

## Using Affirming Learning Walks to Build Capacity

Donna L. Ross

Lisa L. Lamb

Joseph F. Johnson

*San Diego State University*

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### ABSTRACT

Teachers grow from sharing their practice and receiving feedback, yet it can be difficult for teachers to welcome others into their classrooms without feeling judged. Observers need to enter teachers' classrooms projecting respect and value for the challenging work of teaching. In this article, we share an approach to visiting classrooms, called *Affirming Learning Walks*, that differs in comparison to more typical learning walks, instructional rounds, or classroom observations. Affirming learning walks are hosted by teachers or administrators, conducted with other teachers, designed around eight practices known to support student achievement, and focused only on those productive practices that are present rather than on the absence of practices or areas for improvement. This approach provides an opportunity to value many of a teacher's practices that are productive and encourages teachers to engage in more of the productive practices because they are highlighted and celebrated.

**Keywords:** adult learning, teacher education, professional development, teacher leadership, instructional leadership, STEM education, classroom observation techniques

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As researchers and teachers, we know that teaching is demanding and that excellent teaching is all the more so. Finding ways to engage teachers to improve their practice can be challenging because teachers often end up feeling their work is undervalued and that professional developers do not understand the realities of teaching. To address some of these concerns, researchers and practitioners have written about learning walks as one way for teachers to collaboratively support each other to improve their practice (Allen & Topolka-Jorissen, 2014; Bushman, 2006; Fisher & Frey, 2014; Steiny, 2009). In general, learning walks are conducted by small groups of teachers and administrators, incorporate a guiding question or theme, include visits to multiple classrooms for 5–15 minutes each, and provide time for debriefs within the small group. There is often an expectation that the learning-walk team will develop a summary of both appropriate practices and areas for growth that is presented to the entire staff (see, for example, Fisher & Frey, 2014).

Learning walks can reduce professional isolation, increase teachers' willingness to try new teaching strategies, increase opportunities for reflective dialogue, and increase collaboration compared with experiences prior to enacting the learning walks (Allen & Topolka-Jorissen, 2014). Implementation requires teachers to be open to sharing their instructions. Steiny (2009) reported on one principal's effort to incorporate learning walks to support teachers' professional learning. While the effort was largely successful, it also resulted in a small number of teachers asking to transfer schools, others retiring, and about 10% of the remaining faculty not on board with the learning walks. A common problem was getting teachers to agree to have others visit their classrooms in the first place. Building relationships and trust has been identified as central to having teachers open their doors (Bole & Farizo, 2013). When hard-working teachers feel judged and criticized, they often close the door, both physically and metaphorically, to feedback. For educational leaders to actually lead, they must first engage productively to build trust that will allow them to be viewed as supportive, active participants in the teachers' development. Our goal was to design an approach to learning walks that would position teacher leaders to be sought out and welcomed to visit teachers' classrooms.

## Affirming Learning Walks

With leadership from the National Center for Urban School Transformation (NCUST), we identified ways to make learning walks and debriefs a consistently positive and productive learning experience for both the visitors and those who were observed. Named *Affirming Learning Walks*, these include many of the features of more typical learning walks in that they are conducted with small groups of teachers, include visits to many classrooms for 10–15 minutes each, and have a central focus. They are different because the learning walks are led by teacher leaders at the school site, include rehearsals of debriefs with the observed teachers, and solely focus on productive practices that were observed, rather than on areas for improvement. Teacher leaders debrief with the teachers who were observed, either on an individual basis or in a small group, rather than debriefing with the entire staff.

Affirming Learning Walks provide an asset-based orientation toward teachers, and teaching, and have the potential to develop trust and collegiality among teachers and teacher leaders, while continuing to provide opportunities for teachers to grow. Readers might wonder how teachers can improve their practice if there is never a discussion about areas for improvement. Joseph Johnson, founder and former executive director of NCUST shared,

Think about what happens when someone shares 20 great things about your practice and one area for improvement. Where is your area of focus? For almost all of us, regardless of how many positive comments we hear, our tendency is to focus on that one area of improvement. We often leave debriefs feeling deflated and undervalued. It is challenging to get excited about being observed or improving our practice when we think that we will hear that we are not doing enough for our students, especially because we as teachers care deeply about our students' learning (J. Johnson, personal communication, November 16, 2021).

