

Cultivating Dialogic Feedback (CDF): Humanizing Teacher Evaluation

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Current practices in K-12 teacher evaluation look to mechanize the evaluation model and effectuate better teaching by enforcing compliance to the evaluation model. This practice treats teachers as disseminators of instructional practice and thereby of information to students which dehumanizes teachers. The following research takes a different approach to understanding teacher evaluation by working away from fixing the evaluation model by replacing it with another model. Instead, the research examines the breadth of compliance culture, called performativity, and examines the relationship between teacher and evaluator. At the root of the research is discovering how the relationship between teacher and evaluator can usher a culture of authentic growth that entwines with current teacher evaluation practices. Key to the research is capturing genuine dialogue between teacher and evaluator, creating cultivating dialogic feedback (CDF), a system of dialogic cycles that set authentic goals for the teacher, create clear measures of growth the teacher experiences, and use a wider variety of artifacts than traditional evaluations. Using design-based research (DBR), this research sets CDF in a small alternative school and explores the effect of dialogic cycles—looking to understand how dialogic feedback can strengthen instructional practices and create a truly transparent evaluation experience for teachers.

Keywords: Teacher evaluation, evaluation feedback, Teacher/evaluator relationships

Introduction

Teacher evaluation systems have been used for examining external assessment data for measuring student growth, to improve teacher quality by observing teachers in the classroom, and to identify strong teaching practices. The USDOE federal review in 2009 mandated all school districts to:

1. Establish clear approaches to measuring student growth and measure it for each student
2. Design and implement rigorous, transparent, and fair evaluation systems for teachers and principals that (a) differentiate effectiveness using multiple rating categories that take into account data on student growth as a significant fact, and (b) are designed and developed with teacher and principal involvement
3. Conduct annual evaluations of teachers and principals that include timely and constructive feedback; as part of such evaluations, provide teachers and principals with data on student growth for their students, classes, and schools
4. Use these evaluations, at a minimum, to inform decisions regarding developing teachers and principals, including by providing opportunities to highly effective teachers and principals to obtain additional compensation and to give additional responsibilities; whether or not to grant full

tenure and/or full certification; and removing ineffective tenured and untenured teachers and principals after they have had ample opportunities to improve (USDOE, 2009).

As a reaction to the USDOE mandate, many school districts, local, and state governments have spent a lot of time and research on developing strong evaluation models. In response to ESSA (Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015), evaluation systems shared the following qualities: (1) Value-Added Models (VAMs), (2) Teacher-Level Observations, (3) Student Surveys; and (4) School Learning Objectives (SLOs) (Close et al., 2020, p. 10). Different evaluation models place a different emphasis on each of these features, and different evaluation systems have varying iterations of the four criteria.

It is important to understand the reasoning behind evaluation systems in order to understand the transition they have made from accurately measuring how a teacher grows to answering mandates from higher authorities and creating a culture of incomplete accountability that has systematically driven teachers from the profession.

Performativity

Performativity is the hierarchal culture implemented in school districts that discourages teacher discovery, even teacher autonomy. Instead, performativity replaces that culture with a systematic mechanism of evaluation based on corporate groupthink and hierarchal structures.

According to Ball (2003):

Performativity is a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons, and displays as a means of incentive, control, attrition, and change—based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic). The performances (of individuals and organizations) serves as a means of productivity or output, or displays of “quality,” or “moments” of promotion and inspection. As such they stand for, encapsulate, or represent the worth, quality, or value of an individual or organization within a field of judgement (p. 216).

