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# Formative Classroom Walkthroughs

How Principals and  
Teachers Collaborate  
to Raise Student  
Achievement



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Acknowledgments.....	vii
1 Promoting a Culture of Professional Learning.....	1
2 Exploring Formative Walkthroughs.....	15
3 Feeding Professional Learning Forward Through Effective Feedback .....	36
4 Looking for a Worthwhile Lesson .....	49
5 Looking for a Learning Target .....	71
6 Looking for a Performance of Understanding .....	99
7 Looking for Student Look-Fors.....	118
8 Looking for Formative Feedback .....	138
9 Looking for Student Self-Assessment .....	158
10 Looking for Effective Questioning.....	174
11 Formative Walkthroughs and Schoolwide Improvement: Lessons Learned .....	194
References.....	210
Index .....	213
About the Authors .....	220

# Promoting a Culture of Professional Learning

The complexities of teaching and learning in 21st century schools require educators who meet those challenges by continually evaluating evidence and exercising trustworthy judgment. On a daily basis, they must continue to learn about effective educational practices and to weigh the effectiveness of their own classroom practices. Without both perspectives, educators are hard pressed to deepen their understanding about their students and use that evidence to exercise sound professional judgment. To make good decisions, educators must keep what is best for their students at the heart of their decision making.

Toward this end, many principals, curriculum directors, coaches, and teachers are using a new view of classroom walkthroughs—formative rather than evaluative—that helps them to gather real-time evidence to guide their decisions, cultivate schoolwide improvement efforts, and sustain meaningful professional development. Supported by years of research on effective professional learning (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995), formative walkthroughs help educators engage each other in directly confronting research and theory to regularly evaluate their own practices in a safe culture characterized by mutual assistance and sustained through coaching and collaborative problem solving around specific problems of practice (Moss & Brookhart, 2014).

We wrote this book to help educators engage in the formative walk-through process to harness the power of collaborative inquiry and evidence-based decision making. In it we employ a *learning target theory of action* (Moss, Brookhart, & Long, 2013) grounded in the belief that improving

student learning and teacher quality happens in the immediacy of daily lessons or it doesn't happen at all. Through our extensive work with teachers and administrators in schools and districts, we have found that the same learning target theory of action that has helped thousands of educators increase student learning holds particular promise for coaching and supporting educational professionals at all levels of practice.

## **A Collaborative Learning Culture**

Simply stated, the goal of a collaborative learning culture is to build communities of teachers who continuously engage in the study of their craft; develop the shared language and common understandings necessary to pursue collegial study of new knowledge and skills; and provide structure for follow-up and follow-through (Showers, 1985). Formative walkthroughs promote these actions when they are paired with collaborative feedback, used in the context of professional learning targets, and focused on both professional learning and student learning. Formative walkthroughs are about the learning of all parties within the school: administrators, teachers, and students. In a collaborative culture, feedback typically takes the form of professional conversations, and follow-through looks at evidence of both teaching improvements and student achievement. Good coaching that includes formative feedback can be instrumental in helping educators better understand the need for evidence-based change and improvement in their practice (Puig & Froelich, 2006).

A collaborative learning culture integrates newly acquired professional knowledge with the daily work of teachers, promotes collective participation, aligns with instructional goals and practices, links to national and local standards, and provides opportunities for active participation and learning (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001). A culture of evidence-based learning and decision making raises the quality of teaching and learning in every classroom as a public process of collaborative inquiry. This process requires instructional planning that digs deeply into content and fosters conversations and questions about improving student learning that are continuous, evidence-based, and "nondefensive" (Saphier & West, 2010, p. 46). Following this logic, then, the best collaborative learning is "nonthreatening and supportive" and

helps educators continuously enact their new learning to see it work with students (Poglinco et al., 2003).

In a collaborative learning culture, professionals engage in “learning by doing.” That is, the collaborators must commit to six key behaviors: (1) focusing on the learning of each student; (2) building a culture aimed at common goals to which all educators are held mutually accountable; (3) participating in collective inquiry into effective practice against current reality; (4) using an action orientation that quickly turns intentions into observable realities; (5) having a persistent dissatisfaction with the status quo that drives mutual commitment to continuous improvement; and (6) holding a results orientation that assesses efforts against evidence rather than intention (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010).

## How Does the Formative Walkthrough Process Promote a Collaborative Learning Culture?

The formative walkthrough process emphasizes learning inside of practice. It uses the same research-based formative learning processes that raise student achievement by focusing on three powerful sources of evidence: knowing where learning is headed, having a clear understanding of where it is now, and using up-to-the-minute evidence to decide what to do next to improve understanding (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Moss & Brookhart, 2009, 2012). The formative walkthrough process is grounded in a learning target theory of action to promote educational decisions based on what students are *actually doing* in their daily lessons to produce evidence of their learning.

