

When talking about effective instructional strategies, I often hear myself describing them by saying “the power of this strategy is in its simplicity.”

And I think that is so apt, as the best instructional strategies aren't about complicated, convoluted teacher moves, but rather simplicity and elegance.

The same can be said of a structure we use call Academic Conferences. I was reminded of this last week when I facilitated two days of conferences with a Sacramento high school.

Academic Conferences are teams of teachers coming together quarterly to reflect on their learning from the past nine weeks and articulate instructional goals for the next nine. They write to these prompts prior to the conference, come to the conference with copies of their written reflections and goals for distribution to their team (usually four teachers), and then speak for 15 or so minutes using their writing as a platform.

In addition we collect baseline data at the start, middle and end of year to further inform this conversation, but not commandeer it.

Simple, powerful, good ole' professional dialogue. Real dialogue, not gimmicked and gizmoed up, not driven by agendas other than those of the teachers, with a focus on their classroom practice and student growth.

It is a structure that disciplines teacher practices we have long known are good, but seldom make time for. With each Academic Conference teachers bring more honesty and open dialogue to the table.

It's striking how such a simple structure can create such inspiring and searching dialogue and conversation.

Below are some excerpts from teacher writing:

Important learning from last quarter is the power of Think Aloud. I've started using them as an "assessment." I collected "The Gingi" (short story) packet that I made them use as a Think Aloud and I labeled their annotations with which reading strategies they were using. It was a good look into what they do as readers and they use far more strategies than they give themselves credit for. I wonder if it's because it's longer text? I want to keep doing this and work on different versions. LH

I am so excited about the growth in my 4th period class. They are so much fun. It's mostly girls and they have a certain lightness about them—it's like they have been stripped of that "urban" uniform so many of our students wear; even the boys in the class have a pretty carefree (innocent?) attitude. JA

The most striking experience that came from the fluencies in the case of both classes, which may not be reflected well in the actual scores was the competency and speed with which students self-corrected. They also demonstrated quite a bit more confidence performing both assessments, which I believe stems from consistent practice and reflection. PT

It has really hit me this year how important our role as 9th grade teachers really is (duh, I've only taught freshmen for 14 years in a row!). I guess I've been more of an observer this year...paying more attention to what is going on in the other 9th grade classes in our SLC... and asking students how they feel about the 9th grade experience. IT is awesome they are making connections between my class and Geography (where Pebble Creek curriculum/strategies are also used). 9th graders are so vulnerable... it is one of their enduring qualities, but it also stretches me emotionally and professionally. KH

On the last day of the semester I had students do a "first semester reflection and second semester goals" free write. I asked them to reflect on things like: What did you achieve this semester, what did you struggle with, what advice would you give a freshmen on the first day of school. Then I asked them to set some goals for second semester and to make a plan for how to succeed with them. The responses I got back were far beyond what I hoped for. They were honest and insightful about their struggles, and I got some really valuable feedback about my own teaching. NS