Performativity culture is glossy—it champions gravitas and efficiency—claiming to give purpose to building a culture of hierarchy. On the surface, it claims not to be hierarchal—pointing to self-motivation and “meeting of a standard” as its characteristics. However, at the center of this self-motivation is a monologic evaluation—explaining what the evaluator has observed alone without any significance or perspective offered by the teacher. Cochrane and colleagues (2009) add, “with education systems increasingly valuing outputs and efficiency over inputs and processes, teacher performance has been (re)conceptualized as that which can be qualified and measured, relying on a system of performance benchmarks and assessments” (p. 374). Systems that value outputs more than inputs, both overtly and covertly, send the message to teachers, through monologic evaluations, that their voice does not hold the value of a one-size-fits-all model. This can create a system of terror among teachers, where they have to abandon their own ideas and values to fit in that box. Meng (2009) states, “in essence, policy technologies of performativity define performance indicators and evaluate members of the organization based on their capacity to fulfill these indicators they engender the terrors of performativity” (p. 160). As a result, the culture of performativity is very much embedded in policies and practices in an insincere attempt to meet demands of transparency and accountability (Sachs, 2016). To be clear, this is not an argument against performance indicators, nor having outside voices examining those indicators. However, true performance and true learning are not the same for everyone, and learning demonstrations take place in various shapes and forms. To avoid building a one-size-fits-all culture, this is why open dialogue and discussion is essential to the evaluation process. The moment any dialogic is replaced by a monologic adherence to protocols, it devalues the teacher’s voice and role in the process.

The Performative Model

What makes performativity so notable is that a pattern can be derived from its application. Schools rooted in performativity culture possess distinct characteristics. Performative models: (a) establish an administrative hierarchy highlighting manager heroes and their role in the hierarchy,

(b) create fabrications as school guidelines, (c) set a surveillance culture by establishing drive-by observations as a norm; and (d) promote a corporate group-think culture that drives teachers to lose a sense of ethical self.

Literature Review

Evaluation systems and their demands for adherence to teaching traditions, such as displayed learning targets, imitating “best practices,” and creating an environment prepped for brief check-listed, drive-by observations draws a distinct parallel with the teaching of martial arts. Lee (1975) states:

In the long history of martial arts, the instinct to follow and imitate seems to be inherent in most martial artists, instructors and students alike. This is partly due to human tendency and partly because of the steep traditions behind multiple patterns of styles.

Consequently, to find a refreshing, original master teacher is a rarity. The need for a “pointer of the way” echoes (p. 16).

Like the teaching of martial arts, the teaching profession struggles searching for a master teacher—largely due to the errant belief that master teachers are identified instead of grown. As a result, more emphasis is placed on evaluation systems that label a teacher’s actions, rather than capture how a teacher has arrived at their own process. My review of literature demonstrates the tendency to work within evaluative frameworks has become so ubiquitous the research no longer questions the frameworks. To examine how growth can be measured and visualized in stages, I examined growth measured with Taoist concepts. Lee’s stages of cultivation, culminating in Jeet Kune Do, creates the maxim of, “Using no way as way, having no limitations as limitation” (Lee, 2020). It categorizes growth into four categories: partiality, fluidity, emptiness, and Jeet Kune Do.

Partiality: Running to the extreme

Lee (2020) states, “Partiality is where most of us start, and this is unconscious behavior” (p. 171). In education, novice teachers are often stuck in this phase: they are thrown into the field and suddenly find themselves in survival mode, trying to maintain control numerous factors in every class. Simultaneously, these teachers are trying to build an identity with their students and colleagues. This takes time, care, experimentation, a willingness to take risks—all while being mindful of evaluation criteria. Pallas (2023) shows some of the criteria teachers are evaluated on in his research of New York City teachers. According to Pallas, teachers chose eight components they were rated upon:

- Demonstrating knowledge of content and pedagogy
- Designing coherent instruction
- Creating an environment of respect and rapport
- Managing student behavior

- Using questioning and discussion techniques
- Engaging students in learning
- Using assessment in instruction
- Growing and developing professionally (Pallas, 2023)

For an inexperienced novice teacher, these criteria might not work together naturally, and seem more like a list to accomplish. The novice teacher, though, might see criteria such as managing behavior and engaging students in learning as two unconnected pieces of the teaching puzzle. As a result, when they appear on a drive-by observation, the teacher may try to work on these as separate criteria.

This is where the unconscious behaviors emerge, as every movement the teacher makes is reactive to fitting the criteria. Lee (2020) characterizes partiality as: “There’s an inexperienced, uncontrolled wildness to it; there’s no technique, no skill” (p. 172). Lee describes partiality existing in martial arts and other skills, such as cooking or building, through the person learning a skill by running to the extreme, by trying to achieve balance in a way that one person rides a see-saw on their own, placing their weight on one side at a time and hoping for eventual balance rather than achieving it. With teachers, partiality is not so much the movement toward the extreme, as it is a constant pinballing from one extreme to another.