The formative walkthrough process combines four formative elements: (1) a professional learning target, (2) professional performances of understanding that enable the collection of evidence of professional growth, (3) clear and understandable professional *look-fors* (success criteria), and (4) feed-forward information. Let’s examine each element and how it works with the others in the formative walkthrough process.

### Professional learning target

A professional learning target is a clear description of the next level of learning and work that a teacher, a group of teachers, or an entire staff will

aim for during a relatively short period of time (think days or a week, not months or a year). It is part of a larger learning trajectory that aims at a more complex professional learning goal. For example, a learning goal for the year might be *to increase the appropriate use of rubrics to guide writing across the curriculum*. If we were on a trip, this long-term goal would be our final destination. Each professional learning target, then, is a mile marker that describes an appropriate chunk of the long-term learning goal that a teacher or a group of teachers will tackle on the way.

A professional learning target has five characteristics. First, it describes exactly what teachers will *learn* in their classrooms, not what teachers will *do*. This powerful distinction sharply differentiates a professional learning target from a traditional professional development goal. Second, this description of learning uses language the teacher can understand and is appropriate to the teacher's current level of professional development. Third, the description of learning is framed from the point of view of a teacher who is learning the concept for the first time, not the coach or administrator who is familiar with or has expertise in the concept. Fourth, the description of learning is connected to a specific performance of understanding—what teachers will do, say, make, or write to deepen their understanding, demonstrate effectiveness, and gather evidence from their students' actual work to support claims of improving student achievement. Finally, the professional learning target contains things that teachers can look for in their students' work to assess and regulate their own classroom practice.

Here is an example that illustrates the first three characteristics of a professional learning target for teachers who are working toward a long-term goal of incorporating rubrics into classrooms to guide student writing. The teachers have already mastered the difference between a rubric and a scoring scheme, understand the different types of rubrics, and can explain the most effective ways to design a rubric to describe each criterion over different levels of performance quality. During the coming week, the teachers will aim for the following professional learning target: *We are learning that clear, student-friendly criteria organized as an analytic rubric can be used before, during, and after a student performance to help students learn to assess and regulate the quality of their own writing*. Notice that the learning target describes the learning—not the doing—and uses professional language that reflects teachers' growing understanding.

## Professional performance of understanding

A professional performance of understanding is a concrete, relevant, real-work-of-the-classroom task that teachers perform to deepen their understanding and assess their growing competence in relation to their learning target. What elevates it from a task that teachers “do” is that teachers have things to look for in their work that help them assess and regulate the quality of their practice. In other words, for something to count as a professional performance of understanding, it must both deepen and assess teacher learning. Building on our example about the teachers who are learning about the power of rubrics to develop students who can assess and regulate the quality of their own writing, the coach, the administrator, or the professional learning community designs the following performance of understanding: *During the coming week we will design a series of lessons that use a general analytic writing rubric to help our students plan their writing, create a first draft, produce an edited version of the draft annotated with the students’ reasons for their changes, and submit a revised piece of writing that includes their final self-assessment against the criteria from the rubric.* This is what the teachers are asked to do to learn more about the role rubrics can play in helping students improve the quality of their own writing. What will make it a true performance of understanding is the set of look-fors they will use as they teach, monitor, regulate, and assess themselves during the lessons. Educators who will observe and coach them will use the same set of look-fors to formulate their feedback and to scaffold their level of support.

## Professional look-fors

Most professional development asks teachers to “try something out” after they have learned about it during a workshop or through in-class modeling. Few of these experiences are guided by publicly stated success criteria that teachers and administrators will use to monitor, regulate, and feed professional learning forward. In sharp contrast, the formative walkthrough process requires that each educator understand and commit to what will count as evidence of good or improved work. Formative walkthroughs promote each educator’s ability to self-assess and self-regulate professional learning and effective educational practice. Each educator should keep look-fors in mind during self-reflection,

instructional planning, and walkthroughs. To be useful, professional look-fors must:

- describe the *quality of student learning* that will result from the teacher's improved performance;
- be observable, measureable, and distinct (if more than one look-for);
- form a complete set; and
- exist along a range of quality.

Framing the look-fors to describe evidence from student learning is another powerful distinction of the formative walkthrough process. Too often we lose sight of what should be our bottom line—improving student learning. To that end, an effective set of professional look-fors describes what anyone who observes the lesson will be able to recognize in the *students'* work and performances. The look-fors are written in such a way that teachers who are new to the concept can use the criteria to continuously assess and regulate their practice and help get themselves to the professional learning target.

