



Research Paper

Rural schools, standards-based teacher evaluation and technology's Odyssean Promise

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ABSTRACT

This article describes one rural school district's experience using technology to support a state-mandated standards-based teacher evaluation system. By their very nature, rural school leaders, in contrast to their urban or suburban counterparts, assume multiple administrative roles. Moreover, rural schools lack the institutional capacity to effectively supervise and evaluate teaching practices. The authors investigated the extent to which an online standards-based teacher performance evaluation system helped to promote self-reflection about teaching and, subsequently, improve instruction. Investigators surveyed teachers and administrators to gauge familiarity with the technology, frequency of use, beliefs about reflective practices, and implementation challenges. While respondents seemed to avoid several technology components, they expressed a belief that it holds promise for improving teaching practice. The authors contend that technology alone cannot improve performance. Principals and teachers must regularly engage in reflective practices to truly improve teacher performance.

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INTRODUCTION

The Greek poet Homer tells the story of the warrior Odysseus' ten-year journey from Troy to his home in Ithaca following his adventures in the Trojan War. Throughout that journey, which seems as long as the Trojan War itself, Odysseus encounters all sorts of antagonists. Nevertheless, Odysseus succeeds because he is nimble, clever, and persistent. Some contend that current practices of standards-based teacher evaluation systems demonstrate similar characteristics.

Over thirty years ago, Brophy and Good (1986) and Shulman (1987) posited that teaching performance could be understood in terms of generic activities that could be correlated with student outcomes. Inherent in this view of evaluation is the notion that rich and objective data as feedback to teachers can, potentially, improve performance. Such "media richness," as described by Daft and Lengel (1986), theorizes that complex organizations, such as schools, prefer robust data in narrative form, compared to,

for example, a checklist format. Brutus (2010) argues that the quantity and richness of narrative data increases when organized around a coherent framework (e.g., a standards-based teacher evaluation rubric).

To what extent can a robust online standards-based teacher performance evaluation system promote self-reflection about teaching? What promise does technology hold, if any, for improving teaching practice? These are the general questions the authors set out to investigate.

In 2010, regulatory interest in standards-based teacher evaluation intensified with the advent of Race to the Top (RttT) federal funding. In part, states were rewarded with RttT funding for implementing standards-based teacher evaluation systems that utilized multiple measures.

The Alaska State Board of Education issued new guidelines in 2012, whereby local school districts could redesign their teacher evaluation systems. The works of Danielson (2011) and Marzano (2011) heavily influenced

this redesign. The Alaska State Legislature subsequently enacted a new statute entitled, "Professional content and performance standards" describing performance standards for teachers. Shortly thereafter, the Alaska State Board of Education issued guidance to help districts develop local teacher evaluation standards.

Effective implementation of performance-based teacher evaluation is a challenge for any school district on many levels. For rural schools, a lack of adequate staff and resources pose particular challenges (Jacobsen, 2013; Yettick et al., 2014). In 2015, a rural school department identified by the pseudonym, North School District (NSD) began collaborating with Brightways Learning, a 503(c)(3) educational non-profit located in Missoula, MT. NSD is located in rural Alaska and is composed of one main school and six remote schools, with an average enrollment of about 46 students per school. Together, the district and nonprofit created a standards-based teacher evaluation rubric supported by web-based technology (ClassBright Evaluate) to facilitate the collection – and alignment – of multiple types of performance data.

The evaluation system

ClassBright includes four primary components. Three of the components are tools for collecting and aligning observational data to one or more indicators in the district's rubric. The fourth component is the evaluation document. When completing a teacher's evaluation, a school administrator reviews associated observation data to inform and assigns ratings (e.g., Exemplary, Proficient, Basic, or Unsatisfactory) to a performance standard. All data and documents associated with a teacher are stored in that teacher's portfolio within the system, which is accessible by the teacher, as well as the administrators assigned as evaluators.

One of ClassBright's notable data-collection "media rich" tools is termed a "Snippet" (see Figure 1). The teacher and assigned evaluator can each add Snippets into a teacher's portfolio. A Snippet may consist of text, a photo, a short video, or any document file. The author aligns each snippet evidence item to one or more rubric indicators.

