



Electronically Evaluating Effectiveness

AN INTERVIEW WITH WISCONSIN VIRTUAL ACADEMY

The overnight shift to online education has created not only a sharp learning curve for teachers, but for those who evaluate teaching as well. The delivery of instruction may continue to look different in fall, whether in-person, online learning, distance learning without an online module if the students don't have internet access, or a combination of all of the above. Regardless of what the education delivery scenario may be during the 2020-21 school year, the need to teach students remains. In the article "Long distance leadership", Jennifer Gill reflected, "After all, educators tell students all the time that they're teaching them to be lifelong learners. Now the field has a chance to model that practice for them." Beverly Hutton, National Association of Secondary School Principals' deputy executive director of programs and services added, "If we look at this crisis as a prolonged interruption until we get back to the way things used to be, we're missing the opportunity." (Gill, 2020)

Because the need to teach remains, and teachers must learn to teach via new methods and platforms, administrators must support teachers in their efforts to provide the best possible instruction. Evaluating effective teaching in partnership with the teacher continues to be a priority. Evaluators of teachers must adapt to a new way of gathering evidence of virtual instruction and providing feedback in a way that results in enhanced teaching and student learning whether online instruction is a passing necessity or here to stay.

Surprisingly, we forget that some organizations have been operating this way for many years. Since 2002, the Wisconsin Virtual Academy (WIVA) has brought not only growth and development to its K-12 students virtually, but to staff as well. We recently had the pleasure of interviewing nine staff members at WIVA, including administrators and teachers representing grades K-8, high school, and various content areas including Language Arts, Math, Physical Education, Social Studies and Special Education. Their length of experience in online education varied from over a decade to under a year.

Evaluation that has gone from classroom to "Zoom-room" fueled some questions in providing guidance for evaluators. The main question prior to the conversation with the staff from WIVA, was "How much does the online setting impact a climate of trust within the system of evaluation?" Additionally, we sought to learn how the different standards and indicators of the CESA 6 Effectiveness Project Teacher Performance Evaluation System are evidenced in an online environment. The findings from WIVA staff were simple. Good instruction is good instruction, and creating and maintaining trusting educator-to-student, educator-to-educator, and educator-to-evaluator relationships is critical. The following insights represent the similarities and differences of virtual instruction and evaluation, how school staff may overcome the major concerns of online evaluation and tips that may help guide your virtual instruction and evaluation processes.

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SIMILARITIES & DIFFERENCES

The effectiveness of the evaluation system of any organization is strengthened by having five key conditions in place: a foundation of trust; a common, research-based framework on effective practice; regular application of educator-developed goals; cycles of continuous improvement; and integration with school priorities (WI DPI, 2018). All of these conditions are evident in a virtual setting, but both similarities and differences exist.



A FOUNDATION OF TRUST

Conversations based on evidence, feedback and growth that have the greatest impact are conducted within a climate of trust and collegiality. Many professionals have realized that when the foundation has been laid successfully in person, it hasn't been as difficult to maintain it virtually as they had anticipated. As in a brick and mortar setting, creating a trusting climate begins with the leadership. Cindy Worden, Academic Administrator 9-12 at WIVA, underscores that believing in your staff and their potential is still a necessity of virtual evaluation. "Everyone has a unique gift they are sharing with their students. You're only as limited as your vision," said Worden. Desiree Rahmlow, K-8 Administrator agrees and added that the ability to be more accessible to staff in an online setting allows her to keep deepening the relationship she has with staff members not only through quality time, but "quantity time" as well. She stated that, "[Being] online allows me to be more focused on teaching and learning. I can be in more places at once with fluidity which allows me to do more observations and have more conversations which provides greater fluidity and opportunity for an administrator."

Teachers reported that online evaluation is non-threatening, and comes with distinct advantages. Veteran fourth grade teacher Nick Bladow is new to WIVA and has already benefited from the format. When receiving feedback after an observation, Nick reflected, "I think the other cool thing is that I have my class on recording so that I can observe myself from my evaluator's perspective." Several other teachers agreed that lesson recordings have led to increased insight and growth on their parts, including Special Education teacher Jessica Meike who reported, "Observations and evaluations help me to gauge my teaching because I can go back and truly see" my performance.

Trust has also been evident by the teachers' openness to other educators joining their classrooms. "We feel comfortable about jumping in each other's class. We message each other, and they [teachers] can even send you a recording or let you jump into their live sessions" when you want to see an instructional method, offered Jenny Rodman, high school Physical Education and AVID Teacher. Meike added that she is able to "go into the other teacher's classes and check on how my students perform across classes" because the staff is welcoming and collaborative.