Let's continue our example about the teachers who are helping students use rubrics before, during, and after a writing task to increase student self-assessment. The teachers have created the following set of look-fors with their principal: *My students can use the language of the rubric throughout this week's writing process to (1) explain the criteria for good writing that must be present in their story; (2) provide reasons for their writing and editing decisions; and (3) ask specific questions when they need help.* Crafting the look-fors to describe the effect the teachers will have on students keeps the focus on student learning as the clear and unmistakable reason for the coaching enterprise.

### **Feed-forward information**

The formative walkthrough process sets up educators for success. It does this by clearly defining what is expected in terms of professional look-fors that describe student learning and achievement. Feed-forward information, then, is framed by the same professional look-fors and can come from principals, coaches, members of professional learning communities, and teachers themselves as they work to improve their practice. The professional learning target, the performance of understanding, and the look-fors make the learning public, observable, and measureable so that there are no surprises and no excuses. Everyone is aiming for the same understanding and helping to feed



each other forward. As we will discover in Chapter 3, the formative walk-through process uses a three-part analysis to formulate and provide effective feedback. It honors the micro view and the snapshot view of effective feedback and helps teachers see the long view of professional learning.

### Shifting the aim of professional development

Merging these four elements—the professional learning target, the performance of understanding, look-fors, and feed-forward information—within a culture of collaborative inquiry shifts the aim of professional development. Expectations increase from simply grasping or demonstrating “best practice” to continuously documenting professional growth through up-to-the-minute evidence from improved student learning. This unwavering focus on evidence from what students are actually doing in the classroom promotes systematic and intentional inquiry into what *really* works to deepen student understanding and raise student achievement.

Finally, the formative walkthrough process fosters collaborative inquiry as it advances professional learning and informs next-step improvement decisions. Before, during, and after the formative walkthroughs, educators engage in mutual feed-forward conversations aligned with mutual and evidence-based goals for improvement that promote self-assessment and self-regulation as everyone’s most important work.

What follows are insights from our extensive work in schools that inform our understanding. Together, the insights provide a context for the topics, guides, and suggestions found in this book.

### Developing a Culture of Systematic and Intentional Inquiry

*Insight 1: You don’t get useful information by asking the wrong questions.*

The goal of the formative walkthrough process is for educators to move forward by shifting how each person looks at the problem, identifies realistic actions to take, and learns from collective and individual actions. Effective educators must build capacity to raise penetrating questions that challenge current belief systems and underlying assumptions. Rather than looking for quick-fix answers, competent leaders nourish “inquiring systems” that promote collaborative meaning-making and discovery. Because of its systematic

and intentional focus on weighing decisions against evidence from student learning, formative classroom walkthroughs help educational communities navigate the complex waters of teaching and reframe possibilities for students and teachers. They accomplish this through a process of collaborative inquiry framed by the four interrelated elements described in the previous sections—a learning target, a performance of understanding, publicly stated look-fors, and feed-forward information. We have consistently promoted the use of these game-changing components for student learning and achievement (see, for example, Moss & Brookhart, 2009, 2012; Moss, Brookhart, & Long, 2011, 2013), and it has become abundantly clear to us that the same interrelated elements also raise the quality of professional learning and practice.

Examining student learning in our classrooms and using the information we gather to improve that learning cannot begin with a general point of inquiry, such as *How can we improve writing across the curriculum?* or with investigations into the use or nonuse of a particular strategy, such as *Where are we with integrating the new note-taking format across all lessons?* Investigations such as these yield information about the strategies, but bypass questions about the quality of what is being taught in the first place. For example, a social studies teacher can develop his students' capability to use the Cornell note-taking system (Pauk & Owens, 2014) without ever improving the quality of his lessons—the content, the student performances required, and the criteria used to assess learning. And although students may become better note-takers, the direction of the inquiry misses the key issue: what is the quality of the daily history lessons during which the students are taking Cornell notes?

The formative walkthrough process gathers evidence about what is actually happening in each lesson to improve student understanding. Looking for learning inside of practice reveals patterns of professional strength and highlights areas for professional growth. By framing inquiry around what makes a lesson worthwhile and where the lesson resides in a larger learning trajectory (described in Chapter 4), educators can get to the heart of the matter—the relationship of the lesson being taught to standards and curricular goals; the potential for the lesson's content to develop essential knowledge, skills, and the reasoning processes students need for future learning in this discipline; and the ability of the lesson to meet specific student learning needs by organizing information at the appropriate level of challenge, acknowledging