



“The Look” in Teacher Performance Evaluation

Peggy Ann Howard

University of Alberta

At different stages in their careers teachers undergo formal evaluations. These evaluations are usually based on classroom observation. The experience of having an observer, usually the principal, come into the classroom, is one collectively shared by teachers. It may be experienced like this.

The Anticipation

It started right after Christmas with a memo in my mailbox. It said, “I’ll be in to see you Friday.” Oh my God, I thought. Friday! A flutter? A knot? Was it really there? Surely not. Not after all these years.

As a student teacher, that memo would have thrown me into a flurry of activity, dusting shelves, sorting papers, cleaning desks, putting up a new bulletin board, anything to spruce up the classroom for the grand inspection. I would have put a red circle around Friday on my calendar, and had a *very* special lesson planned for the big day. Now, 10 years later, I sit here at my desk, thinking some of those same thoughts, perhaps not with quite the same intensity, but that are nevertheless there. Despite the many evaluations I have gone through, I am starting to feel uncomfortable.

I feel confident about my abilities and comfortable with my students, so why the uneasiness? What is gnawing at me? I am surprised at how ruffled I am feeling. I have had lots of visitors in my classroom, and several formal evaluations. In fact, I have been called a model teacher. Yet, at this moment, I do not feel very sure of myself. It is still four days away and already there is an uneasiness here that I can not put my finger on. Ironically, I had been the one to say, “Come whenever you like. I won’t do anything special.” But now I am starting to wonder. This isn’t going to be just another ordinary day.

I thought that I might put a little extra effort into Friday, have something just a little special planned to do. In some ways I am looking forward to having my principal come in to visit me. This is one of those rare opportunities to show off—to shine. I could use what I picked up at

the last conference to show that I was current, or tell a joke or two to prove that I am not really that nervous, or just hang around the staff room a little more, to show that I am not overly bothered by Friday. But the truth is, I am bothered, and I am annoyed at myself for being so.

The staff room is an interesting place at evaluation time. I have seen colleagues come to work a little more dressed up than usual, walking a little more briskly than normal, trying to seem a little brighter, and I would think, "Oh, this must be *their* day." Joyce would talk incessantly about it and just about drive us crazy. We wanted her turn to be over just as much as she did. Craig would try to slough it off as if it were nothing more important than a visit from the janitor. And Joan, well, she just wished the whole thing was over. You could always tell, though, when it was that time of year, about mid-February. Teachers would start to clean up their act a bit, look for a jazzy bulletin board display, and add a few more marks to their mark books. The air seemed to change a bit, as if there were tiny electric currents somewhere close to the surface. Nerves were a little raw, tempers a bit short.

It was the kind of thing you didn't talk about unless somebody else brought it up first, or else you would have to endure weeks of interminable babble about how nervous someone was, or how they wished so and so would be away ill that day. Some would joke. Some would be very critical, and some just plain mad: "a complete waste of time," they would say, or "I'll have to water down the whole thing so that *he* (meaning the principal) can understand it." More often than not, though, the conversation would center around whose day it was this week, or whose turn it was next. Now I wonder if it shows on me like it does on everyone else.

My principal doesn't seem to like his role in performance evaluation much either. He grumbles and groans and complains about how much time it takes. He says he enjoys "seeing the students," but where does that leave me? A strange bird, "performance evaluation."

The Preparation

I cannot deny that Friday is looking different now. When I brush my teeth it is there. When I drive to work it is there. I get into my car in the morning thinking, "Only three more days to go," as if it were some sort of countdown. I seem to gauge my week and my days by Friday now. Come Thursday I make sure I have my clothes laid out. I warn the sitter that I will be at her house about half an hour early. I make sure the car is filled with gas, everything to be ready for Friday. I think about the questions I will ask, and try to imagine all the what-ifs and what-could-go-wrongs so that I will not be caught off guard.