Relatedly, Aguilar (2016) posited that asset-based coaching is not about ignoring problems. Instead, it builds confidence and solidifies positive practices to prepare teachers to grow. When asked about how focusing only on productive practices can support teacher learning, Johnson continued,

When we highlight productive practices teachers are enacting, and share with the teachers *why* those practices are important for students' learning, they feel encouraged to continue to do them, and they add to their knowledge base about the profound importance of those practices. As well, when teachers visit many classrooms during the learning walks, they have an opportunity to observe all of the productive practices in action, hear through debriefs why they are important, and see a model of how teachers enact the practices (J. Johnson, personal communication, November 16, 2021).

In short, focusing on productive practices provides opportunities for teachers who are observed to hear about the many features of their lessons that are productive and to learn about why those practices are important, and this same focus provides classroom visitors opportunities to see the practices enacted and to hear from the group why these practices will result in significant student learning. For both classroom visitors and for teachers being observed, there are opportunities for significant learning in a positive and respectful space where teachers feel valued and capable (Johnson et al., 2017). Because we know that teachers care deeply about their students' learning, it is easy to find many productive practices that the teachers are doing. Additionally, the experience is authentic because teachers are debriefing about their own classroom practices.

## METHOD

### Participants

We enacted Affirming Learning Walks with a group of 12 teacher leaders in mathematics and science who taught across five different districts and 11 school sites. We used Dove's (2021) definition of teacher leader as "A teacher who has taken on the role of serving in both formal and informal leadership roles within the school building and collaborates with colleagues to work toward better educational outcomes for students" (p. 134). The teacher leaders were all full-time math or science teachers who were selected to participate because of their teaching and content expertise, their formal and informal leadership roles as characterized by Dove (2021), and their desire to continue to learn and grow.

### Data Sources

We developed two surveys, one for teacher leaders and one for teachers who were observed.

### ***Surveys of Teacher Leaders***

We asked the 12 teacher leaders to respond to open-ended survey items to reflect on their experience as hosts and as observers. Because they participated as both a host and observer, each teacher leader responded to the survey two times, one time in each role. The teacher leaders were asked about their take-aways from the experience, how the experience compared to other classroom observations, and their thoughts about being observed and participating in debriefs. Finally, they had an opportunity to share anything else about the experience.

### ***Surveys of Teachers Who Were Observed***

We also asked the teachers who were observed to anonymously reflect on the experience. Although the survey was voluntary, more than 80% of the teachers ( $n = 19$ ) chose to respond. The teachers were asked to respond to open-ended questions about being observed, the debrief, and anything else they wanted to share. In the following sections, we describe work we did prior to visiting school sites, the structure for the day of the learning walks, and next steps.

## **OUR APPROACH**

### **Prior to the School-Site Visit**

We spent time with our teacher leaders to support their learning about the eight teaching practices and preparing them for the Affirming Learning Walks.

### ***Learning About Eight Teaching Practices***

During the first year of the leadership training, the teacher leaders learned about the eight teaching practices (Figure 1) from America's best urban schools, as identified by NCUST (Johnson et al., 2019). In small groups, the teacher leaders embarked on learning about and sharing two practices with the rest of the group. In addition to describing the practice, each small group shared "What It Is" and "What It Isn't" as a way for the others to have a sense for the meaning of each practice. For example, when sharing about Practice 6, Building Fluency with Gatekeeper Vocabulary, the teacher leaders shared examples provided in the book (Johnson et al., 2019). They provided a productive example of making new vocabulary familiar by connecting new vocabulary to known vocabulary, such as by comparing the use of the term *hesitation* as used in a short story to a "hesitation dribble," a term used in basketball with which several students were familiar (pp. 96–97). In contrast, as an example of what Practice 6 is not, the teacher leaders shared the example of introducing new vocabulary without connecting it to students' lives by having students look up the word *hesitation* in the dictionary, copy the definition, and write a sentence using the word. By providing descriptions along with examples and non-examples for each practice, the teacher leaders became comfortable with the practices and could envision how they would be enacted in a classroom setting.

