



Designing Teacher Evaluation Systems: New Guidance from the Measures of Effective Teaching Project

Kane, Thomas; Kerr, Kerri; and Pianta, Robert
Wiley, 2014

Book Review

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Designing Teacher Evaluation Systems is a collection of sixteen articles analyzing data produced by the Measures of Effective Teaching project, an initiative of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The research was conducted with three thousand pre-collegiate teachers working in urban districts. The results and the articles forming the book itself are divided among three themes: using data for feedback and evaluation, connecting evaluation measures with student learning, and the properties of evaluation systems. In short, the book takes on the challenge of what classroom observations and standardized test scores can tell us about good teaching. The core audience for the book seems to be those responsible for educational policy and leadership in primary and secondary schools.

University faculty, especially those responsible for the evaluation of classroom teaching, may find this book to be of some use. The third chapter underscores the difficulty of consistency in classroom observation scores and insists on training procedures “that discipline observer judgments in order to produce valid and reliable scores” (53). The chapter goes on to analyze the distinctive approaches of “master scorers” versus those who are newly initiated. Similar arguments are made in the twelfth chapter on minimizing rater bias in classroom observations. The tenth chapter, “Understanding Instructional Quality in English Language Arts,” may be interesting to instructors in the humanities at any level. The authors of the study note that evaluation systems “make transparent what an organization values” and “no observation instrument is neutral” (325). They report that instructional quality varies in relation to the content of lessons and single out the teaching of writing as particularly challenging; an insight that college educators can appreciate.

In chapter eleven, researchers investigate how “working conditions predict teaching quality and student outcomes” (332). Their evidence reveals that “active believer” teachers who maintain high expectations for their students and participate actively with colleagues produce better results in their classrooms. Amusingly, teachers in the contrasting and ineffective category are deemed “isolated agnostics.” It is also shown that students benefit from a mixture of “academic support” and “academic press” – they are fostered in different ways by being both cared for and challenged. This chapter ends with a list of thought-provoking implications for how educational leaders can create a better environment for effective teaching. Chapter fourteen offers another look at the “cognitive complexity” of scoring classroom observation rubrics (436). It is suggested that an observation cycle might be an effective remedy, where an initial thirty-minute observation focused on scoring a rubric precedes a longer diagnostic observation. In this way the observer is able to provide more focused feedback.

The data-driven authors of this book would be the first to admit the conclusions within are not necessarily translatable to the college environment. I cannot, therefore, recommend a cover-to-cover reading to faculty working on the evaluation of university teaching. I do, however, believe that individual chapters contain interesting points of reflection on the teacher evaluation process at any level and have endeavored to highlight some of the best examples above.

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