Customized Walkthrough forms are another data-collection tool in ClassBright; these are available only to evaluators. Unlike Snippets for which each author aligns and applies one or more rubric indicators, Walkthrough form questions are pre-aligned to indicators by the district. The district can create as many Walkthrough forms as they wish; shared questions can be created once in the ClassBright question bank and then used on multiple Walkthrough forms. An evaluator typically completes a form when visiting a teacher's classroom.

The third data-collection tool is the Formal Observation, which includes three parts: pre-conference notes, observation notes, and post-conference notes. The pre- and

post-conference notes are simple text areas in which the observer records a summary of the relevant conference discussions with that teacher. An observation note is typically one or more short sentences or phrases describing what the evaluator sees during the classroom visit. This observation notes feature allows the administrator to quickly create, save, and move onto the next note to rapidly record, or "script," observations. These observation notes are time-stamped and display in reverse chronological order. Immediately or later, the administrator can align each individual note to one or more rubric indicators.

When completing, the fourth component, the Final Evaluation document in ClassBright, the evaluator reviews the associated data, labeled "Collected Evidence," indicator by indicator to inform each rating selection (See Figure 2). The intent is for the observed data to be easily accessible when the evaluator "makes the judgment call" about the teacher's performance level related to each performance indicator.

An initial pilot using ClassBright began in fall of 2015, which included district administrator training. Full implementation and teacher training was launched in the fall of 2016, followed by additional in-service training in fall of 2017.

Operating theory

In most schools across the United States, the main purposes of teacher evaluation are to exercise instructional leadership and supervision (Loup, Garland, Ellett, & Rugutt, 1996). Many of these evaluations are conducted by principals or assistant principals and are heavily influenced by "clinical" supervision procedures developed by Cogan (1973) and Goldhammer (1969). The "clinical" model begins with a pre-observation conference between the teacher and supervisor to establish rapport, determine the purpose of the lesson, and orient the supervisor to the classroom. This is followed by the supervisor taking notes while observing the teacher during the lesson. The supervisor then shares their observations in the post-evaluation conference by discussing the lesson with the teacher and concluding with setting goal(s) intended to improve the teacher's future performance.

In practice, however, teachers remain skeptical about the reliability and validity of their evaluations (Stodolsky, 1984; Sartain, et al 2011). ClassBright technology purports to offer a more precise view of teaching by making use of multiple measures, in addition to offering immediacy and transparency of the observations made by the administrator. Small samples of "media rich" data (Daft & Lengel, 1986) related to teaching performance are used by supervisors and teachers to link teaching performance to standards set by the school department. It is hoped that users will find these data to be credible and thus offer a

Demo

Clemantine Cooper Portfolio / Snippet

Enter notes: PD proof from fall conference.

Upload File: Choose File Conference...les-Log.pdf

Criteria:

- + ☐ 1 Classroom Environment
- + ☐ 2 Instruction
- ☐ 3 Professionalism
 - + ☐ 3.1 Professionalism and Ethics
 - ☐ 3.2 Professional Development
 - ☐ 3.2.1 Teacher establishes and works toward professional goals.
 - ☒ 3.2.1.1 Growth goals
 - ☐ 3.2.1.2 Educational philosophy
 - ☒ 3.2.1.3 Stays up-to-date in profession
 - ☐ 3.2.2 Teacher participates in and contributes to the teaching profession.
 - ☒ 3.2.2.1 Participation in PD opportunities
 - + ☐ 3.3 Responsibilities and Dispositions of Professional Educators

Create Snippet Cancel

Figure 1: Sample snippet content.

Demo

Clemantine Cooper Portfolio / Evaluation 7/28/16 draft

Classroom Environment 0/14 Instruction 0/29 Professionalism 0/19

Safety and routines

Alignment and flexibility

Engaging environment

Stimulating and inclusive

High expectations

Mutual respect

Student interests

Cultural differences

Teacher interactions

Standards of conduct

Awareness of conduct

Reinforcement of positive behavior

Instructional time efficiency

Interruption management

1.1.1.1 Safety and routines View Examples

Performance Level

☐ Exemplary The teacher maintains a safe classroom environment in which safety procedures and routines are evident to whomever walks into the room.

