assessment, rigorous study, and suggestions at all levels and in all aspects of the professional development practices placed in

teacher education and development programs with a focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning.

As Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin (1995) states, recent research shows that professional development strategies that succeed in improving teaching share several features for they tend to be:

1. Experiential, engaging teachers in concrete tasks of teaching, assessment, and observation that illuminate the processes of learning and development;
2. Grounded in participants' questions, inquiry, and experimentation as well as professionwide research;
3. Collaborative, involving a sharing of knowledge among educators;
4. Connected to and derived from teachers' work with their students as well as to examinations of subject matter and teaching methods;
5. Sustained and intensive, supported by modeling, coaching, and problem solving around specific problems of practice;
6. Connected to other aspects of school change.

What is noticeable in these items is that these items signal the birth and growth of approaches that signal a shift from old models of "teacher training" or "inservicing" to a model in which teachers confront research and theory directly, are regularly engaged in evaluating their practice, and use their colleagues for mutual assistance. Furthermore, as Donaghue (2003:344) informs, "trainers running teacher education courses should consider encouraging participants to think about their personal beliefs and theories about teaching before providing input. Such argument is supported by the social constructivist theory which upholds the view that learning occurs when individuals engage socially in talk and activity about shared problems or tasks; isolation and lack of intellectual stimulation are detrimental to teachers' professional development (Liaw, 2003). Reviews of contemporary research also shows that teacher development encompasses two branches of growth: one is professional and the other is personal through which feeling good about yourself is one's top professional responsibility:

*We teach who we are. We may think we are teaching grammar or literature or exam preparation, but studies have shown that the amount of success which students experience is less dependent upon the knowledge and experience of the teacher that it is on three factors or attitudes: congruence, empathy and unconditional positive regard (Barduhn, 2002:6).*

In Turkey, research on teacher development is mostly preservice teacher education and development located at Colleges (Faculties) of Education. Kiraz (2001) articulates that traditional relationship between supervising teachers and student teachers functions through a traditional apprenticeship model presenting an unequal relationship, standing as a major obstacle for the development of the latter. Parallel to this, Akyel (1996) reminds us that preservice English language teachers should be invited to understand their own learning processes as well as to analyse their peers' and their own teaching practices. Thus, not only in preservice teacher development and education but also in the in-service teacher education, such traditional model seems to pervade. However, in recent years as newer models of teacher education and development spring, so do the newer models of mentor-practitioner relationships which have started to be shaped under the term reflective practices. In such a situation, post observation conferences stand as areas of power struggle in which the mentor/trainer and the practitioner/trainee stand face to face for professional accumulation of knowledge and expertise result of which may hinder or positively affect the success of such activity.

### **Post Observation Conferences**

Observation is described by Tuncay (2003:157) as “in language classrooms, the purposeful examination of teaching and/or learning events through systematic processes of data collection”. As Vossoughi (2000:452) clarifies, the aim of conducting observations is that information both of immediate value (for formative assessment) and for latter use (in summative assessment) should be gathered through this observation, and recorded in suitable form so that it can be understood both by you and by others. What follows these data collection processes are post observation conferences which are practices that follow the observations to exchange the trainer's knowledge and evaluations of that specific teaching practice of the trainee.

Because of limited time and crowded schedules, observation checklists are used to transmit the evaluations and decisions of the trainer. In such a limited exchange activity, procedures lead the action rather than allowing a mutual and reflective exchange of ideas of the two parties. As these examples suggest, post observation conferences seem to possess invaluable richness awaiting for cultivation for in these conferences such a necessary rapport is constructed and necessary messages are exchanged. Thus, it can also be said that post observation conferences help carrying out the success of any teacher development program because of aforementioned reasons and what happens in these conferences need to be studied

carefully for the completion of any teacher development activity including the observation. Because of time constraints and crowded schedules, the trainer gives a brief assessment report of the trainee by focusing on the checklist rather than spending time with the trainee to understand and reflect upon such exchange of ideas.

### **Reflective Inquiry**

Reflective inquiry involves continuous reflection of one's professional activities with open-ended, disciplined critical inquiry that is conducted collaboratively, an interplay among teacher reflection, critical thinking, and continuous learning (Henderson & Hawthorne, 2000:40). Peters (1991:40 cited in Henderson & Hawthorne, 2000:89) clarifies the meaning of teacher reflection as:

*Identifying one's assumptions and feelings associated with practice, theorizing about how these assumptions and feelings are functionally or dysfunctionally associated with practice, and acting on the basis of the resulting theory of practice. In this sense, reflective practice involves critical thinking and learning, both of which are processes that can lead to significant self-development.*

For the importance of the context of preservice teaching, Cruickshank (1985:30) as cited in (Henderson & Hawthorne, 2000:39) claims that reflective teaching is a process in which "preservice teachers teach brief, standardized lessons to peers, are given feedback by peers regarding their skill in presenting the lessons, and then reflect on the teaching they have done." Thus, reflective feedback and questions entailing it should be clarified for the possible successful execution of this practice.