I remember my superintendent's first visit. He couldn't find my mark sheet. Now I make sure it sits front and center and is strategically

labeled MARK BOOK. Funny, that happened many years ago, and it is one of the first things I think about now.

Friday!

I awake long before the alarm is supposed to ring and still feel tired. I wonder how I will feel at 3:30 today. I don't eat much breakfast, especially the kind of foods that may cause my stomach to make all those weird and wonderful noises when it is bound to be very, very quiet in the room.

I stand guard for him in the hallway, not sure why. When he finally does show up (about 20 minutes late), I can't help but catch my breath at the sight of him in my doorway. He seems bigger somehow, taller than his six foot two. Instantly I feel guilty wondering if he knew that I had been watching for him. I notice his tie. Bright red. He never wears a tie. He is the kind of man who says he only wears them to weddings and funerals. That throws me a little.

But my principal is generally OK. We have known each other for several years. We wave good morning to each other from down the hallway. We have shared some happy times and some sad times. He jokes and teases me about my flopped desserts that I have taken to staff functions, but he eats them anyway. I have argued with this man and he would listen, so why the flutters, why the sudden urge to flee?

He says his hellos to the class, tells me to go ahead with whatever I am doing, just to pretend he isn't there. Oh, sure, I think. Bloody likely.

He walks to the back table, puts down his briefcase, and tries to get comfortable in a chair built for someone three foot six. I can't help but smile to myself. The tables in my room are also made for little people, so his feet stick way out. That's when I notice his shoes, brand new, hardly a scuff on the sole. His feet seem bigger than before, and he is having trouble finding a place to put them. I should feel sorry for him, but I must admit I am enjoying his discomfort.

I look at him now. He is no longer just the man from down the hall, but different somehow: distant, cool perhaps. He doesn't smile. He just sits there watching me. Out come the pen and paper, and it starts.

Feeling the Look

The good-morning look is not the one we share now. I start to feel really uncomfortable, like one of those floating ducks at a shooting gallery you see in the midway, back and forth, back and forth. I feel like the target. His eyes are right on me. They follow me around the room wherever I move. His looking isn't a comfortable, friendly kind of looking. It is not a mother's watching either that says, "I'm sorry, I know how you must feel." This look is not nurturing or protecting me. It is not a pedagogic look that is open to my possibilities. It sets me apart. It puts me at a

distance. I wish I could step aside and use a hand puppet, the kind of thing counselors do when they talk to kids. I feel cloistered, as if the room has suddenly become smaller and narrower. I feel as if his eyes are sitting right here on my shoulder scrutinizing everything I do, every move I make.

I begin to feel as if I am not quite all there, as if I am sort of floating. It is really strange. It is me all right, but it doesn't feel like me. Part of me is gone. Part of me has run for cover. It is an awful feeling. All the little things I doubt about myself start to come to the fore. All my vulnerabilities are set out here for him to look at. And for me too. I really do not like this. I have to push those thoughts away, to keep them down, so that I can concentrate on what I am supposed to do. But I have two jobs now. Not just the one that he has come to observe, but also the one that I am fighting not to do. No wonder I feel so tired. My students ask me why my face is so red!

I had invited him to come into my room, but I do not like his looking at me. Sometimes when I think I'm looking really good, or I've just had my hair done, I don't mind people looking at me. In fact, those are times one likes to be looked at. This wasn't the kind of looking that my son does when he inspects his hairdo in the mirror on picture day. This looking seems thrust on me, and I feel trapped by it. I feel unraveled, out of tune, not quite in balance, as if I want to stand closer to my desk. I notice other things about me too. My arm seems heavier when I lift it to the board. I watch it go there, something I do not normally do. It seems forever to get the word written out on the blackboard. I feel clumsy, and I misspell the word. I have to grip the chalk more tightly. When I erase the error, I leave an awful, greasy streak on the board. I wish that it would hurry and disappear. The cord on the projector fights me. My shoes make too much noise. My voice sounds as if it belongs to someone else. I can actually hear myself talking, as if the words are coming out of my mouth one by one. I feel my face get hot. Awkward, disoriented, a visitor to my own body, a body that I am not normally aware of: now it seems to betray me.