☐ Proficient The teacher maintains a safe classroom environment.

☐ Basic The teacher maintains a classroom environment that addresses emergency procedures for students.

☐ Unsatisfactory The teacher does not maintain a physically safe classroom environment.

Comment

Create Rating Cancel

Collected Evidence

7/18/16 - Walkthrough - Snapshot Walkthrough	1.1.1.1	1.1.1.2	1.1.1.3
Curricular Objective and/or Daily Assignments Visible: Yes			
Mac Howard			
7/18/16 - Walkthrough - Snapshot Walkthrough	1.1.1.1	1.1.1.2	1.1.1.3
Today's Date is Displayed: No			

Figure 2: Sample rubric indicator with observational data

more accurate portrayal of teaching performance. Hence, teachers are more likely to reflect upon past performance and subsequently commit to future activities that will improve their teaching effectiveness (Garet et al., 2017).

METHODS AND DATA

In 2017, the University of Montana (UM) was invited to help conduct research on the implementation and use of ClassBright. A survey was developed to better understand NSD users' familiarity with the ClassBright evaluation system, frequency of its use, users' beliefs about how well it

promotes reflective practice, portrays/improves teaching, as well as their views about implementation challenges. In November 2017, the survey was distributed to all principals and teachers employed in the district; 81% responded. Most respondents did not supervise teachers, but the majority of those who did spent less than half of their time in that capacity (See Table A1).

Table 1 indicates that users were familiar and somewhat equally so with each of the evaluation system's components. Not surprisingly, respondents were most familiar with Formal Observation component.

Users reported that while they were familiar with NSD's teacher evaluation rubric, they were much less so when

Table 1: Familiarity with ClassBright Evaluation System's Components (n=29)

Question	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Q4. On a scale of 1 to 10, please rate how familiar you are with <i>each</i> of the following ClassBright evaluation system components.		
Snippet	7.7	2.5
Walkthrough	8.2	2.4
Formal observation	8.3	2.4
Evaluation form	7.1	2.9

Table 2: ClassBright's portrayal of teaching (n=29).

Question	<i>n</i>	%
Q28. When implemented fairly, how well does the ClassBright evaluation system accurately portray teaching performance?		
Not at all	1	3.6
Somewhat	11	39.3
Well	11	39.3
Very well	5	17.9

Note. Missing data were excluded from the analysis.

asked about linked examples that are embedded within the ClassBright teacher evaluation system. Additionally, when asked about ClassBright's system components (Snippet, Walkthrough, Formal Observation, and Evaluation document) and their district's teacher evaluation rubric, they were least likely to use a Snippet. Walkthroughs and Formal Observations have a high use. However, only 41% of teachers report discussing rubric indicators with their evaluators during the Formal Observation Post-Conference. Furthermore, 51% reviewed and discussed rubric alignments with their evaluators related to Walkthroughs (see Table A2).

The Formal Observation was most likely to promote reflective practice privately and discussions with colleagues (Table A3). While a little over half of the respondents indicated that they believed the ClassBright evaluation system offered an accurate portrayal of teaching performance (Table 2).

Familiarity with the district's teacher evaluation rubric was, according to users, the biggest challenge to using the ClassBright evaluation system followed by issues with using the technology (Table 3).

Finally, almost 59% of the respondents reported that they believed the ClassBright technology helped to improve

teaching practice, while another 35% remained neutral. Only 7% of users believed otherwise (Table 4).

DISCUSSION

On first blush, it seems that survey respondents eschew some elements of ClassBright technology, in particular Snippets and linkage to NSD's teacher evaluation rubric. Nevertheless, respondents expressed a belief that the technology holds promise for improving teaching practice. It is also important to remember that NSD was still in the early stages of implementation.