### **Characteristics of Reflective Feedback**

Reflective practice should be scrutinized in order to explain the meaning attributed to these questions. Hoffman (1996:45) states that in addition to the shift from technical to practical and critical reflection in professional practice, "the reflective practitioner philosophy models include a holistic view of the complex professional practice, the meaning in the experience, the interface between person and practice, the working in collaboration with colleagues and systematic, critical, creative thinking about action and practice". Hence, characteristics of reflective feedback are as follows:

- Promotes **reflection** as part of a dialog between the giver and receiver of feedback. Both parties are involved in observing, thinking, reporting, and responding.

- Focuses on observed **behavior** rather than on the person. Refers to what an individual does rather than to what we think s/he is.

- Is **descriptive** rather than judgmental. Avoiding judgmental language reduces the need for an individual to respond defensively.

- Is **specific** rather than general.

- Promotes **reflection about strategies** and the students' or observer's responses to a specific strategy.

- Is directed toward behavior which the receiver can **change**.

- Considers the **needs** of both the receiver and giver of feedback.

- Is **solicited** rather than imposed. Feedback is most useful when the receiver actively seeks feedback and is able to discuss it in a supportive environment.

- Is **well-timed**. In general, feedback is most useful at the earliest opportunity after the given behavior.

- Involves **sharing information** rather than giving advice, leaving the individual free to change in accordance with personal goals and needs.

- Considers the **amount of information** the receiver can use rather than the amount the observer would like to give. Overloading an individual with feedback reduces the likelihood that the information will be used effectively.

- Requires a **supportive, confidential** relationship built on trust, honesty, and genuine concern.

### **Suggested Questioning Techniques**

In order to inquire about some particular aspects of one's teaching practices, a collection of questions are asked during post observation conferences. Asked orally or in written forms, such questions help not only recording the facts or features related to one's teaching but also bring more possibilities to deepen the knowledge produced in such an interaction. Sample questions, or prompts, which are often asked during post-observation conferences are as follows:

- How do you think the class went? What do you think worked very well in this class?  
How can you use what worked well in your next class?

- If you could teach the same class again, what would you do differently? What would you do the same way? What will you find funny about this class in two years? What will you remember about this class in two years?

- I noticed that you [describe strategy, i.e. called students by name, moved all around the classroom, lectured from your notes, did not answer students questions]. Why did you choose that strategy? Did the students respond as you had expected? Were you satisfied with the student response?

- What were your objectives in doing [describe strategy]? Did you feel that you were successful in meeting these objectives? Please explain.

-Did you model the things you wanted to?

- You seemed [describe perceived attitude, i.e. negative, positive, distracted, enthusiastic] about [describe activity]. What was going through your mind?

- What do you think would happen if you [describe strategy]?

- Could you have asked something different besides, [quote question] to get the response you desired?

- What do you think your strengths are? How can we build on your strengths?

- Why did you react [describe reaction]?

- What areas do you want to improve? How might you do that?

- What did you learn from teaching this class?

- What made this class different from others you have taught?

- How did you feel about your students during this class?

- When you said, [quote something said], I felt [describe your reaction].

- Was this a typical class? How was it the same? How was it different?

Remembering Donaghue's (2003) words on knowing the practitioner's beliefs and assumptions prior to these conferences, additional questions are needed to enable the both parties establish a reflective sphere in which they can exchange ideas and information accordingly. Having pertained into qualitative reserarch and interviewing techniques, desirable and suggested questions have a lot to offer to those who would like to collect more data as well as to help the participant follow a story line containing both depth and breath. These interview questions, offered by Merriam (1998) can also be used in post observation conferences firstly because such meetings should be based on reflective, two-way relationships, mutually shared upon which a sound professional development can be built (see **Table 1** for sample questions). Such questions, I believe, are helpful for the following reasons:

1. Such questions help the trainers learn more about the beliefs and knowledge of the trainee;

2. These questions will also help the trainee focus on his thinking and decision-making processes for answering these questions will give way to a reflective practice for learning is a consequence of thinking (Beerens, 2000);

3. These questions will help building a mutual relationship based on trust and understanding without antagonizing between the peers;

4. These questions will also help situating the observation and post observation conferences to a more reflective sphere in which the participants feel as though they are peers.

### **Conclusion**

When colleagues, mentors, and all agents exchange ideas, share their stories and beliefs about their profession from a reflective perspective, their narratives may become the raw material for deeper reflection, professional meaning making develop, personal beliefs are revealed, and teaching is examined critically (Henderson & Hawthorne, 2000:41). Hence, rather than searching for push buttons, individuals take on responsibility in a natural way in their profession. In sum, it is, first, the mentor's responsibility to foreshadow possibilities rested in reflective practice. Post observation questions, both for modelling as well as for accumulation of knowledge purposes, may serve well in forming ways of newer models of thinking and reflecting for the education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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**TABLE 1: Adapted Qualitative Interview Questions for Post-Observation Conference Meetings**

<b>Types of Questions</b>	<b>Examples</b>
<b>Hypothetical Question</b>	Suppose it is my first day in this professional development program. What would it be like?
<b>Devil’s Advocate Question</b>	Some teachers say that teachers who make use of L1 endanger students’ foreign language learning. What would you say to them?
<b>Ideal Position Question</b>	What do you think the ideal training program would be like? What aspects of language learning and teaching should a program emphasize?
<b>Interpretive Question</b>	Would you say that applying Multiple Intelligence Theory in your language teaching had a positive effect on students’ learning?

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