

By Daniel Mourlam

# Lights, Camera, Reflection!



Whether you want to observe students, your performance, or the classroom environment, video is a great way to develop effective learning and teaching.



There are many ways to critique our teaching, but few are more effective than video. Personal reflection through the use of video allows us to see what really happens in our classrooms—good and bad—and provides a visual path forward for improvement, whether it be in your teaching, your work with a particular student, or your learning environment. This is true regardless of the focus of the video.

### Finding a Focus

Before running to the media center to check out a camcorder, it's important to think about the focus of your recording. A critical question to consider is: What am I going to reflect on as I watch my video? You could ask yourself questions such as: Is there a better way for me to teach this unit? Are my students engaged during large group discussions? Is the current layout of the classroom conducive to project-based learning? You can focus on any aspect of your practice, such as your students, your teaching methods, or the learning environment.

First, ask for permission from the student and the parent or guardian. Create a simple form that explains what you're doing and why. Be sure to have a place on the form that allows both the parent and the student to opt out of any video recordings (see "Recording Quick Tips" on page 24 for a few samples).

It's essential that your students know the videos aren't going to be used against them. Let them know that you are trying to learn from them. It's important for your students to understand that even adults continue to learn. Using video of your students is also a great way to model what lifelong learning looks like.

Determine in advance what to reflect on. Perhaps there is a new

teaching strategy you are trying, and you want to know if you're effectively implementing it. Or maybe you have an unresponsive class and want to investigate and develop your classroom management skills to help reduce the barriers to learning. You may want to model a technique for other teachers in your professional learning community. Whatever you decide, be sure to thoughtfully narrow your focus. If you try to include too much, it could be difficult to make changes that lead to improved practice.

As you narrow the focus of your video, it may make sense to ask for some volunteers. Some students might be interested in helping you improve. Let them have a voice, not only in what you record, but also during the reflection of the video. Your students can provide a unique perspective that you may be missing as you reflect on your videos.

If you don't know what to record, try making a general video of your classroom that doesn't focus on anything in particular and see what emerges. If you're still not sure, ask someone, such as your students, another teacher, or your principal, or refer to a previous evaluation to help guide your development. Don't feel as though you have to do this alone. You're surrounded by educators who want to help you improve, so be sure to leverage them as you examine your practice.

Focusing on the learning environment might be necessary if you are changing to student-centered instruction, such as problem-based learning. Traditional learning environments aren't suited for student-centered instruction, so it's entirely possible that you and your students are struggling with this new type of instruction because the learning environment isn't appropriate.

Whatever you decide to focus your video on, be sure this is what you record. It's important that you don't prepare a special lesson for the days you record, because in the end that isn't going to help you improve your teaching.

### When to Record

Once you have determined what to record, the next step is deciding when. I recommend recording throughout the school year, as often as possible. The more you do it, the better you will become at honing your practice. Developing a reflective practice doesn't happen overnight, so the more opportunities you have to engage in that activity, the better.

It's important to find the right balance. Remember, the point is the learning and teaching that takes place in your classroom. You don't want to become so consumed with setting up the camcorder and recording that you lose focus of what really matters.

Start out slower by recording once every three or four weeks. Then, once you get used to recording and become more adept at implementing changes to your teaching, you can increase the frequency of your recordings to once a week or so.

Finding that balance will likely take some time, but once you do, schedule recording into your calendar. This will allow you to schedule other obligations around recording and to arrange to have the necessary equipment available for the days you record. Look at your lesson and unit plans and decide when it is most appropriate to record. Avoid days you're giving an exam, when school is dismissing early or starts late, or when there are special events taking place. Scheduled recording dates will also help keep you accountable.

Consider recording when you are formally evaluated by your principal



## Recording Quick Tips

**Enlist a videographer.** The video will only be helpful if it's pointed at the action.

**Use a tripod.** There's nothing worse than shaky video, and it's even worse when the audio is scratchy because the videographer touched the microphone while handling the camera.

**Reduce ambient noise.** Turn off fans and radios and close windows and doors. This will improve the quality of your audio recording.

Position the camera as close to the audio as possible. This will result in a louder and clearer sound recording.

**Try using the devices you have.** You don't need high-end equipment to get high-end results. Try using your smartphone, iPod, iPad, or standard camcorder.

**Keep it short.** Target the area you want to improve the most and record it.

**Get permission from students and parents.** If your students will be included in any videos, ask for permission. Here are three permission forms that you could easily modify:

- Elementary students: [bit.ly/MI6w0r](http://bit.ly/MI6w0r)
- Secondary students: [bit.ly/MI5MIL](http://bit.ly/MI5MIL)
- Parents: [bit.ly/NQO5Nh](http://bit.ly/NQO5Nh)

**Trash it.** When you are done reflecting on the video, delete it. No need to dwell on the past. You can use your written reflections to look back if needed.

or lead teacher. Make the most of your recordings by preparing for your evaluation in advance. This not only gives you an opportunity to make changes before your supervisor comes in to observe, but also allows you to show and explain the steps you have taken to improve your practice.

### Reflect on Practice

Once you've recorded yourself, it's important to take time the same day to reflect on the video. If you're still struggling to find an area to focus on, ask yourself some critical questions about what you see in the video. Why did I do that? Why didn't I say this? Why didn't I have the students do this instead? Is that really the best way to spend our time? Do I really respond like that to student questions? Even if you're happy with what you see in the video, ask yourself some critical questions that get to the heart of your teaching philosophy to help better articulate your actions to peers and superiors.

If you still can't find your focus, don't fret. Ask someone else to watch the video with you. This could be a student, a teacher, or even your principal. If you're comfortable with them watching, schedule a time when it works for both of you to sit down and discuss what you see. If not, then share the video with them and meet a day or two later. Once you both watch the video, discuss what you both saw. Did they see the same things as you? Are there things they would change? Are there questions they ask that you asked yourself? If so, that might be something to examine in more depth.

Another way to approach reflection on practice is to create a professional learning community (PLC). You can create a culture of reflection and improvement in your school by meeting with other teachers who want to in-

vestigate their teaching in more depth. This could take the role of a book club, but with a twist. Instead of reading a book, have everyone watch the same video of one of the PLC members and then have a discussion around what everyone saw, what they might adopt, and what they'd change if they were teaching the lesson. Leverage those around you to improve not only your practice, but also the practice of your fellow educators.

It's crucial that you write down your thoughts. Reflection is a continuous process as we implement change. As the school year progresses, it will become increasingly difficult to remember your first few videos. Writing down your thoughts and ideas may seem silly at first, but if you're serious about becoming a better teacher, it's a necessity.

If you are interested in how you improve over time, create a simple rubric that measures your target area. Identify the components you are going to improve or address, and use a simple evaluation metric, such as: not present, partially present, present.

Whether you're examining students, your performance, or the classroom environment, the use of video can be an instrumental tool for improving learning. The key is to record as often as possible and focus on one area at a time. This will allow you to reflect and target improvement. Be willing to look critically at yourself and to have others look critically at your teaching. If you can allow this constructive feedback, you will be able to identify areas where change is needed most.



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