ClassBright was developed as a toolkit for supporting the feedback methods – and potential dialogue generation points – of both administrative observations and teacher self-reflection. One of this study's findings supports that notion in that users believed that Formal Observations, generally structured with the key attributes of reflection and dialogue, have the highest value to teachers' professional development. Other ClassBright components fall in close behind, however, their application value could be increased if they were used within more structured expectations and re-framed, such as within a self-reflective

Table 3: Challenges with use of ClassBright (n=29)

Question	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Q29. Rank in order the following challenges to using the ClassBright evaluation system – where 1 is the biggest challenge:	2.9	1.4
Comfort with the system software (posting Snippet, viewing portfolio, aligning indicators, etc.)	3.7	1.0
Supporting technology (internet access, device or browser compatibility, etc.)	2.1	1.9
Time	2.6	2.0
Familiarity with the rubric (indicators, expectations)	5.4	2.9

Table 4: ClassBright and Improvement of Teaching (n=29)

Question	<i>n</i>	%
Q30. Do you believe that the ClassBright teacher evaluation system helps (your district's) teachers improve their teaching practice?		
Strongly disagree	0	0.0
Somewhat disagree	2	6.9
Neither agree or disagree	10	34.5
Somewhat agree	14	48.3
Strongly agree	3	10.3

perspective.

Dieker and Mona-Amaya (1995) propose that the reflective process allows teachers the ability to evaluate their effectiveness and learn to relate class experiences and its content to make changes in instruction. More actively supporting self-reflection – e.g. through school culture and related software mechanisms – can be a powerful driving force for blending both cognitive and meta-cognitive processes in professional improvement. As a cognitive process, learning from experiences comes from individual inquiry and collaboration with others (Benammar, 2004; Dewey, 1933; Mesirow, 1991; Moon, 2004; Schön, 1983). Specifically for teachers, Husu et al. (2008) found that regular engagement in self-examination and self-evaluation helped to interpret and improve professional educational practices. Furthermore, several researchers (Brown et al., 1989; Lienhardt, 1988) suggest that knowledge should be investigated in the context of its use. This cognitive process fosters a teacher's professional development by helping them connect theory and knowledge to application within their school environment and classroom setting.

Meta-cognitive reflection can further enhance the value and outcomes for teacher effectiveness. Noormohammadi (2014) found, for example, that "meta-cognitive reflection

can significantly predict instructional and student engagement components of efficacy." Sellars (2012) suggests that the not only is self-reflection important for decision-making related to change in a person's deliberate focus on professional improvement, but also that the intrapersonal intelligence the person brings to the activity of their self-reflection is imperative to the meaning making for their improvement. Such recognition of the role that the meta-cognitive aspects of reflection plays can help a teacher refine their methods, modes, and strategies for teaching that best fit their personality and emotional make-up, thereby more effectively applying their cognitive understandings.

Leijen et al. (2013) found that pre-service teachers experiencing their first time teaching in a classroom largely saw the highest value in an external coach. However, those with multiple teaching experiences reported much higher value in self-reflection. This could be due to becoming more skilled and more confident in their self-assessment, so that self-reflection yielded more accurate assessment and therefore was perceived as a more valuable exercise.

To engage in reflection, active participation by the individual is required (Moon, 2004; Procee, 2006; Schön, 1983) and it also needs to happen collaboratively with

others (Benammar, 2004; Dewey, 1933; Leijen, et al., 2012; Procee, 2006). This combination of self-assessment and dialogue with others (e.g., peer-to-peer or in a professional learning community) empowers an individual to share and learn from their experiences while also benefiting from the help of others to extract patterns, re-interpret, and re-frame those experiences (Leijen et al., 2014). Furthermore, a guided reflection procedure can support effective development of practical knowledge (Husu et al., 2008; Leijen et al., 2009; Leijen et al., 2014; Sööt and Leijen, 2012).

Returning to Brutus (2010), we propose that collecting media-rich data and organizing it around a coherent framework alone is insufficient to effect improved teacher performance. Data can only play *a part* in evaluating teacher performance. *Reflection* on practice and *dialogue* that connects data to the performance framework is what truly elevates the narrative form – essentially adding value and meaning to the data—and has the potential for greater impact. Therefore, educators who engage in intentional and purposeful self-reflection and discussion connected to the framework are more likely to positively affect teacher performance.