When I must concentrate on my body, to check and see how I am doing something, then surely I will falter. But when I can forget my body, I can do wonderful things. My fingers will fly across the keys when I look beyond the keystrokes to the melody that unfolds. Being noticed in this sense is pleasant. The look is welcomed. There is even a showing off for this kind of look. I feel extended. My possibilities are opened in pushing off the limits of this look.

Becoming Object

But now my position has changed. Frustrated, vulnerable, I am no longer in charge of my-self. I have become his look, the object of his

look. I begin to watch myself as I imagine he must see me. It is as if I have moved outside myself and am looking down on myself, watching like an out-of-body experience. Sartre (1956) said, "Because I am now the object I experience a subtle alienation of all my possibilities, which are now associated with objects of the world.... I am no longer master of the situation" (p. 260). Is this what my principal is seeing? Is he seeing me as an object that he can measure?

I am conscious of this splitting. I feel that I have become two. I magnify and scrutinize everything I say and do. The silent talking I do with myself becomes louder and interferes with what I am trying to say to my class. I struggle to keep my inner talk quiet, to keep my own coaching in abeyance. Normally there is no need to coach, to talk to myself about what I must do. I just do what is needed. Here it seems that everything I do must be questioned. He becomes the Other, outside myself. "By the mere appearance of the Other, I am put in the position of passing judgment on myself as on an object, for it is as an object that I appear to the Other" (Sartre, 1956, p. 189). I stand outside my self now to take measure of my self.

Being Measured

I had dressed for this occasion. But now I feel transparent, as if he is looking right through me to other things in the room. Now he seems to pay more attention to the gum wrappers on the floor than to me. I wonder if that matters. Perhaps the gum wrappers are saying something about me. Suddenly I have this awful image of being covered in gum wrappers, and that is how he is measuring me.

I had worked to present my world to him. I had polished and rehearsed my lesson, gone over and over it. I had the watertight plan, every word down verbatim. There would be no slip-ups, no mistakes. There was so much on the line here. The stakes were high, and I wasn't about to risk anything. Now that piece of paper on his table has "upped the ante." His checklist lights his way into my world, but I am not sure that he really sees me. His boxes and numbers are already there to say something about me. I feel that I must perform in relevance to those silly little boxes. Is that how I am to be measured, by check marks in a box?

That is how I feel, no more important than my desk, or my chair. In this *objectness* I feel less human, less worthy. I am on display to be measured, to be given a value, a grade. I am held up here to be a measure of his worth. His worth? It is not *his* worth that is to be measured. It is *mine*. How did he become my measure? I seem to have lost *my* worth. I want to be in a position where I am in charge, where I am the one who says, "Yes, that's good," or "No, you could do this a little better." I really do not like him sitting there passing judgment on me.

When I am aware that I am being judged, I become uncertain, unnatural. His looking deprives me of my doing, and I must concentrate on how to do it rather than on the doing of it. I measure every step and try to double guess what he will think, or like, or want to see. My students, who should be my concern, are not my concern. My concern is him, to please him. Of two minds now, my work is twice as hard. I seem to have to work twice as hard to accomplish half as much. Time goes so slowly, and yet it goes so fast. I don't seem to be able to gauge it just right.

He looks up now and again, but mostly he just writes, and writes, and writes. I wonder what his pages say? What value will he give me? How is it that I can stand up here, of value to my students, or so some parents tell me, and feel that I am devalued?

