

Benefits of a Teacher Observation Group

Kylie Bertram



A personal reflection on the power of regional observation groups—and a call to action to create your own.

Before my first year of teaching, I interviewed at a lot of schools. I was offered two positions: one teaching biology and chemistry at a high school 15 minutes from my home, the other teaching seventh grade science at a middle school 45 minutes away. The high school let me know that I would be on my own, with no professional learning community (PLC) or common planning time with teachers teaching the same courses. The middle school had common planning times for PLCs, and my PLC would include a National Board Certified Teacher who was excited to work with and mentor a new teacher.

Did I want to teach middle school? No. Did I want to learn how to become a better teacher and not be tossed to the wolves? Yes. I took the job that offered support, even though it was not my ideal position.

I had a great year. I experienced the ups and downs of a first-year teacher, but at every down I had my mentor, Greg, to debrief with, to challenge my ideas, and to help me grow my skills. When I was nervous to try a new technique in my classroom, Greg gave me the confidence to attempt it during first period. Then we could debrief during second period and tweak my lesson for the rest of the day. When I struggled with student behaviors, Greg talked me through the conversation I could have with a given student, including acting out possible responses from the student based on my statements. When I didn't

know at first how to make the dreaded negative phone call home, Greg walked me through it. At the end of the day, I could almost always leave school feeling proud of my work and ready for the next day. I loved teaching and knew I made the right career choice.

Then life happened. My spouse got orders to move from the Washington, D.C., area to Washington State the summer after my first year of teaching. I applied for and accepted a job at a high school. I knew I would not have the same support I had the year before. To say I was nervous about my second year was an understatement.

At that summer's Knowles Teacher Initiative Summer Meeting, I was invited to lunch by other Fellows from the Pacific Northwest so I could learn about their observation group, the Northwest Regional Fellows (NWRF). I was a first-year Teaching Fellow, had just moved to Washington a few weeks before, and am generally introverted and struggle to make new friends. I will always remember how welcoming they were and how comfortable they made me feel. I knew the support I would gain from being a part of this group would make a difference for me from the start.

At lunch, I learned how the group was established. Two teachers in the region, Meg Gildea and Abby Daane, wanted to develop a larger learning community among teachers in the Pacific Northwest to increase opportunities to learn from each other and their different contexts. Abby and Meg started NWRF with informal dinner meet-ups. As the group grew, they began to hold dinner meetings in different cities. At one funding planning meeting, Abby had the idea to observe classrooms. While the observation was a lot of work to plan initially, the result

was a stimulating conversation in the afternoon followed by dinner at Abby's house afterwards. This day sparked the motivation to start an official regional observation group. After writing grant proposals to Knowles to pay for dinner, substitute teachers, and travel costs, Knowles Teaching Fellows were able to opt-in to participate in the NWRP group.

Soon, members of the group began inviting colleagues and the composition of the group was expanded beyond Knowles Fellows. This organizational change led to a change in our name: we are now Observe Northwest (ONW). Each year, ONW recruits new Teaching Fellows at the Knowles Teacher Initiative Summer Conference, and current members recruit colleagues to join. The group has expanded from casual meetings of Knowles Fellows to organized observations followed by a conversational reflection, then a social dinner, once in the fall and once in the spring.

Why invest the time and energy to form or join a regional group? First, a local observation group builds fellowship among teachers who teach in the same region at different schools, in different contexts. I was an early-career teacher new to the area, and the observation group gave me the opportunity to discuss my new classroom and context with teachers who did not work in my building. I was grateful for the group's fresh perspectives on struggles I couldn't always define or assess properly within my own context. I was able to expand my professional community, something I desperately needed to support my practice. Observations also provide the opportunity to engage with colleagues around meaningful inquiry. Members of ONW enjoy being able to discuss and analyze observational trends across multiple classrooms and teachers with a community of teachers from different contexts.

Members of the group also agree that meetings in the fall and spring always occur at times when we are in need



I always leave the observations feeling motivated and better equipped to deal with the issues I am facing."