Formal Observations – often the single observation requirement in rural districts – may currently offer the richest source of in-context professional development opportunities. The Formal Observation's inherent nature of driving self-reflection and collegial reflection (from the administrator) through collaborative dialogue and being implemented as a somewhat “guided reflection” contributes to that value.

While other ClassBright components might hold promise for increasing the frequency and breadth of reflective and collaborative learning practice among teachers, it seems clear that embracing any kind of evaluation system alone is no magic bullet. To achieve authentic improvement, more work needs to be done with rubric familiarization, technology proficiency, and structuring time for sharing and collaborative discussion. Furthermore, developing the expectation and value around self-reflection and how ClassBright's Snippet tool can be used as a key mechanism for a blended cognitive and metacognitive exercise should be further explored. One respondent's comment, in particular, seems to capture the gist of our findings. “Evaluation systems are not a substitute for a culture of steady growth and excellence that otherwise exists at a school” (Appendix B). Perhaps, then, active reflection by oneself and shared in community with others as part of a school's culture could accelerate a school district's growth and excellence.

Educators, such as NSD and others in rural areas, inherently assume multiple administrative roles, so they may feel particularly challenged to properly supervise and evaluate teachers. We speculate that districts might be initially drawn to technology with hope that the technology will make teacher evaluation more efficient and effective.

However, technology alone cannot improve teacher performance. Reflection and dialogue is critical to change teaching practice. Districts must somehow insist and support their personnel to engage in regular self-reflection activities and on-point discussions to improve practice.

CONCLUSIONS

So as Odysseus' ten-year journey home was fraught with all sorts of antagonists, so it is with teacher evaluation. Like Odysseus, technologies, such as ClassBright, are nimble and clever. However, evaluation's promise will only be fulfilled when teachers and evaluators persistently reflect and talk to one another; contextualize lesson outcomes, student characteristics, and content (Stonehouse, and Keengwe, 2013).

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APPENDIX

Appendix A

Table A1: Characteristics of participants (n=29).

Characteristic	n	%
Q1. Where is your position located?		
Main school	13	44.8
Remote school	16	55.2
Q2. Do you supervise teachers?		
Yes	7	24.1
No	22	75.9
Q3. About what percent of your role deals with teacher supervision?		
< 25%	2	28.6
25% to 50%	3	42.9
51% to 75%	1	14.3
>75%	1	14.3

Note. Missing data were excluded from the analysis.

Table A2: Familiarity with NTTFS's Rubric and Use of ClassBright's Components (N=29)

Question	n	%
Q5. To what degree are you familiar with the domains and indicators in (your school district's) teacher evaluation rubric?		
Not familiar	0	0.0
Somewhat familiar	9	31.0
Familiar	14	48.3
Very familiar	6	20.7
Q6. To what degree are you familiar with the examples linked to (your school district's) teacher evaluation rubric?		
Not familiar	6	20.7
Somewhat familiar	14	48.3
Familiar	5	17.2
Very familiar	4	13.8
Q7. Since the beginning of the school year, have you added a snippet to your portfolio?		
Yes	9	31.0
No	20	69.0
Q8. How often to you attach a rubric indicator to a snippet that you added to your portfolio?		
Never	4	44.4
About half the time	1	11.1
Most of the time	1	11.1
Always	3	33.3

Table A2: conts.

Q9. Since the beginning of the school year, has a supervisor added a snippet to your portfolio?		
Yes	22	75.9
No	7	24.1
Q10. When reviewing a snippet added by a supervisor, how often do you hover over/review the rubric indicator alignments to it?		
Never	8	36.4
About half the time	5	22.7
Most of the time	5	22.7
Always	4	18.2
Q11. Since the beginning of the school year, has a supervisor performed a walkthrough in your class?		
Yes	28	96.6
No	1	3.4
Q12. When reviewing a Walkthrough, how often do you hover over/review the rubric indicator alignments on questions?		
Never	9	32.1
About half the time	10	35.7
Most of the time	2	7.1
Always	7	25.0
Q13. Since the beginning of the school year, has a supervisor performed a Formal Observation in your class?		
Yes	18	62.1
No	11	37.9
Q14. How often were the Formal Observation notes aligned to rubric indicators?		
Never	0	0.0
Sometimes	2	13.3
Most of the time	4	26.7
Always	9	60.0
Q15. Following a Formal Observation, how often do you and your supervisor discuss the rubric indicators?		
Never	3	17.6
Sometimes	4	23.5
About half the time	1	5.9
Most of the time	4	23.5
Always	5	29.4