**Figure 1**

### ***Teaching Practices from America's Best Urban Schools (Johnson et al., 2019)***

1. Making students feel valued and capable
2. Focusing on understanding and mastery
3. Promoting clarity
4. Ensuring culturally, socially, and personally responsive teaching
5. Checking for understanding, providing feedback, and adapting instruction
6. Building fluency with gatekeeper vocabulary
7. Promoting successful practices
8. Leading students to love learning

### ***Preparing for Affirming Learning Walks***

After the teacher leaders learned about the teaching practices, we shared that we would be visiting their school sites in small groups to conduct learning walks. We further shared that we would only be focusing on the practices we observed rather than commenting on what the teachers were not doing or could be doing better. Each teacher leader was expected to

host a small group of teacher leaders and project leaders to observe their own classroom and the classrooms of several peers. By asking them to identify teachers for us to visit, we knew that we were asking them to stretch themselves in their roles as teacher leaders. Most identified three peers for us to observe on the same day we observed the teacher leader's classroom. Before visiting any classrooms, we practiced identifying evidence of the eight teaching practices by together watching videos of classrooms that varied in the enactment of the practices. We also practiced debriefs with the teacher leaders so that they had a sense of what they (and the teachers at their school sites) might expect. We provided a form for the teacher leaders to use to guide their observations (Figure 2). Prior to our visit, the host teacher leader sent directions to the school, check-in procedures, and a schedule with times that included which teachers we would visit and when we would conduct each debrief.

## The Day of the School-Site Visit

Typically, a group composed of four teacher leaders and a project leader visited the school site. We first met in our small group to review the plan for the day, to make sure that everyone had observation forms, and to allow the host teacher leader to share anything about the school that they thought was relevant. Each teacher leader took a turn as a host. We kept the groups small for each Affirming Learning Walk (4–6) so that we did not overwhelm the teachers who were being observed. We often visited the classroom of the host teacher leader first for about 10–15 minutes, debriefed with the teacher leader, and then went into the other teachers' classrooms. Because we thought about these walks as a learning experience for the teacher leaders as well as the teachers, we first debriefed without the classroom teacher that we observed so that the host teacher leader could take notes from across many observers and share with the teacher at a later time. These debriefs served as a type of "rehearsal" so that the host teacher leader had ideas for what to share and how to share it.

Figure 2

### Observation Form for Affirming Learning Walks

Teacher Visited \_\_\_\_\_ Subject \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Pre-Observation Meeting Notes:

<b>Teaching Practices from America's Best Urban Schools</b>  (Johnson et al., 2019)	Please write down any noticings you have related to the selected teaching practice(s). Be objective, avoid evaluative language and cite as much observational evidence as possible. We are only observing for about 10 minutes, so you will not have comments for every practice.		
	<b>Observations of students.</b> What are students doing and/or saying that relates to this practice?	<b>Observations of the teacher.</b> What is the teacher doing and/or saying that relates to this practice?	<b>For the Debrief:</b> Why is this practice important?
1. Making students feel valued and capable			
2. Focusing on understanding & mastery			
3. Promoting clarity			
4. Ensuring culturally, socially and personally responsive teaching			
5. Checking for understanding, providing feedback and adapting instruction			
6. Building fluency with gatekeeper vocabulary			
7. Promoting successful practices			
8. Leading students to love learning			
Post-Observation Meeting Notes:			

## After the School-Site Visit

We asked the host teacher leaders to conduct debriefs with the teachers we observed within two days of the Affirming Learning Walks so that the visit was still fresh in the minds of the teacher leader and the teacher who was visited. These debriefs were led by the teacher leaders with a focus on the practices seen and why they are important for students' learning, rather than what was not observed or what could have been better. One unconventional feature of this debrief is that no part

of it is designed to discuss next steps or what the teacher would have liked to have done differently. Why? Because one goal is to establish trust between the teacher and teacher leader (or administrator) and to form collegial relationships. Teachers are often their harshest critics, and we wanted these experiences to be both authentic and uplifting. In other words, we wanted teachers to *want* to be observed.

## **RESULTS**

### **Experiences of Teacher Leaders**

In the following sections, we provide information from our open-ended survey items that our participants shared. All names are pseudonyms. The heading of each subsection represents a theme from across the responses.

