Five Questions Every Teacher Needs to Ask
By: Kevin Pughsley

Teachers have often talked about wanting to go and observe other teachers and when asking to take a day to go observe you are met with we don’t have the funds, take a personal day, use your planning period. It is a challenge and too best honest I want to be able to use my planning period to do that but with coverage of classes, conferences, grading, emails, and yes I can go on with tasks that keep me from doing that (I am sure you can relate).

Professional companies and organizations are doing something right they have mentors that meet with employees and ask the tough questions about how they feel in the company, what are their goals, what do you feel is a strength and a weakness in your daily routine, and provide feedback from their observations, meetings, and interacting with colleagues they work with. There is a mentality of we are investing in you and want to see you improve even by providing areas for improvement mixed with the positives. We are not talking about the compliment sandwich here. We are talking about being honest and a general sincerity to help an employee improve and grow. You know the old quote “PEOPLE DON'T CARE HOW MUCH YOU KNOW UNTIL THEY KNOW HOW MUCH YOU CARE. LEADERSHIP BEGINS WITH THE HEART, NOT THE HEAD.”

JOHN MAXWELL

Think of an iceberg in Alaska floating in the water everyone is excited to see the iceberg and marvels at the top 10 percent you see but what about the other 90 percent underwater? I call this the “Iceberg effect”. Administration observations are like this they get a snapshot of 10 percent which most of the time you know they are coming and you put on a dog and pony show or threaten your students to be on their best. Most of the time the feedback is generic similar to another teacher and the observations are rushed and only offer a 10-15 minute view of a lesson and your students. It’s not the administrators fault with a plate full of tasks that need to be completed on top of the observations of 20 or more teachers but much like the iceberg we marvel at our feedback which is only 10 percent. What about the 90 percent that is unseen by administration everyday and represents a much bigger portion of your teaching?

The solution to this issue has been in front of you the whole time but we have been looking at the surface rather than getting wet and taking a risk to tap into the person who sees the true glacier. The person who sees the 90 percent of the iceberg under the water and its imperfections, jagged edges, but also the beauty of all it put together is Your Students! They are with you everyday and see you at your best and also see you at your worst. They know the daily teacher they have and they know the observation day teacher. Have you ever had your students after a principal observation makes comment like that was fun can we do that more often, why did you do this more when they were in there? They can read your emotions and when you are off and uncomfortable but they also offer a valuable look inside what is happening
in the classroom that often you don’t see with the students you are trying to reach. I know as teachers we have eyes in the back of our heads but let's be real how much is going on that you don’t know about. Do you want a chance to change that? Do you want a chance to improve your teaching and reach a new level? More importantly do you really want the observations and feedback that you claim you desire?

If your answer is Yes, than I am proud of you! These five questions that every teacher should ask are so powerful, if you are open to receiving the feedback with a mentality called “Proper H” Help not Hurt. Establishing a process with your students that feedback is a powerful and harmful tool depending on the approach. I teach it early and often working with students that before providing feedback saying, “remember I am here to help you not hurt you” creates an environment where students and teachers are willing to receive feedback both positive and negative. The point that I am making is as a teacher we need to have this mentality when asking these questions and understand that the feedback you are about to receive is to help you not hurt you.

Question 1: Do you feel I care about you? Yes, the heavy hitter but you as well as I know if you are in a room where you feel cared for you work harder. The exact opposite is true that when you feel the teacher doesn’t care you shut down and there's no getting through.

Question 2: Did I teach in a way that you could learn? We are getting straight to the heart of it finding out how effective is your teaching. Your principal won't see this in three observations that totals maybe an hour or two if you are lucky but your students will because they experiencing your teaching 188 days a year. Remember, help not hurt this is to make you a better teacher and isn't that why you started in teaching in the first place.

Question 3: Do you feel that I have control of students in my class? Classroom management is an important factor in learning and needs to be established early and correlates to the level of expectations you have for your students. You may feel good about it but the students see all that you don’t in their group, across the room, if you are being fair and equal in managing the classroom.

Question 4: Did I keep you interested in the subject? Are your lessons engaging and relevant to the students? You are about to find out and I understand your argument about some students just don’t like a subject and true but even if you don’t like something if it is presented in a fun and intriguing way you can still find it interesting. Are you recycling lessons from four or five years ago and finding the excitement and interest are lacking? Let’s find out!

Question 5: Were you given opportunities to relearn material that was difficult to you? Total honesty, this is the question that gets me every time. It is my Achilles heel, the area I need to improve on as a teacher and I am working on improving. Here is the truth though, if I never asked these five questions I probably would be doing the same stuff or convincing myself that I
am doing well. It’s like walking around with toilet paper stuck to your foot and everyone sees it except you but no one says a word.