Regaining Subjectivity

I set my class to their assignment now, and I sit at the front of the room with a small group of children. I leave the rest to read independently at their desks. Jason, a quiet child, sits at the end of the row where he is most comfortable. The principal's table is just behind Jason's desk. I see Jason get up from his desk, his finger glued to a word he cannot read. He leans out of his desk toward the principal. Jason tilts his book so the principal can see. Silence. Jason leans a little closer. Silence. Jason leans closer still and points harder at the word, not looking up from his book. "Go ask your teacher!" Jason points harder still. "Go ask your teacher!" For a moment there is blankness, and then it hits Jason. The word he is pointing to cannot possibly say, "goaskyourteacher." In that instant Jason hears what is said to him. He looks up. His mouth begins to open. "Jason," I whisper, motioning with my finger, "come here."

He comes to me, brow slightly wrinkled. "Sensitive," I tell him, my finger close to his. "Sen-si-tive," I say more slowly, smiling, not looking up from the word. Jason moves back to his desk now, my eyes trailing after him. I glance at the principal whose pen lifts from his paper. He too is watching Jason. Our eyes meet and quickly he gets back to his writing.

"Do you think we could do that?" Rochelle asks, tugging at my arm. "Rochelle, what was that?" I ask, looking at her as if for the first time today. "What did you say?" I ask again. Suddenly I want to say, "Good morning Rochelle. How are you today?" the way that I normally did. I want to start again, the way that I usually started my days.

His sitting there at the back does not seem to matter now. Jason reminds me why I am here.

Getting the Evaluation

He says his goodbyes rather simply, and leaves. Now I stand here feeling that there is a gap I need to fill, as if I should explain what has happened, even though I have prepared my students for his coming. There should have been no surprises.

The rest of the day goes by in a blur, anticlimatic. I try to catch a quiet moment here and there where I can replay what I have done, to get a sense of how the lesson went. Has it gone well? What will he say?

He said we should meet in his office after school to discuss the evaluation. I walk down the hallway now wondering what he has seen. I don't think there will be any surprises, and yet ... The butterflies are back.

The paper is sitting there on his desk when I walk in, flat and white and thin. I scan the paper looking for what, I am not quite sure. "Uses good questioning strategies, yes." "Challenges the students, yes." "Creates a safe environment, yes." "Invites student interaction, yes." And then I find it. Tucked obscurely in the middle, "Colleagues find you somewhat reserved." Reserved? Reserved! What does that mean? Unfriendly, cool, snobbish? Does it matter that I don't talk very much, or that I don't enjoy exchanging recipes in the staff room? My God, is this what I am? Reserved? Will I forever be known as reserved?

I do not seem to read the rest of the paper, although I am sure that my eyes do. I can feel them travel down the page, oblivious of what is there. Funny, how that comment affects me. He says that everything is fine and that there really is no need for a second visit. That is a relief, I guess.

I walk back to my empty classroom, glad that everyone has gone home. It seems that I need some time to put all the pieces together. Except for that one little comment, I guess all has gone pretty well. I hold my evaluation in my hands. I have been called a "model teacher" again. Not very original. Those words do not feel much like me. The comments, the numbers, they do not feel much like me either. I stare at my copy of the paper for a long while. I can see the faces of my students and hear the hum of our classroom behind those words, but I wonder, has he? Somehow my students have become colorless, and so have I.

Afterward

Sometimes we get numbers, ones, twos, or threes. For figure skaters those numbers might mean something, 5.7 for technique, 5.9 for artistic merit. But for me numbers just don't work. They say nothing about me or what I can do. Reducing me to a number or a grade on a checklist is not who I am. And yet I prize that piece of paper that calls me "model." When I leave this school or apply for a new position, that piece

of paper and all the other ones like it will be there included in my résumé, part of my dossier.

For the most part evaluations are not something we share. They are something we keep kind of secret, even when they're good. They stay locked in someone's cabinet, and that gives us a certain comfort. But these things are never really secret. Even the look on the teacher's face after an evaluation can tell you that. If they're up, it probably went well, and if they're not ... Even a so-so report seems like a failure. It has to be really good to be good. There is no middle ground here, no average. No one wants to be just average.

If I am having a bad day, I might think of my evaluation. Or I might wonder if someone in central office has opened my file lately. I wonder who might have read it, or if the secretary who typed it talks too much. Sometimes I lie awake at night and wonder.

