INTRODUCTION

As we introduce *The Transparent Teacher* and teacher-driven observation to audiences of teachers and administrators, we find that they are interested in hearing the origins of this unique teacher-driven observation process. We’ll share with you now the short narrative we offer them because it illustrates what is possible when a teacher takes charge of her learning and becomes transparent in her practice. Set during evaluation time when Trent was a brand-new high school assistant principal, this story provides the vision for what it means to take charge. In this story, you will find our motivations for writing this book and the power this process has to shift the culture of teaching. We predict that you’ll see connections between the narrative and your own experiences as a teacher.

SHIFTING TEACHER OBSERVATIONS

I had been a high school assistant principal for all of three days when the principal gave me the list. I felt my heartbeat quicken as my eyes scanned the names of twenty-two teachers I was assigned to evaluate that year. My situation as an administrator holding this list was unique: several years back, I had been a new teacher at this same school, and a number of these teachers had mentored me. In my eyes, they were masters of the trade.

I was expected to make two visits to each classroom over the course of the school year. The first was an informal but scheduled observation, where I would observe the class at an appointed time and recommend areas for improvement. Later in the year I would drop in for the formal evaluation, during which I’d look for progress in the improvement area the teacher and I had chosen.

I’m not sure why the principal recommended I first observe Shelly, known as the best math teacher in the district. She was intimidating and really, really good. As the head of the union, she had both experience and influence. Maybe he thought that if I could survive this one, I’d be on my way. Maybe he told her to take it easy on me a little. Who knows? Frankly, I was less worried about the formal evaluation than about the first observation because the first required me to suggest areas for improvement without the structure of a rubric or set of criteria.
Most of my teachers, including Shelly, were teaching subjects I’d never taught, and many of them had far more classroom experience than I did. I lay awake in bed wondering how the observations might go and what it would take for me to add value to their teaching. Certainly I’d need to come up with something useful—if not brilliant—in order to prove myself as an effective administrator.

It came to me the next morning as I was driving to work. In graduate school, I’d taken a class that was directed toward administrators and described the importance of collecting objective data in the classroom. Instead of walking into these classrooms and observing whatever caught my attention, I would assign myself the role of data collector. I decided to take this idea one step further: because there are so many potential data sources in the classroom, I would focus specifically on collecting data that the teacher wanted. That approach felt exciting to me. It meant that I would need to communicate with each of these teachers before our observation and ask them what they were focusing on improving in their teaching.

When Shelly knocked on my office door the morning before our scheduled observation, I sat up straight. She sat down and crossed her legs carefully as I launched into an explanation of my plan to collect data during our observation in an area she was focused on improving. Her eyes brightened as she caught hold of the idea and told me, “In my classes recently, I’ve been focusing on how to improve my questioning. My goal is to engage more students in my basic math classes, and I believe that asking more application questions will help me accomplish that.”

“I follow you completely,” I responded. “Would it help you if I script all the application questions you ask during our observation?”

“I like that idea. Do you think you could also script what the students say in response? Then we could have a conversation afterward about what’s actually going on in the classroom. We’ll probably see some next steps I can take based on the data,” she concluded, taking charge. “I’m up for that!”

I responded, making a mental note to brush up on Bloom’s taxonomy before the observation, “See you in third period!” She nodded, smiled, and went off to class.

I arrived at her room with confidence born of clear purpose: I knew exactly what I was going to do during that observation, and I knew that it would add value. Over the next hour, I drained the ink from my pen, earnest in my commitment to support her by gathering data relevant to the area she had designated. As quickly as my ears picked up her questions and translated them to my fingers, she gathered responses from student after student.
Having filled my assignment with zest, I was equally confident when we debriefed the observation after school. Sitting in her classroom, we shared an extremely productive, data-based conversation. Because the data I had collected were at the heart of our conversation, she didn’t feel threatened: we were reviewing teaching data, not evaluating the teacher. As we looked at the questions and student responses I’d scripted, we quickly noted the following:

- Around five students attempted to answer each application question. It took this many attempts at answering the questions for someone to respond appropriately.
- Of the ten application questions she asked in the one-hour period, fifteen of her twenty-eight students had attempted to answer one. This meant that many of the same students were attempting to answer the questions.
- The ten correct answers were given by four different students.