A COMMON RESEARCH-BASED FRAMEWORK & INTEGRATION WITH SCHOOL PRIORITIES



A resounding theme of the conversation was the ease of application of the Effectiveness Project standards and indicators of performance in an online setting. Bladow offered, "I have a greater vision [for my online instruction] prompted by many of the standards and indicators." Administrator Rahmlow added, "As you're planning for your virtual instruction, you're still accountable to instructing on your professional knowledge."

The opportunities for reflection that the EP forms allow are appreciated. "When I think of EP, my Student Learning Objective (SLO) and Professional Practice Goal (PPG) keeps me focused on how to grow, reflecting upon what went well informs me how to keep growing," stated Matt Watson, high school Social Studies teacher. Meike added, "[EP] has focused me on

Data collection which drives instruction. The use of online tools has completely supported my targeted instruction.” Carrie Cherney, Assistant Academic Administrator 9-12 noted that just like in a building, staff can be at different places in their growth and development journey, and the evaluator must be in tune to each staff member as an individual. “I think some of the consideration is what tools are available for staff, what training has been done, and now what are they doing with it? Are they using it efficiently or effectively? Just like in brick and mortar, there is a wide range of performance,” stated Cherney.

Although many of the ways that standards of performance will be evidenced in instruction are similar, there are nuances that some instructors haven’t realized until it’s pointed out to them. Administrators aren’t the only partners with educators in their growth and development. Colleagues help point out ways they are demonstrating effectiveness they hadn’t considered. Nicole Williamson, high school Math teacher, valued the insights of her Instructional Coach. “My Instructional Coach will highlight things that are strengths for me and help me align it to EP, and help me demonstrate my performance by helping to find documentation [of my performance].”

REGULAR APPLICATION OF EDUCATOR-DEVELOPED GOALS



The online slide presentation is the educator’s classroom, and because of that, the learning goals need to be evident from the first slide, just as they are when students walk into most classrooms. “My objective or learning target is the first slide on my PowerPoint,” relays Gina Brown, middle School ELA teacher. Her goals for her students are based on the curriculum goals, as well as the student learning objective, or SLO she has set at the beginning of the year. Watson is also driven by his SLO and stated, “My SLO and PPG keeps me focused on how to grow. The reflecting upon what went well informs me how to keep growing.” Cherney agreed, “Informals and Formals keep me focused on what I’m looking for, but the SLO and PPG help me think of myself as a coach and how I can help each individual teacher. I find ways to support teachers as individuals.”

CYCLES OF CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT, INTEGRATION WITH SCHOOL PRIORITIES

The process of evaluation is not only planned and systemic, but informal and on-demand as well. In the virtual setting, an administrator can join a classroom at any time, so it is important to have this understanding as a staff. WIVA staff appreciate the flexibility of evaluators joining their online classes, noting it is also less of a distraction to the teacher and students when they do. “It’s easier to keep going without a big distraction,” noted Bladow, who appreciates that his evaluator is able to see many different aspects of his teaching regularly. Rahmlow, his evaluator, also likes the fact that she can be present and involved, or she can be a silent observer because every situation is different. “I might chat, do an emoji, turn my camera on, or be a fly on the wall,” said Rahmlow.

Online evaluation allows an administrator to observe teaching and learning more often, and in a variety of settings. Administrators are able to work with teachers regularly which fuels conversations on how to constantly improve. Worden, Cherney, and Rahmlow engage in one-on-one feedback conversations with teachers weekly, participate in professional learning communities and data-driven discussion meetings and are regular attendees in classes. “I follow the teacher to all breakout rooms during an observation, just like in a physical setting. I see all 6 standards represented,” said Ramlow. Worden remarked, “For me as an evaluator I have shifted from a supervisor doing evaluation to a growth mindset of growing my teachers for the success of my school.” She added, “I love the EP model because it’s so growth oriented. I use it to leverage our school-wide initiatives.”



OVERCOMING CONCERNS

Even with the many benefits, online evaluation still brings concerns to educators. The WIVA staff had many of their concerns alleviated quickly. Here are a few answers they had for common evaluation questions:

Will I be able to build, maintain and demonstrate positive relationships not only with my students but with my evaluator as well?