I can now see that the leadership opportunity ONW provided in a supportive, community-based organization was imperative in order for me to gain the confidence I needed to branch into leadership roles in other aspects of teaching."

of a boost of some kind. For example, I may be feeling down about my abilities and the way things are going in my classroom. However, I'll go to an observation and see practices I already know are wonderful but had forgotten about, like pointing out positive behaviors instead of negative behaviors. The observation and conversation with other teachers reminds me how important and how easy those types of practices are to implement. I always leave the observations feeling motivated and better equipped to deal with the issues I am facing.

Second, a local observation group also provides opportunities for leadership in a non-threatening, low-risk environment. While I am introverted, I am also passionate about working to become a teacher leader. It was with this mindset that I took on an organizational leadership role at the Knowles Teacher Initiative Summer Meeting before my third year of teaching. Passing and receiving the torch of leadership was not easy. ONW Fellows had watched the hard work that Mike Town and Alex Steinkamp, the self-proclaimed "crank-turners" of the group, had put in for the past few years. In contrast, that year I was starting my third year of teaching at a third new school. Taking on leading ONW meant leading a group of teachers who were much more experienced than me, both at teaching and at leadership.

I was intimidated by taking on this role, but Mike and Alex coached and mentored me, and all members of the group consistently encouraged me. That year, we were able to meet at Mike's school to establish other leadership roles and create documents to support

planning of the group's work. These documents made the group self-sustaining by allowing smoother transitions of leadership, which also supported our goal of providing more low-stakes leadership opportunities to teachers. Read more about ONW's leadership transition in "The Machines Around Us" by Alex Steinkamp (2019). Because of my experiences with ONW, I now lead a professional learning community at my school and am contributing to district-level science initiatives. I can now see that the leadership opportunity ONW provided in a supportive, community-based organization was imperative in order for me to gain the confidence I needed to branch into leadership roles in other aspects of teaching.

Last, a local observation group provides opportunities to see other teachers' practice and classrooms and get feedback. The opportunity to see others' teaching practice allows you to reflect on practices that are the norm in your classroom, evaluate whether these are the practices you'd like to be the norm, and if not, how you might begin to shift your practice. There are always practices I see during observations that inspire me to improve and try new things. Being at someone else's school, in the room with the teacher and the students, and reflecting with the teacher at the end of the day gives me the opportunity to implement new ideas or improve my own teaching practice. Recently, we observed a Knowles Fellow and her colleague in Oregon. Their use of interactive notebooks, a practice I had been using but found challenging, was so impressive. During the observation day and during the reflective debrief, I was able to watch their implementation of the notebooks, make notes to myself, ask plenty of questions, and reflect on why I didn't feel like similar notebooks were working in my classroom. I took away practices that I could implement immediately that following Monday.

Sometimes, you will observe at a school that has similar demographics to yours, but will still pick up on different norms and nuances. Sometimes, you will observe at a school that could not be more different than yours. Both experiences always lead me to reflect more deeply on the role I play in shaping the norms and culture within my classroom. The community of the observation group provides a safe space for me to grapple with the big, the small, and the sometimes scary parts of being an educator. The passion, strategies, and practices shared on observation days always make me more hopeful—a powerful emotion for an educator.

If you are interested in starting and maintaining an observation group, I want to emphasize intentionally inviting people into the group. ONW has made a difference in both my professional and personal satisfaction, and I never would have joined had I not been intentionally invited. Invite new teachers you know, colleagues at your school, and especially reach out to



The passion, strategies, and practices shared on observation days always make me more hopeful—a powerful emotion for an educator."

those who may be more introverted. You never know the difference it could make.

Reference

Steinkamp, A. (2019). The machines around us. *Kaleidoscope: Educator Voices and Perspectives*, 6(1), 25–28.

Citation

Bertram, K. (2019). Benefits of a teacher observation group. *Kaleidoscope: Educator Voices and Perspectives*, 6(1), 22–24.



Kylie Bertram,

a 2015 Knowles Teaching Fellow and National Board Certified Teacher, is a science teacher in Federal Way, Washington. Over the course of her first five years of teaching, she has taught middle school life science, ninth grade biology, Pre-AICE (Advanced International Certificate of Education) Biology, AICE Biology, and Principles of Biomedical Science. Outside of the classroom, Kylie advises We Act Club, a club focused on positive change in the community and the world, and serves on the curriculum writing team for her school district. Reach Kylie at kylie.bertram@knowlesteachers.org.

Read more about ONW's leadership transition in the next article.