

# Adapting the Utilization-Focused Approach for Teacher Evaluation

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**ABSTRACT:** Mandated teacher evaluations are of little use to educators for a variety of reasons, including lack of reliability and validity of evaluation instruments and methods, failure of evaluation systems to adhere to the Personnel Evaluation Standards (Joint Committee, 2008), and the inherent bias in using classroom observations as a method of evaluating teachers. As a result, teacher evaluations fail to improve teaching or impact student learning. This paper suggests that the utility, and ultimately the impact, of teacher evaluations can be improved by adapting the utilization-focused approach to teacher evaluations. Specific suggestions for implementing the Utilization-focused Evaluation Checklist (Patton, 2008) are also provided.

**KEYWORDS:** *teacher evaluation, improving teacher effectiveness, utilization-focused evaluation, formative evaluation, utility in evaluation, personnel evaluation, classroom observations, reliability and validity*

Utilization-Focused Evaluation is defined as evaluation done for and with specific intended primary users for specific, intended uses (Patton, 2008). Teacher evaluations are required by law, but is that the only reason they are conducted? While caught up in the whirlwind of *No Child Left Behind* and a demand for greater accountability in K-12 education, we seem to have forgotten that teacher evaluations should be conducted for teachers and administrators to impact student learning by improving the effectiveness of teaching both individually and collectively (Darling-Hammond, Wise, & Pease, 1983). The research is resoundingly consistent: Teacher evaluations have little to no impact on the quality of education or student learning (Colby, Bradshaw, Joyner, 2002; Flesher, Sommers, Brauchle, 2000; Frase & Streshly, 1994; Peterson, 2000; Cousins, 1995; Joint Committee, 2008; Shinkfield &

Stufflebeam, 1995; Stiggins & Bridgeford, 1985). Since there is strong evidence that teacher effectiveness is the single most important factor in student learning (Mathers, Oliva, & Laine, 2008), we can conclude that teacher evaluations are not meeting their intended goal of improving teacher effectiveness. This is either because teacher evaluations cannot or, more likely, are not being used for the purpose of teacher improvement.

Why aren't teacher evaluations being used? Although there is no clear-cut answer, the literature discusses several serious flaws with teacher evaluation that could be contributing factors to their lack of use.

## Teacher Evaluations are Not Valid or Reliable

Although teachers have been evaluated using a variety of methods, including student ratings, interviews, student achievement, and competency exams, the most common method of teacher evaluation remains the classroom observation. A principal or other administrator typically conducts these observations once a year for experienced teachers and two to three times per year for new teachers. The observation is often followed by a one-on-one discussion of the evaluation results and an official report filed with the district personnel office. These evaluations have proven to be unreliable and potentially biased for several reasons.

### *The Evaluation Instrument is Rarely Reliable or Valid*

Bitner and Kratzner (1995) argue that very few teacher evaluation instruments hold up to scientific scrutiny and the creators of most instruments seem to be unaware or deliberately ignoring the “best practices” of measurement and evaluation. The instruments are rarely tested for reliability or validity, and those conducting the evaluations are seldom adequately trained in their use (Flesher et al., 2000). Additionally, in an effort to make some instruments more “objective,” they limit the evaluator’s ability to accurately describe or assess many of the best and worst teaching practices that they observe. It remains that most teacher evaluations are still almost entirely subjective; vary greatly in terms of validity, reliability, and effectiveness; and are inconsistent with data gained from other sources (Toroff & Sessions, 2005; Kyriakides, 2005; Peterson, 2000; Darling-Hammond et al., 1983).

### *The Evaluator is Biased and/or Incompetent*

In most cases, principals are the ones who conduct evaluations of teachers, regardless of the teachers’ subject or grade level. There is evidence that principals are not capable of accurately evaluating most teachers due to a lack of relevant teaching experience, little to no training with the evaluation instruments, inadequate time for genuine observation, and, in extreme cases, inherent biases from favoritism toward and even physical attractiveness of the teacher (Toroff & Sessions, 2005; Zimmerman & Deckert-Pelton, 2003; Peterson, 2000). Zimmerman and Deckert-Pelton (2003) claim that “only when principals are knowledgeable and experienced educators can they understand, critique, and evaluate teachers” (p. 29). Although one could argue against this, one cannot deny that many teachers perceive this to be true.