- “Both of my evaluators understand the virtual environment and how my classroom works, and that helps. Them knowing that student engagement is a little more difficult and that student anxiety issues impact participation” go a long way in a partnership approach to problem-solving. (Watson)
- “I use my video camera all the time so they [students] can see my face. They see my home, my kids and develop a personal connection with me.” (Rodman)
- “This engages ME... to see my teachers... and I’m already fully invested in what they have to offer. So for our students, they NEED to SEE their teachers to bring all levels of the experience alive.” (Rahmlow)
- “Relationships build within the chat - I will chat every student in the session as I have the opportunity.” (Meike)
- “[Students] need the teacher to initiate the space and time carved out for them as an individual. Nick made a space for students to write on the board, others make a time for them to connect, students at many ages need that structure because they don’t often step forward.” (Rahmlow)
- “Students feel more comfortable telling you things virtually instead of in person - so need to be aware of professionalism and ethical standards.” (Cherney)

I’m not that technologically savvy. What if I try something while being observed and it doesn’t work?

- “In the virtual environment it can be kind of scary to try some new things, but we will learn a lot from that and our administrators support us.” (Watson)
- Referring to Matt’s comment above, “I call those spectacular disasters!” (Worden)

I’m a special education teacher. How much harder will it be for my evaluator to see how I differentiate and interact with the students on my caseload? OR I’m a regular education teacher, how can I differentiate for my students?

- “I feel that in the virtual environment, there are more opportunities for co-teaching than there would be in the f2f environment, so much collaboration!” (Brown)
- “Perhaps your class doesn’t go as smoothly as you’d like, but I can always go back and take my data (to check for understanding). There are some excellent benefits!” (Meike)
- “There have been many opportunities for accommodations including study guides, breakout rooms for small group instruction, and time to co-create the power points that meet the needs of the students.” (Meike)



HELPFUL TIPS FOR VIRTUAL INSTRUCTIONS & EVALUATION

The staff at WIVA are constantly looking for ways to improve their online instruction, but they have found the following tips particularly useful in an online setting.

- Use a document camera so that students can see manipulatives and the teacher is doing from above to help model for understanding.
- Connect with students 15 minutes prior to class starting in an open chat session so you can talk to students about non-school issues. (ie: “Would You Rather” up on the board as a conversation starter which is a good way for students to get to know each other.)
- Have students on camera to allow more connection.
- Use breakout rooms based levels regarding self-directed and teacher-directed.
- Give students structured opportunities to grapple with what they’re learning, then come back and discuss.
- Incorporate a lot of reflection i.e. “How’d you feel about that activity? Do you feel ready for the test?” to open a lot of conversation and fosters a positive environment where students can share.
- Have weekly (Friday) 30 minute social for students on a caseload to cover a study skill, anxiety tool, online etiquette, for 10 minutes, then 20 minutes of us-hanging out, share Youtube videos, etc.
- Start a Youtube channel with your own videos on math, writing, social skills, etc., students can follow you and send me messages because they are on this platform all the time.
- Make time for one to one classes - once you allow them time to get to know you, then they open up to you. It’s the relationships - that’s what makes it work.
- Jazz up slides with fancy fonts, colors, bitmoji’s and images. It makes things fun and this is my classroom.
- Initiate office hours for each student, then in general.



SUMMARY

The WIVA staff provided comfort about the future of online education, and confidence that the online classroom has been and will continue to be a place where students, educators, and evaluators of educators engage in powerful growth and development. “It’s far simpler than I think people expect,” stated Rahmlow, “yet still a robust process.” Having sound standards for teachers allows common language to drive discussion on student learning and professional growth. Administrator Cherney shares that staff have successfully translated standards and nuanced how they are evidenced effectively in an online setting. In reference to growth, administrator Rahmlow stated, “The EP model has helped me grow into an improved level of ‘grounding,’ meaning that while there are MANY layers of behind-the-scene details to execute solid virtual public education, we are at our core, focused above all on our six standards of EP.”

In order to support teachers as they navigate the waters of online instruction, administrators must continue to come alongside and help provide evidence of student engagement and learning, as well as time for reflection and feedback on what is working and what is not. School systems are definitely able to ensure that the five key conditions of an effective process for evaluation are in place in an online setting. Establishing a foundation of trust, employing a common, research-based framework on effective practice, planning around the regular application of educator-developed goals, adhering to cycles of continuous improvement, and integrating efforts with school priorities for consistency of purpose will ensure that educators get the feedback they need for growth and development. And when teachers grow and improve there is a positive impact on student learning and achievement.

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