

Report from the IPA “Developing Effective Conferencing Skills with Teachers” workshop

Submitted May 1, 2006

On April 19, Vicki Graziano, Katie Orrego and I attended the “Developing Conferencing Skills Wprkshop” hosted by the Illinois Principals Association. Of the twenty or so attendees we were the only non-administrators. The workshop was led by the very capable Donald Kachur, Professor Emeritus at Illinois State University.

As Jeff suspected when he asked the Clinical Experiences Subcommittee to send some representatives to this workshop, the content had great relevance to the work U-High teachers do conferencing with clinical experience students. The primary concern of the workshop was to teach administrators how to be “mediators of thinking” instead of simply “fixers” during the teacher review / evaluation process. In other words, the administrators were encouraged to ask more questions, develop teacher ownership and make the evaluations process productive and meaningful for teachers. This is done through effective open ended questioning, respectful and complete observations, the development of clear goals and objectives and a commitment to professionalism.

The workshop represented a full day of thinking about conferencing and I found it very thought provoking in regard to my work with clinical experience students. I would like to highlight some of the issues the workshop covered that I feel might be worth mentioning:

- It is important for the evaluator to create ownership on the part of the teacher
- One of the most vital initial elements of the evaluation process is trust building
- An evaluator should have a strong cache of questioning skills and responding skills; it seems unlikely that any form will lead to a totally productive evaluation cycle
- Evaluators should participate in some sort of self assessment of the conferencing skills on a regular basis.
- Teacher evaluators also need to fine tune their responding skills
- Empowerment is developed when teacher evaluators provide alternatives instead of mandates, and allow the teacher to accept responsibility for the work being done in their class.
- There was a good deal of time spent on the importance of non-verbal communication and paralanguage

RECCOMENDATIONS

There are several recommendations we would like to make that come from thinking about how we would like to apply what we learned at the conference to the work being done with clinical experience students.

1. Seek out Donald Kachur as a consultant to work with U-High faculty next fall as well as new faculty in a setting more specifically designed to improve conferencing with clinical experience students. If Kachur is unavailable we might be able to apply some of what we learned at the conference in a staff workshop, but this seems far less likely to be successful and meaningful to U-High.

2. There should be large scale revisions of both the Teaching Skills Analysis Form (TSAF) and the Summative Evaluation for in order to emphasize the need for complete conferencing. These forms should incorporate a more open ended and broad approach to the clinical students work and should encourage dialogue instead of simple scoring.

3. The clinical student evaluations of U-High faculty should be revised to reflect the teacher's conferencing skills. Further, U-High faculty should be trained and encouraged to implement their own individual evaluations after each clinical student has completed the process in order to develop feedback that is rich in context and feedback.

4. Some of the questions that we feel it is important for U-High faculty to ask their clinical students (and to consider about themselves) include (note: these questions come from pp 6 of the handout materials distributed at the workshop).

- How would you describe your knowledge of the technical aspects of teaching?
- How would you describe your capacity to demonstrate or model needed changes in performance?
- How would you describe your experience as a teacher in the classroom?
- How would you describe your repertoire of suggestions for good teaching?
- How would you describe your persuasiveness of the rationale you use to defend your suggestions?
- How would you describe your knowledge of the subject matter taught?
- How would you describe the level of teacher trust developed?
- How would you describe your working relationship with clinical experience students?
- How would you describe your interpersonal manner?
- How would you describe your flexibility.
- How would you describe your ability to convey messages to teachers.
- How would you describe your ability to give positive and negative feedback?

On a personal note I have asked many of these questions of my clinical experience students during post-conferences in the last two weeks and have found the resulting conversations meaningful and productive; far more meaningful and productive than the individual or department clinical student scantron evaluations.