#### ***Positive Orientation That Promoted Learning***

One of the consistent messages from the teacher leaders was that the visits were affirming and positive. Sofia echoed most of the comments when writing:

As a visitor, the most impactful thing for me was the feeling of positivity, joy, and affirmation that I felt after spending the day observing and giving feedback on the best practices. Everyone in attendance—from observers and participating teachers—taught me something that day. As teachers, we don't often get enough recognition for the everyday things or encouraging words. Having the best practices in mind helped to give useful and positive affirmation to the teachers being observed. I left with a renewed sense of appreciation for the work we are doing.

In some instances, the teacher leaders compared educational experiences that were not positive to the Affirming Learning Walks as a way to recognize the value of the Affirming Learning Walks. Mary wrote:

I was surprised at how positive the conversations stayed. Throughout our careers I know we have always had those conversations with peers where we are complaining about students or even how other colleagues did things. With this day, it was one comment after another about how well the teacher set up a task or how proficient the students were with lab materials.

The teacher leaders recognized that the day included positive affirmations that were uplifting for all. Furthermore, they recognized that it was more than just a positive experience—that they were learning from these interactions with other teachers, as explained by Dana: “The biggest takeaway is that this experience was a very positive experience that left me with more ideas and motivation to continue to grow as a teacher.”

#### ***Validation From Being Observed***

Mary further reflected the comments of many when she talked about her experience being observed. She compared her experience as a teacher to the experiences we hope that the students have:

It was just so affirming to hear everyone talk about my lesson/classroom/interactions with students. Knowing that feeling, I wish I could observe more teachers and have that debrief with them just to honor them as teachers and make them feel valued and capable. That is so meta . . . telling me that you observed my students feeling valued and capable makes me feel valued and capable as an educator. And it is leading me to love teaching! . . . After my second learning walk . . . I am really starting to memorize those practices, which means they will probably come out even more in my teaching . . . I like that the focus was always positive. It was almost like a scavenger hunt, and I was looking for as many good things as possible to say.

David commented that debriefs with this positive orientation inspired him to want to continue to learn and grow:

Any time that I know I am going to be observed, either by admin or colleagues, there is a certain level of anxiety that builds up. . . . Receiving feedback from the group that observed warmed my heart and the anxiety I felt leading up to [the] event began to fade away. Hearing all of the positive comments from my peers seemed to validate the work that I do as an educator. In some ways, I feel more motivated now to continue to try new strategies and lessons with my classes.

### ***Connecting Feedback to Eight Practices***

Having a common focus for the observations and centering the debriefs around shared noticing helped to structure and build community among the participants. Martin reflected on the importance of providing feedback that connects back to the eight practices and why those practices are important:

I think it was very helpful to have . . . the NCUST best practices and looking for evidence of these practices in the classroom. . . . I think it was really helpful [that] we had the paper to take notes on and highlight all the evidence of the NCUST effective practices in the classroom. There are so many things to see in the classroom that having an outline of specific things to catch is extremely helpful.

### **Experiences of Observed Teachers**

We were especially interested in the responses to the observations and debriefs from teachers with whom we had not interacted prior to our visit. These teachers knew the host teacher leader but not the other visitors. We found their responses often mirrored those of the teacher leaders.

#### ***Positive Experience During Debriefs***

The positive response to the debriefs was evident across every respondent. For example, one teacher, Jane, shared, The debrief was actually the best debrief I have ever experienced! I've never been evaluated this way in front of my colleagues, but it was great to hear JUST positive things about myself and other teachers in my department coming from yet another trusted colleague. The entire discussion involved nothing but positive energy and really was the best part of my morning.

#### ***Difference Between Affirming-Learning-Walk Debriefs and Other Debriefs***

Chris reflected on the difference between this debrief compared to other debriefs:

I really enjoyed the debrief. It was similar to what I expected logistically but I did not expect it to be so much positive feedback. So often as teachers we are told we aren't doing enough, not making enough phone calls home, not doing enough differentiation, not doing enough relationship building, not doing enough [. . .].

#### ***Recognition of Recently Enacted Practices***

Ann reflected on her gratitude that we noticed features of her practice that she had been working to improve in her teaching:

It was encouraging that in such a short period of time it was evident that there are many supports being implemented. I have been working with my students on their self-efficacy and growth mindset. Thank you for noticing that the learning environment is conducive to supporting students through their journey with mathematics.