Shelly asked for my insight as an observer: “What were the other thirteen students doing during the lesson? Why were only four students able to answer my application questions?”

As we discussed the data, Shelly suggested a few things she could try. “Maybe if I chunk the questions into more digestible parts and begin to require everyone to answer them, I’ll find the real value in these application questions.” She fleshed out her plans and bounced ideas off me as she considered how the data I collected could help her improve. I was greatly relieved that I didn’t have to be a math expert or even a teaching expert to be a productive observer.

Our interaction had a positive impact on my capacity as an observer. I began to take on the role of data collector, and the teachers I observed felt my commitment to helping them do better what they were already doing.

At Shelly’s retirement party several years later, we talked about that observation experience. She laughed when I admitted how nervous I’d been and thanked me for making a difference in her professional development that year: “You know, when I learn a new strategy at a conference, there is a fifty-fifty chance it simply won’t transfer to an effective practice in my classroom. Now I’ve found that when I have a colleague observe me implement a strategy in my classroom with my students, the likelihood that it sticks is almost 100 percent.” As I nodded, she continued, “Working with you, I really felt that I took ownership of the observation process. You helped me improve an area I was already focused on, and the data you collected showed us the next steps.”
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As an educator, I took several important lessons from this experience with Shelly, and these lessons serve as the foundation for this book:

- The main ingredient for an effective observation experience is the disposition of the observed teacher. If the observed teacher wants to learn, the possibilities are unlimited.

- Being an effective observer is within everyone’s reach. I didn’t have to be brilliant or know something Shelly didn’t. Most important, I didn’t even have to be an administrator. I simply needed to be sincere in my desire to help, earnest in my data collection, and willing to engage in dialogue about the data.

- Shelly took charge and moved her professional development into her own classroom, in large part by becoming a transparent teacher with her classroom open to observation. She owned her professional development by declaring an area of focus and enlisting me to gather data. Clarifying these roles eliminated awkwardness from the postobservation debriefing: I had simply gathered data to help her answer her own questions about her teaching. Since I collected data rather than trying to opine about her teaching, we had a productive, nonthreatening conversation about teaching and learning in her classroom.

Since this time, I have founded Education Direction, an organization that teaches these and other data-driven education principles to hundreds of schools and districts.

THE TRANSPARENT TEACHER: TAKING CHARGE OF YOUR INSTRUCTION WITH PEER-COLLECTED CLASSROOM DATA

That title and subhead are a mouthful. To give you an idea of what we’re really saying here, we’d like to explain the words we chose.

The teachers we work with often describe feeling frustrated with the professional development they receive. The strategies may be interesting, but they don’t work consistently in the classroom. Professional development topics can be innovative and groundbreaking, but much gets lost in the space between the convention center (or where teachers received professional development training) and the classroom (where they put the strategies into practice).

This space is our niche—the gap we’re bridging. We support teachers in taking charge. When teachers take charge of their professional development by moving it directly into their classrooms, they take charge of their own growth, effectiveness, and even overall job satisfaction. Using the techniques we present in this book for
teacher-driven observation, teachers lead their professional learning inside their own classrooms.

Breaking down the professional isolation characteristic of the profession and opening up our classrooms—becoming transparent teachers—is a necessary part of moving professional development to our classrooms and into the context in which we work each day. As a teacher leading your own teacher-driven observation (TDO), you’ll invite your peers to collaborate with you in observations in order to collect data. When you open your classroom to your peers, creating transparency around the teaching and learning that occurs there, you’ll set the stage for your colleagues to collect classroom data. Having these data is like having eyes in the back of your head: they allow you to see into the blind spots of teaching that occur for every teacher. Instructing is a 100 percent mental capacity endeavor, so you miss details like how many times a student got out of his seat or what questions the students asked during the lesson. You answered those questions, but you don’t know ultimately how many questions you posed, or whether the student questions reflected their collective understanding or confusion related to the topic.

Taking charge means that you decide what areas you’d like to focus on in your teaching. TDO gives you the tools to answer your questions as you collaborate with your colleagues. Taking charge means that you control who comes into your classroom and when. You guide the meetings and keep the data collected. We invite you to take charge of your teaching and situate your professional development in your classroom by reading this book.

