

Teaching Between Desks for Deeper Learning

Increased emphasis on fostering deeper learning for students suggests a fundamental change in teachers' role and vantage point of instruction. The change requires less time teaching in front of class and more time roving among desks and teams to monitor and facilitate students' collaborative work and problem solving.

The teacher's interactions and decisions during students' independent or collaborative "work time"—choosing what to focus on, how much time to spend with each team or individual, what to say or not say—has a crucial instructional value.

Japanese educators have a specific pedagogical term for describing this mode of instruction called *kikan shidō* (between desks instruction), carefully distinguished from a separate Japanese term, *kikan junshi* (between desks patrolling), which focuses merely on checking for right answers and behaviors. In our new book *Teaching Better*, we describe our first-hand experience with Japanese use of *kikan shidō* while working full-time as licensed teachers at a Japanese school.

In another article we recently published in *Educational Leadership*, we expand on a study by [O'Keefe, et al. \(2006\)](#) by illustrating four principal functions of *kikan-shidō*: (1) monitoring student activity, (2) guiding student activity, (3) organizing materials and the physical setup, and (4) engaging in social talk. We also describe how more intentional use of *kikan shidō* might help US teachers facilitate deeper learning for all students.

LEARNING TO TEACH BETWEEN DESKS

Teachers in classrooms around the world spend hours of class time each week roving between desks during student activities, group projects, pair work, or individual practice. But how much of this time reflects thoughtful planning and carefully orchestrated assistance? Teachers will need sustained, collaborative learning opportunities and new professional development resources to practice and refine this mode of instruction and facilitate deeper learning. Important questions that help prepare teachers for *kikan-shidō* include the following:

- How does *kikan-shidō* support the learning goals for this lesson?
- What are my specific goals as I circulate?
- How will I distribute my time with various groups and differentiate support?
- What key understandings or misconceptions will I be looking for?
- What probing questions will I use to check for understanding or advance student thinking?
- What will I be careful not to say or do that might decrease the rigor of the task?
- What materials will I need to distribute?
- When should I engage in brief social conversation with students to provide encouragement and build relationships?

Using collaborative inquiry to plan and reflect on lessons that incorporate these questions is one way to develop effective *kikan-shidō* practices. Carrying a copy of the lesson plan on a tablet or mobile device during *kikan-shidō* is also useful; teachers can review the plan on-the-fly during instruction and take notes as they observe students, perhaps even capturing audio and visual examples of student work.

Teacher teams can then discuss these observations in post-lesson reflection meetings. As we describe in our book, they can discuss *kikan shidō* choices in the lesson, such as the type of guidance teachers provided

during specific moments of student interaction, or which groups they selected to present at the end of the lesson and how *kikan shidō* observations informed those choices. Did these examples help facilitate a rich discussion on the range of problem approaches? Given the options available from the various approaches observed in observations, what were some other possibilities, and how might they have added or detracted from the culminating discussion?

This kind of deliberate planning and reflection will help teachers develop increasingly nuanced understandings of the choices presented in each *kikan-shidō* episode and, most importantly, how these choices inhibit or enhance student learning.

To learn more about *kikan shidō*, collaborative inquiry, and other resources for improving instructional practice, check out our new book, *Teaching Better: Igniting and Sustaining Instructional Improvement*. Now available from Corwin Press.

References

Ermeling, B.A. & Graff-Ermeling, G. (2016). *Teaching better: Igniting and sustaining instructional improvement*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Ermeling, B. A., & Graff-Ermeling, G. (2014, October). Teaching between desks. *Educational Leadership*, 72(2), 55–60. Alexandria, VA: ASCD. ©2014 by ASCD. Adapted with permission.