

# ON-DEMAND PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT SERIES



## EPISODE 6

### Developing a Common Language for Excellent Instruction



## EPISODE 6: Developing a Common Language for Excellent Instruction

doodles and notes

### Recognizing and developing excellent instruction

The first essential step toward improving instruction in one's school and district, is to develop one's ability to see, notice, and understand (to recognize) excellent teaching.

Dictionary.com provides these definitions of recognize: rek-uh g-nahyz (verb)

1. to identify as something or someone previously seen or known
2. to identify from knowledge of appearance or characteristics
3. to perceive as existing or true



When administrative leaders recognize excellent instruction, they are not seeing it for the first time. Rather, they are identifying episodes of excellent teaching by comparing them to what they have seen, learned, and experienced before. The act of recognizing, then, involves two parts. First the observer must have acquired and organized a knowledge/experience base that can be quickly and accurately accessed. Then, the observer must have the processing ability to interpret, in real time, what is being observed in light of the observer's knowledge base.

One of the key differences between how experts and novices observe differently is that experts tend to notice meaningful patterns in the contextual field where novices tend to notice less connected details (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). A casual observer looks up at the sky and sees clouds. A meteorologist sees patterns of clouds that have meaning for forecasting weather.

*In How People Learn- Brain, Mind, Experience, and School* (Bransford et al., 2000) the authors explain...

*"Research shows that it is not simply general abilities, such as memory or intelligence, nor the use of general strategies that differentiate experts from novices. Instead, experts have acquired extensive knowledge that affects what they notice and how they organize, represent, and interpret information in their environment. This, in turn, affects their abilities to resolve problems."* (p. 31)

One way experts tend to organize their knowledge and experience base for fast retrieval is to create a common professional language that can serve as an architecture for containing and organizing that knowledge. Physicians speak and collaborate using a common medical lexicon known and spoken by all physicians. Attorneys and airline pilots do the same thing. When a common, scientific lexicon is used thinking is clearer, faster, and less prone to error (Rutherford, 2013). The common lexicon effect may be appropriated by educational thinkers too; and one does not have to invent a personal taxonomy to realize the benefits. There exist many comprehensive and research-based treatments of instructional practice that use a taxonomy of terms as a frame upon which a practitioner might build deeper understanding.

*"To have a second language is to have a second soul."*

Charlamagne

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The Center for Educational Leadership at the University of Washington has created a framework that includes five dimensions and thirteen sub-dimensions of teaching and learning (Fink, 2012).

Charlotte Danielson's popular *Framework for Teaching* consists of 4 domains, 22 components, and 76 elements (Danielson, 2007).

John Hattie has organized over 200 teaching/learning influences by their effect sizes on student achievement (Hattie, 2009).

Robert Marzano, D.J. Pickering, and J.E. Pollock in their 2001 book *Classroom Instruction That Works* offer a taxonomy of nine strategies that represent the most effective attributes of teaching (Marzano, 2001, 2007).

Douglas Lemov in his book *Teach Like a Champion* details 49 techniques for "putting students on a path to college" (Lemov, 2010).

Dave Burgess in *Teach Like a Pirate* provides readers with 32 hooks that increase student engagement (Burgess, 2012).

In *The Artisan Teacher: A Field Guide to Skillful Teaching*, Mike Rutherford provides 23 themes of skillful instruction (Rutherford, 2013).

The list above is certainly not exhaustive and is only provided as a starter list to the many approaches to organizing the body of knowledge that exists about excellent instruction. The case is clear, however. Instructional leaders that seek to better recognize excellent instruction do well to have a structure on which to organize their ever-growing knowledge base.

This mental structure need not be original and need not be a pure iteration of any one author/expert's framework. To enhance the recognition of excellent instruction, the framework must serve to deepen and organize an observer's body of instructional knowledge. To enhance collaboration, feedback, and improvement, it is helpful if the framework is shared among teachers, teacher leaders, administrators, and administrator supervisors.



As observers of classrooms, do we know what we see, or do we see what we know? There is compelling evidence that our language (what we call something) strongly impacts our thinking (what we notice) (Mitterer, et al, 2009, Klemfuss, et al, 2012) (Vygotski, 1986).

Studies have demonstrated that teaching people new color words changes how people are able to discriminate colors. (Boroditsky, 2011, p. 65). A common human occurrence is learning a new word and then noticing that word several times in the days following. How does that work? Does the universe intentionally show us the new word right after we learn it? Or, has the word been around us all along and we are just now seeing it because we now know it exists? The latter explanation, of course, is true. We didn't notice the word until we knew it.

“Do we know what we see, or do we see what we know?”

Lera Boroditski

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So, the language we choose to describe an element of excellent instruction not only helps us organize our thinking, it determines what we notice in any episode of classroom observation. It is important to also note that a common lexicon for describing excellent instruction can limit what we notice in a classroom observation. Just as it is difficult to see something in the dynamic contextual field of a classroom without language to describe it, it is also difficult, once named and noted, for an observer to not see it- or to see anything else.

There are many excellent lexicons available to educators who want to build their capacity for seeing and understanding teaching effectiveness. The Artisan Teacher lexicon of terms is featured in this program as an example of a comprehensive, practical, and easy to access resource. Pattern recognition and deep understanding are supported by a common professional language, not necessarily any one particular professional language. Which language is used is less important than the degree to which the language is actually used, shared, and deeply understood.

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*Access to the entire KACTE/KDE On-demand Principal Leadership Development Series is available at: [www.kyacte.org](http://www.kyacte.org) and [www.education.ky.gov/CTE](http://www.education.ky.gov/CTE)*

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