### *Classroom Observations are Not Indicative of True Behaviors*

Both the students and the teacher will feel inclined to “put on a show” for the evaluator, especially if the observation is scheduled in advance (as required by many teacher contracts). These contrived observations also fail to reflect teacher responsibilities outside of the classroom, and only a portion of the full in-classroom responsibilities can even be observed in any one observation (Kyriakides, 2005).

## Teacher Evaluations do not Follow the Personnel Evaluation Standards

A comprehensive study of teacher evaluation policies in the Midwest revealed that few district policies require evaluators to be trained, reference using resources or guidance to support the evaluations, or have clear consequences for unsatisfactory evaluations; and most used vague terminology leaving

evaluation policies and reports up to interpretation (Brant, Mathers, Oliva, Brown-Sims, & Hess, 2007). All of these are in opposition to what is required by the Personnel Evaluation Standards (Joint Committee, 2008) in order to fairly evaluate teachers. An earlier study conducted in the northeast showed that teacher evaluation systems only moderately followed the Personnel Evaluation Standards as a whole, with only 36 percent of cases adhering to the specific standards of evaluator credibility and valid measurement (Loup & Ellett, 1997).

### Teacher Evaluations do not Offer Formative Information for Teachers to Improve

The inherent summative nature of most evaluations also makes them particularly useless. Teachers often don't even see the results of their evaluations until the end of the year when they are required to sign them before being sent off to the districts. The amount and quality of principal-generated formative feedback varies widely (Flesher et al., 2000). When teachers do receive feedback from principals, it is often inconsistent, unidirectional, lacks specific examples or suggestions for improvement, and is based on subjective preferences (Zimmerman & Deckert-Pelton, 2003). "Most teacher evaluation processes attend to questions of how to identify effective teaching without addressing questions of how to bring about changes in teaching behavior, assuming that having discovered what ought to be done, implementation of recommended actions will naturally follow" (Darling-Hammond et al., 1983, p. 314). Studies also indicate that some administrators are unwilling to give constructive feedback because of lack of expertise in the field or disinterest in the entire evaluative process (Jorgenson & Peal, 2008; Zimmerman and Deckert-Pelton, 2003; Frase & Streshly, 1994).

### Lack of Use of Teacher Evaluations

These fundamental flaws have made teacher evaluations essentially useless to both teachers and administrators. Teachers are fully aware of the lack of reliability and validity of teacher evaluations, and because of this, they don't take evaluations seriously. This then makes them less likely to accept and internalize evaluation feedback (Jorgenson & Peal, 2008; Zimmerman & Deckert-Pelton, 2003).

The evaluations are also not very useful to administrators. Poor teachers receive inflated ratings and marginal teachers are left unidentified (Calabrese, Sherwood, Fast, & Womack, 2004). Even if poor teachers were correctly identified by the evaluation system, their lack of validity and reliability make them nearly impossible to be used as a legal basis for dismissal (Darling-Hammond et al., 1983). Additionally, studies have shown that through teacher evaluations, principals are only able to clearly identify the very best and the very worst teachers, making them useful only in weeding out grossly incompetent teachers (Jacob & Lefgren, 2006; Stiggins, 1986). Since most teachers are at least somewhat competent, these evaluation systems do little to improve personnel.

### Making Teacher Evaluations More Useful

The Personnel Evaluation Standards (Joint Committee, 2008), along with good sense, tell us that we should be making teacher evaluations more meaningful and useful. How might we go about doing this? We could begin by increasing the reliability and validity of teacher evaluations. Studies have already suggested many ways to do this, such as having an external evaluator observe the classroom rather than a principal or administrator. Additionally, reliability could be improved by training evaluators to properly use instruments and by having multiple evaluators

observe a single classroom. Although limited resources make multiple external evaluators unfeasible to most school districts, principals could easily be trained how to properly conduct evaluations, and administrators within a school district could easily “swap” schools with other administrators for the purpose of teacher evaluation.