Fluidity: Two Halves of the Whole

The fluidity stage is marked by the recognition of mistakes in teaching practice and a willingness to both overcome obstacles and to create processes for doing so. This is the point where teachers begin to explore, develop, and rely on their own foundational systems of practice. We see the harnessing of our potential as inevitable, and both exciting and terrifying (Lee, 2020). These systems promote early stages of recognizable growth by both teacher and evaluator. A genuine willingness to grow is not forced on the individual, the individual desires it, and eventually relies on the created systems. As the individual teacher creates their own systems, the evaluator ideally shifts from a judge of the system to a guide for what works for the individual. What complicates this step, though is the systems stage can be seen as the peak of growth. By staying in fluidity, and having an evaluator judge the system, adherence to a system becomes a pinnacle, not a step in achieving growth. Evaluation culture creates a preference for a score over genuine growth. Furthermore, this is where a lot of evaluators have reached their peak as teachers and have transitioned into the evaluator side of the field, giving the evaluations. Throughout the literature, evaluation systems discuss the “training” of teachers to use the evaluation systems properly, but the system deviates from authentic growth in favor of designating teachers.

Emptiness: The Formless Form

Western culture provides a negative connotation to emptiness, associating empty with nothingness. In contrast, Eastern culture associates emptiness with spiritual peace, almost a meditative creative quality, with designer potential. Lee (1999) states, “We in the West think of nothingness as a void, an emptiness, a nonexistence. In Eastern philosophy and modern physical science, nothingness—nothingness—is a form of process, ever moving” (p. 85). This latter part of the description is crucial in understanding how teacher growth is cultivated. Reaching emptiness requires a significant “bridging of the gap” from fluidity. This bridging of the gap moves the teacher from relying on systems, practices and procedures, to having these systems at the teacher’s disposal, ready to use, but knowing when, where, how, and why.

In other words, the teacher has separated themselves from being scored on how well they are using a system to using a system with a deeper purpose in mind. This also explains the incomplete nature of teacher evaluation. This process and ability to be spontaneous in the right moments, to be sensitive to the situation, to know what skill is needed, and to adapt to the situation absolutely cannot be found or observed through a drive-by observation, or limited to a lengthy checklist. In fact, the reaching of emptiness requires a probing into the thoughts, actions, and reactions of teacher and student that standard evaluation has no patience for. Only a larger understanding of the full context, an exploration of the teacher’s praxis and how students respond will demonstrate this formless form.

Jeet Kun Do: Using “No Way” as “Way” - Having “No Limitations” as Limitation

Emptiness requires a letting go of systems and procedures, in order for the individual to explore. The final step of cultivation, Jeet Kune Do, realizes oneself. Our learnings, experiences, knowledge, thoughts, our emotions all gather in order for us to be the best version of ourselves. Belief in Jeet Kune Do is belief in plurality—as individuals realize the best versions of themselves.

For teachers, Jeet Kune Do is praxis. The teacher is no longer trying to imitate procedures and structures. The teacher is no longer experimenting to find their own way—no, the teacher reaches out to students uniquely to that teacher. Therefore, as a teacher reaches Jeet Kune Do, it becomes more important to understand the teacher’s motivation—not to be following a procedure, but the crystallization from working with students. According to Lee (1999), “Jeet Kune Do rids oneself of hang-ups, insecurities, fears, and suppressed emotions—anything, in other words, that would bind the individual from becoming anything less than the fullest expression of that individual” (p.

19). Teaching, specifically the relationship between teacher and student, becomes similar to a martial-arts sparring session. The teacher and student are not opponents, but are sparring with emotion, knowledge, and experience—not striking, but trying to clear a path to each other’s minds. It is as similar to enlightened as its denotation allows: showing a rational, modern, and well-informed outlook.