I know what you are feeling. “I am afraid of the answers my students will give”, but what about the fear of what you are missing out on and the powerful feedback you will receive and the impact it will have on your teaching.

Sample of the question and a rating scale from 1-5 with 5 being always and 1 being never

The five questions are quick for the students to respond but give you are quick snapshot of your classroom and teaching effectiveness. I also include 2-3 other questions for the students to write a response too and this generation loves to provide feedback and express their opinion. Here are a few questions I have used in the past and if you are still reading at this point you are probably going to buy in and do this and congratulations on that decision! Do yourself a favor and make a commitment to ask the first two questions every time.

*What is something I need to improve on as a teacher? (Be honest and don't put nothing!)
*What is something I am doing well and need to keep doing this year? (Be honest and don't put nothing!)
*What was your favorite activity from this year/nine weeks and why?
*Which activity for the upcoming unit/nine weeks interests you the most?
*Do you have a different idea for an activity on a standard/concept than the ones above? If so what is it?
*What is something a teacher can say to you that will make you feel valued(seen)?
*What is one thing you wish you could change or start new in my class or our team?
*Any comments you would like your teacher to know or suggestions you want give me for next year. (Be Honest and don't put nothing)
*(Any questions you come up with that best relates to your classroom or needs)

There you have it. The five questions that every teacher needs to ask and not yourself but your students. Instead of getting feedback from one person for the year or the angry parent in an email who has never stepped in your room and letting that define you. Why not, let 100 plus students give you feedback throughout the year so you can constantly adjust your teaching, lessons, and tap into what motivates your students. Don’t be satisfied with the 10 percent and but go for the 90! Don’t limit your challenges but challenge your limits! Aren’t we always challenged to see the positive in every situation or student? Don’t you want to see all the things you are doing well that confirm your making a difference, they are learning, that a lesson did work, or area that students need help in. I personally challenge you to try it once and see the response from your students, that you value their feedback, the responses you receive as an educator, and trust me you won’t stop. I would love to share in your experiences on how it went on my blog www.madeyoulookguys.blogspot.com (under construction)
Ohh yeah, here are a few samples of some feedback I have received over the years. (Yes, from both perspectives) Thank you for investing in your students but in this case investing in yourself as an educator and your continued growth. #TeacherGrowthMindset #MadeYouLook

Examples of feedback (positive and constructive):
“\[I\] think you do very well and when I say you are the best teacher I have ever had I mean it. You always keep me interested in the topic from the start of class and at the end I leave with new and exciting knowledge and when I look back on it I think, "Wow! That was fun!" or "That was really interesting. I want to know more." My favorite thing about your class is lab activities. they are fun and most of the time they help me see clearer what that topic has to do with what is really happening in the world. I like how you walk around the room to the groups and ask questions to make us think. Thank you!“

“I like when you smack the table and talk loud to keep us ready and engaged in the segments and subjects we are learning.”
“Something always good about Mr. P is that he doesn't drag on when someone gets in trouble, he gets to the point and gets it over with”

“For the sake of your future students, don't hold classes after the bell. Other than that I really enjoyed having you as a teacher.”

“Make things more hands-on and interactive would help me a lot because I am a more of a physical learner than mental. And, I just like doing things physically. “

“I feel that some students are able to talk out in class and get away with it and others students you will punish if they talk this may be an issue that only I have been noticing but I feel some students are getting treaty differently then other students. Thank you for reading this.”

“I feel that on the behalf of what you would need to keep doing is to be there for students, and be a person someone can go to, talk to, and someone they can trust. Something you might want to consider doing is allowing everyone who wants to answer the critical thinker give an answer either on a piece of paper or lets groups come-up with an answer.”

“A way you can kinda improve is maybe less presentations or doing things in front of the whole class because I don't like doing that sometimes like at ALL and I get scared and nervous because I am shy. Another way is MORE group work like with projects or other things because it is SO MUCH FUN!:) and because I like working together more than by myself and when I work with other people, it makes me feel good because I feel like they could soon become my friend or just because of how good we work together and it is SO MUCH FUN!:) and it also makes me feel that I am not alone sometimes!:])
"Don't get me wrong. I love your class because it is a great environment and fun but sometimes we have a little to fun (by little to fun I mean a lot) There is so much fun none of the stuff we just went over and learned about actually sunk it to your mind. You make it fun so we can relate back to it later remembering that but when I think about that all I remember is the activity not the actually meaning behind it."

“You are a wonderful teacher because you care about every student and make sure they know it. Also you understand students have after school activities and don’t give us a lot homework. You do a great job at keeping us engaged even though your class is more challenging. I have really enjoyed being in your 7th period science class this year.”