



Shafts of Light

Tick-tick-tick. A senior teacher is in a colleague's classroom, observing. Tick-tick-tick. The senior teacher, or coach, takes notes of the colleague's interactions with five particular students. Tick-tick-tick. After 10 seconds, the coach stops observing the teacher. Tick.

The coach then concentrates solely on one of the five students. For ten seconds. No more. No less. The coach takes notes, all the time collecting information about the teaching practice in the classroom.

The coach is virtually unobtrusive. The teacher is relaxed, knowing the coach is not making judgements or evaluations or appraisals. The coach is observing and collecting evidence, with the keen eye of experience.

For 25 minutes, the coach will listen to what is said, watch what is done, and record the details. Tick-tick-tick.

At the end of the lesson, the coach will ask the five observed students to rate their thinking and learning for that lesson on a scale from one to five. Whether the students are from Year 1 or from Year 12, they'll be asked the same questions, such as, 'How much do you think you have learnt?' and 'How hard was the thinking you did in class?'

The teacher reflects upon the evidence of the lesson's interactions, looking for confirmation of their teaching practice and also aspects that could be altered. The coach presents the information but does not make direct suggestions. It is up to the teacher to decide whether to act upon the evidence.

Karen Milkins-Hendry was a Year 8 and Year 12 mathematics teacher at Newhaven College. A teacher for 25 years, she was also the school's Deputy Principal, Teaching and Learning. In 2012, Ms Milkins-Hendry was observed and coached on four occasions by Independent Schools Victoria SSNP Advisor, Lara Meyer.

'I've always been open to ideas for improving how I teach,' said Ms Milkins-Hendry. 'There is more than one way to teach well, and those good teaching practices don't have to be in isolation.'

'Evidence-based observation and coaching allows individual teachers to engage in ongoing professional learning that is completely pertinent to them, their students and their teaching practice,' said Ms Meyer, who embraced evidence-based observation and coaching wholeheartedly when teaching at-risk students in New Zealand a decade ago.

What, then, did Ms Milkins-Hendry, already a highly-regarded and open-minded teacher, learn from evidence-based observation and coaching? 'One of the key things

Newhaven College is a Prep to Year 12 interdenominational, coeducational school on Phillip Island with 670 students.

Challenge: To build an ongoing culture of reflective practice for teachers.

Action: Teachers are observed and coached across four terms.

Result: Teachers finetune their teaching practice based on hard data; students are more stimulated.

It initially requires meticulous planning to teach this way, but it's worth it. Once you make the change and new habits are formed then it is a very simple equation: Make the students work harder than you. The students appreciate they are learning in a different way, and lap it up.

– Ms Karen Milkins-Hendry,
Deputy Principal, Teaching and Learning



I realised was that it didn't have to always be up to me to come up with excellent questions for students, but that my teaching was far better if students were generating and then asking the majority of questions.' Ms Milkins-Hendry described this realisation as like a 'shaft of strong light' illuminating her thoughts on teaching practice.

'Other teachers will have different shafts of light, so to speak, depending on how they teach, and how they want to change their teaching.'

Ms Milkins-Hendry's mathematics classes now see students not only asking more questions of her, but of each other. They ask these questions while working in specially-selected groups at various whiteboards. In these classes, the teacher is not up the front of the classroom talking to a passive group of seated students. Rather, Ms Milkins-Hendry poses a task and watches as the students set about solving the mathematics problem. She will help the students of course, when asked, but is keen to see them come to their own answers.

The Year 12 mathematics students at Newhaven College become so engaged in this form of teaching that they can work happily and constructively for 90 minutes.

'It initially requires meticulous planning to teach this way,' said Ms Milkins-Hendry, 'but it's worth it. Once you make the change and new habits are formed then it is a very simple equation: Make the students work harder than you. The students appreciate that they are learning in a different way, and lap it up.'

Ms Meyer described this form of teaching as 'a move away from whole-class didactic teaching. It's more collaborative, more interactive. The students become actively involved in learning rather than passive recipients of teaching. Students at Newhaven College – and other schools – are very engaged by this more discursive teaching.'

Since 2011, 20 Newhaven College teachers have participated in evidence-based observation and coaching. Across Victoria, Independent Schools Victoria SSNP Advisors have trained coaches from 36 National Partnerships schools. The Independent Schools Victoria SSNP Advisors also coach teachers in some of those schools.

'Evidence-based observation and coaching means that professional learning can take place in real time, in the classroom, and relate directly to the teacher,' said Ms Meyer.

'Teachers are learning about the art of teaching and then practising those techniques in an ongoing, supportive manner.'

Tick-tick-tick.

Other Successful Schools

Since 2010, Independent Schools Victoria SSNP Advisors have trained 141 teachers from 36 National Partnerships schools. The following Member Schools have also been trained to use the Evidence-Based Observation Tool:

- Australian International Academy of Education
- Adass Israel School
- Al Siraat College
- Al-Taqwa College
- Bayview College
- Belgrave Heights Christian School
- Chairo Christian School
- Covenant College
- Darul Ulum College of Victoria
- East Preston Islamic College
- Geelong Baptist College
- Good News Lutheran College
- Gilson College
- Henderson College
- Heritage College
- Highview College
- Ilim College of Australia Inc
- Lighthouse Christian College Cranbourne
- Lighthouse Christian College
- Little Yarra Steiner School
- Melton Christian College
- Minaret College
- Oakleigh Grammar
- Sirius College (Eastmeadows Campus, Meadow Fair Campus and Dandenong Campus)
- South Coast Christian College
- St Anthony's Coptic Orthodox College
- St John's Greek Orthodox College
- St John's Lutheran Primary School, Portland
- St Mary's Coptic Orthodox College
- Sunshine Christian School
- Berry Street School
- Trinity Lutheran College.