#### ***Highlighting Productive Practices That Observed Teachers May Not Have Recognized***

The next two quotes highlight how focusing on teachers' current productive practices can help to encourage teachers to continue to enact the practices and to better appreciate why those practices are important for students' learning. For example, Brook shared, "The debrief was helpful and gave me insight into my own instruction that I had not necessarily considered." Kate reflected, "The debrief was great. I felt so flattered by the things that the other teachers noticed and I honestly didn't think of half of the things that were brought up. It was great to hear some positives and good things." In both cases, the teachers shared that they had not recognized important features of their practice as beneficial, so sharing those practices explicitly is critical so that teachers continue to enact them.

#### ***Importance of Trust***

Finally, Jane shared a perspective that mirrored our goals:

I am open to being evaluated this way more often. I think that after a few of these confidence-boosting debriefs, I would want to request the same group observe me and tell me what I could improve upon. If I build a relationship with a group of observers that have first recognized my good teaching habits, I'd be more willing to accept feedback about what I could do better.

This relationship-building to which Jane referred is what we believe is necessary for supporting teachers to grow. We believe that teachers can grow from gaining a better understanding about why the practices they are doing are productive and by being recognized explicitly for engaging in these practices. We also anticipate that these same teachers will seek out additional resources, opportunities to grow, and feedback once they have developed positive relationships with those who are observing them.

## **AFFIRMING LEARNING WALKS COMPARED TO OTHER KINDS OF CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS**

When compared to other kinds of classroom observation or learning walks, four features stand out. First, visits last only 10–15 minutes as opposed to spending an entire class period observing a lesson, for example, as in a lesson study. This approach allows teachers an opportunity to see several classrooms in a relatively short period of time. Second, debriefs are first conducted within the small group, and later, the host teacher leader debriefs individually with each teacher who was observed. This method of conducting debriefs allows the host teacher opportunities to rehearse debriefing and to hear from the visitors about which practices they noticed and why they are critical for student learning. The initial debriefs often last as long or longer than the observation. Third, the observation protocol and the debrief is focused entirely on positive examples of the practices as opposed to having the teacher share what changes they would make in the lesson if they were to do it again or to offer suggestions for improvement. By focusing on positive practices, teachers trust that the observers will appreciate the good work that they are doing, build collegiality, and provide a window for teachers to recognize and continue to enact the positive practices. Fourth, teachers at a school site can observe all of the target practices if they take part in the learning walks because teachers observe multiple classrooms, and so there is usually an opportunity to observe all of the targeted practices. Also, observing many teachers and identifying only positive practices sends a message that every teacher has features of their practice from which other teachers can learn.

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR THOSE WHO ENACT AFFIRMING LEARNING WALKS**

We offer three suggestions for those who would like to enact Affirming Learning Walks. First, design an observation protocol with best practices from your field. One excellent option is to use a protocol that focuses on the eight NCUST practices (Johnson et al., 2019). Next, be sure that teachers and observers are clear on what they are looking for and how the debrief should unfold—by understanding best practices of interest and focusing solely on the positive. One option is to practice an observation and debrief with a trusted colleague or through watching videos of classroom teachers and role-playing a debrief. Third, for those who are concerned that teachers will not grow if there is not a next-steps phase or an areas-of-improvement phase, remind them of the many opportunities teachers will have to see others' practices and reflect on those. As it turns out, debriefs are substantial even without the next-steps phase, and at the same time, focusing on the positive encourages teachers to do more of the productive teaching moves while promoting a culture of trust.

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**DONNA ROSS**, PhD, is a Science Educator in the School of Teacher Education at San Diego State University. Her major research interests lie in the area of teacher leadership and teachers' enactment of NGSS practices. Email: [DLRoss@sdsu.edu](mailto:DLRoss@sdsu.edu)

**LISA LAMB**, PhD, is a Mathematics Educator in the School of Teacher Education at San Diego State University. Her major research interests lie in the area of teacher professional noticing and students' conceptions of integers. Email: [Lisa.Lamb@sdsu.edu](mailto:Lisa.Lamb@sdsu.edu)

**JOSEPH JOHNSON**, PhD, is Emeritus Dean & Professor in the College of Education at San Diego State University. His major research interests lie in the area of leadership and teaching practices in America's best urban schools. Email: [jjohnson@sdsu.edu](mailto:jjohnson@sdsu.edu)

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