What Has it all Meant?

We prepare for evaluation day, try to look our best, suffer through the nervous stomachs and sweaty palms. We try to get a handle on why we feel so strange and disjointed, why we're bothered by being watched. It seems like such an innocent thing to have someone come into our classroom. And yet we feel vulnerable and perhaps even violated. However subtle, our relationship with our evaluator changes. It seems that we have crossed the line somewhere in all of this. I have been judged. It wasn't to be like this. I was to show him everything that I could do, and all that I could be. And yet I could not even be there for my students, let alone for me.

I do not feel the same about my principal. I cannot look at him in that same old way. He looks different to me now. Oh sure, we'll continue to joke and talk about school, but deep inside I will not forget how I feel today, out of control, a stranger to myself, uncomfortable in what I do and who I am. The possibilities that I feel and know I have vanish, just as surely as that greasy finger print on the board.

But my students bring me back. They reconnect me with what brought me to teaching many years ago. I hold on to that belonging that is not there on his piece of paper. I see the look on Jason's face and hope that he has already forgotten the incident, that somewhere deep inside him his body is remembering the care and compassion I feel for him in our fingers almost touching. I see that look that judged me, that took a piece of me and laid it on the paper, the look that left me cold and empty, filled with ambivalence.

I take home that piece of paper and shut it deep inside my drawer. What began as a memo in my mailbox, and ended as something committed to history in my personnel file, is not really an ending. The

experience of evaluation opens questions that go beyond the schizophrenic existence of being “there” for my students, and “there” for my evaluator, beyond the nagging anxiety, the performance, the measure of technique (Brophy, 1984).

Understanding What Lies Beneath the Mask

As teachers we know that when someone enters our classrooms the constellation changes. We understand that having to deny the creativity, spontaneity, and intuition in the moment of teaching, reduces teaching to measurable functions. But it reduces teachers as well. It reduces us to objects. As objects, our position changes. In false position to ourselves and to our students we become objects to be measured. It is only through being object that we can be given a value, assigned a worth, some “thing” that can be assessed.

Beyond the public story of evaluation is a private experience that hinges on “the look.” When anticipation gnaws at us and we worry about what to wear, when our evaluator looks larger than life and we feel alien to our own bodies, when we feel transparent and forget our students, evaluation speaks to something powerful in our life world that unearths us. Uncomfortable in being watched, being objectified, being something that we are not, is this how evaluation measures the worth of teachers?

Evaluation sits outside of teaching, and outside of who we are. Like the gum wrappers and the numbers that say so little about our teaching, evaluation speaks about us as object, not as subject. Our evaluators who come “in to see” can not “see” us as subject. A subject cannot be evaluated. A subject cannot be given worth. A subject is beyond measure, invaluable, beyond worth. Only when we become the object of another’s looking do we become an object that can be measured. By being measurable we become accountable, and by being accountable we become part of the larger system of prediction and control, part of the system that purchased us, the system that will decide just how much we are worth. What relation, then, has evaluation to pedagogy, to the relationship between teacher and student? What value is evaluation in measuring what it cannot?

What has happened here? What lies beneath the mask? More than “empty comment” and more than a “plea for understanding” (Brophy, 1984) the pedagogic relationship between teachers and students, evaluation points to something else. A deontologized language (van Manen, 1977) that describes what teachers do says very little about what teachers are or what they become during evaluation. As part of a teacher’s job, performance evaluation may be welcomed, it may be resisted, but most surely it is remembered. Understanding what is beneath this mask must begin *in* experience, from the *lived experience*

of being evaluated. That experience points to the phenomenon of what evaluation really is.

References

- Brophy, V. (1984). *Evaluation as empty comment*. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Alberta.
- Sartre, J.-P. (1956). *Being and nothingness*. New York: Philosophical Library.
- van Manen, M. (1977). Linking ways of knowing with ways of being practical. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 6, 205-228.