

Hanlon's Razor

Bill Hanlon

Never attribute to malice that which can be adequately explained by stupidity

What works is work!

Instructional Leadership

Classroom observations can result in improved instruction and increased student achievement. I recently was observing instruction in an algebra class for a couple of consecutive days. The continuation of the observation the following day gives school administrators a better feel of what is really going on with respect to teaching and learning than just visiting one day. In the first day of instruction, students were provided pre-made notes that had blanks that needed to be filled in as the teacher covered the lesson. The teacher systematically went through the lesson following the notes which included; multiplication and division with radicals and rationalizing the denominator. From a math perspective, there was more meat on that bone than the students could chew in one lesson.

In the notes, the teacher provided an algorithm for each of the three objectives and one example, ran out of time before he finished, then assigned homework. My experience suggested these students were not going to successfully complete that assignment.

Predictably, the next day the students did experience a great deal of difficulty completing their homework. Since this was an Honors class, some students were able to figure out how to multiply and divide radicals. However, it would have been a lot easier on them if those operations with radicals were linked to multiplying and dividing polynomials.

When it came to answering questions with respect to rationalizing the denominator, it was apparent the kids simply could not get that done. The procedure that was given to the students the day before indicated to rationalize the denominator, they should multiply by the denominator. The one example the teacher used in his presentation worked for that format using that simple direction. The problem was there was no understanding of “why” behind rationalizing the denominator and therefore the slightest variation from the example given was going to cause most students needless heartburn.

Now, on to the point I want to make. With all the questions the students were asking the next day, the frustrated teacher responded by saying that he was “amazed” that they could not do these exercises because he taught the material yesterday, weren’t they paying attention?

By observing this class in consecutive days, I had a better feel of the instruction and clearly understood why students were experiencing difficulty in algebra. The students

were able to do the exercises that had the same simple structure he had used in his example. They had no clue how to do the majority of the exercises that had variations.

When I first sat to discuss my two-day observation with the teacher, he interrupted me before I could start to make sure I understood that the students weren't studying as evidenced by them not completing their homework assignment. In other words, he was doing his part, the students were not doing theirs. It's their fault they are not doing well.

He failed to realize that he did not adequately explain the "why" behind the procedure he presented, that the procedure was inadequate, that he didn't provide examples in his instruction that had variations like the ones they would encounter on their homework assignment, nor was there any guided practice to ensure the students knew how to do the problems before he assigned the homework.

If I wasn't in the class the next day, I would never have known how he handled students experiencing difficulty and how conveniently he blamed the high failure rate on them without ever reflecting upon his role in the class' confusion.

My comments were straight-forward and took the teacher somewhat by surprise. I described the class by reviewing my four pages of notes using the time intervals he used before changing a topic, activity or direction. I then discussed his teaching and made a recommendation for each concern I had. He indicated he never recalled having someone in his class on consecutive days, that no one has ever given him such frank feedback on such a poor job of instruction, and/or how poorly he treated his students when they didn't understand concepts he was teaching. And, that he has never received written recommendations based on those observations to improve instruction – resulting in improving student achievement.

Administrators can't improve instruction by observing a teacher for part of a period or even the entire period. School administrators should know their teachers well enough that they could pretty well predict what individual teachers would do under specific circumstances. Having observations that followed the entire lesson and the follow-up to the lesson the next day would provide added insight into what needs to be done to improve instruction that results in increased student achievement.

All that goes for naught if there is not a post observation conference to discuss instruction. By the way, the teacher did not realize that he didn't complete the lesson, never really thought about guided practice before he assigned the homework, didn't realize how negative he was with his students, etc.

The teacher verbally committed to make changes in his instruction. That requires ongoing follow-up. The cost to improve instruction – ZERO! if you are doing your job. The simple question that needs to be answered is; Are we still into avoidance by continually "researching", purchasing and implementing new programs or hiring consultants that make us look busy or are we just going to finally do the job? *What works is work!*