Unfortunately, the reliability and validity of teacher evaluations is closely linked with time and monetary resources, making change in this area fairly unlikely. Instead, I propose that we increase their utility by following a utilization-focused approach (Patton, 2008).

## Utilization-Focused Evaluation

Although Patton (2008) describes his utilization-focused approach in terms of program evaluation, the guiding principles can easily be adapted to meet the needs of teacher evaluation. Patton’s (2008) checklist for utilization-focused evaluation (UFE) is comprised of twelve steps.<sup>1</sup> Those most applicable to teacher evaluations are adapted and described in context as follows.

### *Teacher/School Readiness Assessment*

This stage operates under the premise that evaluations cannot be useful if teachers and schools aren’t ready to be evaluated. Teachers and school administrators should be committed to conducting an evaluation that will be useful to everyone, and district officials need to be ready to restructure teacher evaluation systems with utility in mind. Evaluation readiness is often dependent on school climate and culture. A school may need to work on this before being ready to embrace UFE.

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<sup>1</sup> The checklist is also available online at [www.wmich.edu/evalctr/checklists/](http://www.wmich.edu/evalctr/checklists/)

### *Evaluator Readiness and Capability Assessment*

This step is most critical to making teacher evaluations useful, as it has already been shown that those typically charged with conducting the evaluations are not properly trained or qualified. At this point, the persons conducting the evaluations need to be properly trained in UFE and need to buy into the concept that evaluations should be useful. It is recommended that having grade-level or content experts conduct the evaluation might be more useful than having principals conduct evaluations. It is also important to note that there does not need to be one single evaluator in a school. All those willing and able to be a part of the evaluation team should be properly trained and given required resources. Each trained evaluator should then be assigned a “caseload” of teachers to evaluate over a specific timeframe. The entire evaluation team should be involved in making these assignments based on utility.

### *Identification of Primary Intended Users*

This step is fairly straightforward. Primary intended users of teacher evaluations are teachers and administrators. It should be made explicit which teachers are assigned to a given evaluator and which administrators are their supervisors. Note that there is not always a clear-cut line of authority in schools, as some teachers, such as music or fine art teachers, might have supervisors at the district level rather than the school level.

### *Situational Analysis*

The evaluation team should look at the school/district’s previous evaluation experiences and identify any potential barriers or resistance to use. They should know what resources are available for conducting evaluations and timelines for completion. Additionally, evaluators should be aware that

each teacher is unique, and even within a school, evaluations are context-dependent.

### *Identification of Primary Intended Uses and Evaluation Focus*

The specific uses of the evaluation can and do vary from teacher to teacher. It is important for evaluators to meet with individual teachers to discuss what they would find useful. This is likely to involve direct improvement of teaching skills. By encompassing this step, the teacher evaluation system will change from being primarily summative to being primarily formative. Evaluators should also discuss evaluation use with administrators. Again, this is likely to involve direct improvement of teaching skills as well as identification of incompetence. The evaluator should then take information from teachers and administrators to develop the key evaluation questions.

### *Evaluation Design, Data Collection, & Analysis*

The design of the evaluation is entirely dependent on the evaluation questions developed in the previous step. Methods will vary and may include classroom observations, document analysis, student surveys, or interviews. Evaluation methods will vary from teacher to teacher and from year to year. The evaluator should keep in mind that the evaluation needs to be practical, cost effective, and ethical in addition to being useful. Data should be collected and analyzed with use in mind, and collection should not be detrimental to the classroom environment. Teachers should be involved in interpreting findings and generating recommendations.

### *Facilitation of Use and Metaevaluation*

Evaluators should help teachers and administrators develop a plan for using the

evaluation results and, most importantly, should provide follow-up guidance and support. After the evaluation is completed, the evaluator should also determine the extent to which intended use by intended users was achieved.

### **Impact**

The biggest criticism of teacher evaluations is that they have no impact on student learning, but teacher evaluation systems are not all bad. A huge advantage of most teacher evaluation systems is that evaluations are a continuous process, not one-time events. If such a longitudinal evaluation is conducted with use in mind, the evaluator has the opportunity to develop a strong mentoring relationship with the teacher. When an evaluator is seen as a mentor, rather than as an incompetent boss, the evaluation has the potential to actually impact teaching practices and student learning.

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