Methodology

Design based research (DBR) in education combines a framework and a methodology in which the design of new education materials or learning environments is a crucial part of the research (Bakker et al., 2019). DBIR creates a framework for understanding how CDF can change the nature of evaluation—how it affects all participants, how it brings different participants together. DBR has an immediacy of development that allows for prompt adaptation that entwines the theoretical with direct application of research. Fishman and colleagues note, “DBIR [Design-based implementation research] applies design-based perspectives and methods to address and study problems of implementation” (Fishman et al., 2013, p. 37). Cobb and colleagues (2003) note that design-based research is a learning ecology—a complex system of multiple types of elements that are designed to examine how the different elements work together (Cobb et al., 2003). This study looked to develop CDF in a DBR framework based on the following characteristics: (1) Development of a theory, (2) the research has an interventionist quality, (3) the research has prospective and reflective components to it, (4) there is a cyclical nature to the research; and, (5) the theory must do real work (Bakker et al., 2019).

Results Overview

This qualitative study exploring how CDF can deepen the evaluation process took place between May 2024 and December 2024. The study began with eight participants: six teachers—Lawrence, Charles, Rebecca, Tiffany, Sofia, and Tyler— and two evaluators: Angela, the principal; and Bruce, the assistant principal. Sofia began the study in May 2024, but left her position over the summer. Tyler began the study in May 2024 but dropped out of the study by October 2024.

Alterations Needed for the Initial DBR Cycles and Phases

The first focus group took place in May 2024, followed by some teacher-evaluator switches that resulted in the pairings seen above. I asked participants to think about their goals, artifacts, and how they envision their growth over the summer break. As the new school year started, I went over the meeting protocol with all participants and answered all individual questions, ranging from logistics to individuals thinking about their ideas for goals. However, as stated in Chapter 3, the

format had to be changed: Cycle one focused on articulating and setting goals, cycle two examined ideas for what artifacts could look like, and cycle three discussed each pairings ideas around growth. The study concluded with a final focus group before the winter holidays. When asked, if given the opportunity, would the participants be willing to continue the study, all members responded positively. Both Lawrence and Rebecca mentioned that the goals they made for the study became their actual goals for the school’s standard evaluation. When member-checking the following semester, teacher participants said they had a mid-year conversation with their evaluator regarding the traditional evaluation model, but no other one-on-one conversations regarding their goal. This suggests that CDF goals can coincide with the school’s traditional evaluation model, but that without other interventions, teacher-evaluator pairs may not maintain the goals or the frequency of conversations they had with this study.

Shifting from Adversaries to Opponents

This study looks to replace this adversarial culture by using CDF to re-think of adversaries as opponents. Opponents are those with different perspectives in movement with the other person. In martial arts, your opponent is often your sparring partner, a person to interact with. A sparring partner allows the martial artist to unleash techniques ranging from moving at different speeds, discharging different levels of power, to experimenting with new combinations or trying something unfamiliar. An adversary does the opposite—looking for a way to break through the guard and knock the martial artist out. The relationship between teacher and evaluator should seek to be more of that probing collaborative partnership. The last thing a teacher wants to feel is metaphorically floored by evaluative feedback. Dialogic feedback replaces punches and kicks with ideas, methods, and conversations. This allows a clearer teacher-evaluator relationship to emerge with opponents verbally sparring to improve the teaching process. When examining the themes that emerged from the transcripts, teachers and evaluators work as collaborators and the collaboration centers around developing clearer guidelines that apply to growth with each teacher-evaluator pair.

Developing Verbal Chi Sao: Opponents Engaged in Verbal Combat to Deepen the Conversations

In wing chun kung fu, there is an exercise called chi sao or “sticking hands.” It is a close combat exercise that develops sensitivity, focus, and awareness. Lee (2020) states the following about chi sao:

In chi sao, the practitioners rock their arms side to side in a circular motion, never releasing the tension on their forearms and never stopping the motion. They continue to exchange energy back and forth, all the while sensing what the other is giving and trying

to respond skillfully and immediately. This is a truly connected relationship in which both sides are in full communication, contact, and sensitivity to each other, and in which both sides are pushing the other onward. This exercise requires great attention and presence, but it is also meant to prepare you to find the opening through which you will act (Lee, 2020, pp. 98-99).