Note. Missing data were excluded from the analysis.

Table A3: Reflective Practice (n=29)

Question	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
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Table A3: cont

Q16. – Q19. On a scale of 1 to 10, to what degree do each of the following ClassBright evaluation system components trigger you to reflect internally upon your own teaching practice?

snippet	5.5	3.4
Walkthrough	6.7	3.2
Formal observation	7.8	2.6
Evaluation form	6.1	3.3

Q20. – Q23. On a scale of 1 to 10, to what degree do each of the following ClassBright promote discussion with colleagues about teaching practice?

snippet	4.3	3.3
Walkthrough	4.6	3.1
Formal observation	5.6	3.3
Evaluation form	4.5	3.3

Q24. – Q27. On a scale of 1 to 10, rate each of the following ClassBright evaluation system components on effectiveness to promote reflective teaching practice?

snippet	5.1	3.5
Walkthrough	6.2	3.1
Formal observation	7.5	2.7
Evaluation form	5.9	3.2

Appendix B

The following are respondents' comments to Question 31, an open-ended item at the end of the survey. The question reads, "Finally, is there anything else that you think we should know about the ClassBright evaluation system that we have not asked in this survey?" Responses are as follows:

1. Evaluation tool needs to be used consistently in the district.
2. I am glad you addressed the factors of time and internet access in adding Snippets. I don't have the time. And when I do, often something interrupts it or the internet is slow. I have done so many activities and travels with my students this year but have had little to no time to put in "Snippets" so therefore, because it is not a top priority, it warps the perception of my involvement with the students. There just is not time.
3. I have not received any formal training on its use. I don't know if I may have been at another training and not at in-service during the instruction.
4. I like the system and find value in it, but I have so many other things that I have been asked to do for my job that seem more important. It always gets put on the back burner and I rarely have time to give it much thought. When my administrator does a walkthrough or formal observation, I do look at it and reflect on my practice, though.
5. I think that the best way to encourage growth among teachers is regular walk-throughs, scheduled time for teachers to visit other classrooms, professional growth opportunities (and requirements - conferences, etc.), and scheduled time to discuss needs / better ways of teaching / etc. An evaluation system always feels "evaluative" and serves one main purpose: to retain good teachers and to encourage the rest to leave. Evaluation systems are not a substitute for a culture of steady growth and excellence that otherwise exists at a school. The focus on the evaluation system being a means to improve teaching, in my opinion, is a mistake, because there are more effective ways to encourage a steady improvement in our profession.
6. It would be helpful to see prior year alignments and evaluations to see growth and areas of improvement. At times it would be helpful to be able to upload more than one attachment when creating snippets to have documentation of facts. I

struggle to document some area, for example 3.1.1, 3.1.2, and 3.1.3. I am still not completely clear on district expectations- approximate number of snippets a teacher should complete, is there a target number such as 3 under each area to have a

complete picture, ...

7. Layout of the website is not great- a menu would be helpful. We as staff do not discuss our results. I reflect on mine seriously and use it as a reference to improve my teaching, but as a staff we do not examine areas we can improve or support one another.

8. The only fair evaluation system would be one where I am measured against other special educators with a caseload of (at least) 32 students who also supervise 12 para-professionals while also teaching a 17 student high school general education geography class! (THIS IS ALL TRUE!) This would be the only fair eval system. ClassBright does not touch the surface in measuring how hard I work; it favors those with the least amount of work who have the time for lipstick and powder. Making myself look beautiful is about # 167 on my weekly list of tasks.