**HOW TO USE THIS BOOK**

As you dive into the following chapters, you’ll hear the voices and read about the experiences of hundreds of teachers engaged in TDO. We hope that the process offers you, as it has for them, a way of leading transformation in your teaching and improving student learning.

*The Transparent Teacher* will be a rich resource for you in implementing TDO. So that you get the most out of it, the remainder of this Introduction describes the three parts of the book, gives you an idea of where to start reading, and details key chapter features. It also highlights the chapter summaries and study questions at the end of the book that may prove relevant for your personal review or for a book study group.

**Parts 1 Through 3**

Part 1, “Preparing,” explores the purpose of TDO and topics relevant to planning for its implementation in chapters 1 and 2. Together these chapters provide a context
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for what TDO can do for your teaching and the professional culture in your school. They also address the preparation that best sets you up for success. Through the exploration of these topics, you’ll meet Heather, a seventh-grade math teacher who is looking for a meaningful way to apply her professional learning to the unique context of her classroom. By the end of part 1, you will be ready to dig into the specific steps of TDO.

Chapters 3 through 5 in part 2, “Implementing,” detail each of the three steps of TDO. Each chapter explains how to engage in one step of the process, providing examples and tips that support implementation. You’ll continue to follow Heather’s journey as she engages in the TDO process. Her experiences provide a comprehensive, insider view of the process from start to finish. You’ll also read about how other teachers have applied the core principles of TDO in their work. By the time you finish part 2, you’ll have a clear vision of how TDO can support your learning and the instruction in your classroom. You may even feel prepared to begin a round of TDO.

Chapters 6 through 8 in part 3, “Sustaining,” aim to answer your questions, from, “How do I find the time to implement this process?” to, “How might this process look across my grade-level team?” Principals who are interested in kick-starting TDO schoolwide will find particular value in chapter 7, the only chapter written directly to administrators. The final chapter provides a narrative of a large, comprehensive high school that implemented TDO across a faculty of 170 teachers. This case study illustrates the challenges and successes that can occur when teachers engage in TDO.

Finally, the epilogue examines how the practice of TDO relates to the work of professional learning communities (PLCs), an increasingly common collaborative structure in schools. If PLCs exist among your faculty, the epilogue will provide value in examining how TDO can support your existing work. Even if a PLC structure is not in place, this chapter will help you see how TDO can propel collaborative work in your school.

**Where to Start Reading**

Your role in your school and your existing comfort with having observers collaborate with you about your teaching will inform how you use this book. Teachers and administrators who are brand new to the concept of TDO will find it most helpful to begin with parts 1 and 2, moving on to part 3 when they are ready for implementation. If you’re intrigued by the concept and ready to learn more about the practices themselves, you may find it most helpful to begin with part 2 in order to build your understanding of the process itself.
**Chapter Features**

Each chapter contains text boxes that highlight key points. These points are the big things to remember about TDO and are useful for in-text navigation and review.

Each chapter also contains at least two boxes titled “A Note to Principals” that highlight information that is relevant from the point of view of principals. Principals who are reading this book might flip through the chapters to read those boxes first and then look for more detail as is relevant. Because chapter 7 is dedicated to addressing principals, there are no principal boxes in that chapter.

A “Common Missteps” section follows the main body of each chapter in most of the chapters in parts 2 and 3. We’ve culled these from the experiences of hundreds of teachers across dozens of schools. You’ll find it helpful to take note of these not only during your initial reading but also to revisit these as you engage in the practice—both in its infancy and development.

**Chapter Summaries and Study Questions**

If you’ve read this book before or just prefer to begin with more of a quick point version, flip to the back of the book and read the chapter summaries provided there. These summaries may give you an idea of which chapter you’d like to refer to for greater detail. We’ve also provided study questions that connect directly with each chapter. These questions are designed to encourage deeper thinking about the concepts in the chapters and promote personal application. Any teacher working with TDO can benefit from thinking through these questions. They can also be used in more formal book study gatherings or graduate school courses.

**FINAL THOUGHTS**

We are confident that you’ll find in the pages ahead both the vision and the resources for creating a professional, job-embedded learning experience inside your own classroom that empowers you to take charge of your teaching and equips you to become a transparent teacher.