Martial arts practitioners rock their arms side to side in *chi sao*, with a give and take of energy in motion. Similarly, teachers and evaluators trade ideas and perspectives in conversations, sharing a productive tension as they discuss the construction of lessons, instructional techniques, student differentiation, and assessment. The movement of *chi sao* is what allows each participant to block and initiate their own punch, that is in turn received and initiated into a cyclical flow. Like *chi sao*, it is crucial that any tension between teacher and evaluator simply does not continue to build by moving the arms in isolation, but the arm movement flows between teacher and evaluator. Like the *chi sao* exercise, teacher-evaluator pairs want to be in full communication, contact, and sensitivity to each other. In either *chi sao* or teacher evaluation, the movement causes more movement, which becomes cyclical, and allows for new openings, discoveries, and ideas—any of which can depend on the other. This requires engagement from both teachers and evaluators, for if one stops the movement (only acts as a listener in an evaluation conversation), the other struggles to maintain sensitivity with the other.

Using a Verbal Chi Sao to Design Goals

When teachers and evaluators first met, no teachers had a goal written, but all had ideas for what they wanted their goal to be. Different teachers experienced different challenges in setting up their goals. The second conjecture of CDF has evaluators treating teachers as designers—designers of curriculum, designers of lessons; and therefore, designers of goals. Ideally, this would start the verbal *chi sao*.

As some teachers began to develop ideas, a beginning *chi sao* started to emerge—teachers seeing ideas begin to form into a goal, evaluators filling in the blanks—constant movement toward developing an individualistic goal. In other cases, though the verbal *chi sao* could not start. This was due, specifically, to a lack of movement. A teacher came to the meeting with an idea, the evaluator could not see how the idea fit into the descriptor, and the idea halted. This observation is important to the analogy of *chi sao*. It is not about assigning blame or stating that either teacher's or evaluator's perspective is at fault. Instead, it demonstrates a lack of movement cannot advance an idea.

Discussion

This study was an exploration of the conceptualization of CDF—trying to further

understand the dynamic between teachers and evaluators. Specifically, this design attempted to implement humanizing feedback as a staple in teacher evaluation. The design included a series of conversations between teachers and evaluators interspersed with broad-involvement focus groups and semi-structured interviews that took place between May of 2024 through December of 2024. Along with meetings, I examined written artifacts including teaching goals, artifact plans, reflections, and other plans and documents teachers shared with me to demonstrate their process. The actionable knowledge that arose from CDF conversations was that teachers who create alternative goals become more engaged in their process when discussing their goals, as well as trying to articulate their goals. Evaluators that engage in more frequent conversations with their teachers have the potential to better understand how growth for a goal is initiated and realized. Evaluators can also draw from a better bank of artifacts to recognize the process of creating goals and actualizing growth. These realizations do not stem from pre-existing rubric criteria, but from frequent conversations—a back and forth between teachers and evaluators. Implementing CDF conversations broadens the potential research possibilities around teacher evaluation. Instead of focusing research on the rubric model and building off the rubric model, further research can consider the nature of the conversations between teacher and evaluator. This study sought to understand how CDF conversations could deepen the teacher evaluation process, by humanizing both teachers and evaluators. In this chapter, I reflect on the conjectures of CDF, reflect on the challenges of the study, attempt to pinpoint future iterations of CDF, and examine the implications of this design.

Establishing Trainings before the Initial CDF Meetings

Foremost among the limitations was the realization of needing to redefine, goals, artifacts, and growth (on a couple of different occasions) needs to be addressed. As stated throughout the study, these revisions were unexpected, but a flaw in the design process. The CDF meetings require both teacher and evaluator to reconsider their roles—and having veteran teachers and evaluators may have actually further complicated this reconsideration. Veteran teachers and evaluators so used to viewing evaluation conversations play out in a similar fashion, would not think to reconsider how they arrived for the CDF meetings. Therefore, it is necessary to implement specific professional development workshops at the outset of the study before the meetings begin. These workshops first would focus on the nature and role of the CDF meetings—opponents engaged in verbal *chi sao*. It would be necessary to separate teachers and evaluators at first to develop the concept and let teachers and evaluators role play with each other before bringing them together to practice as opponents conducting verbal *chi sao*.

In addition to workshops examining the roles of teacher and evaluator, I would require workshops discussing goals, growth, and artifacts—how each are set and the connection between the three. For teachers, this is about building pieces of a process through creation, deconstruction, and demonstration. For evaluators, it is a reminder of viewing the process and not the product—the former is needed to properly contextualize the latter.

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