
Preface

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THE DOWNEY REFLECTIVE CONVERSATION AND CHANGING SYSTEM TEXTUAL ARCHITECTURE

The Imitators Don't Get It (or don't want it)

It has been said that “imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.” With respect to the Downey three-minute classroom walk-through (Downey, Steffy, English, Frase, & Poston, 2004), this has certainly been the case. When one surveys the educational marketplace today, there are myriad look-alikes, copycat, and knock-off versions of the Downey classroom walk-through approach. Upon close inspection, they all incorporate the basic structure of the Downey model, save one particular and distinctive feature: *the reflective conversation*.

There is a reason for this: The copycats and knock-offs have been done by those attracted primarily by the convenience of the walk-through concept—that is, a quick, truncated, postholed view of the classroom that does not require the time-intensive and often tedious methodology of longer versions of teacher evaluation and supervision encapsulated in legalistic protocols and clinical and scripted models of observation and formal follow-up conferences. The hectic life of most school site administrators today makes lengthy and intensive observational models increasingly impractical for typical teachers experiencing few problems, reserving longer approaches only for teachers who are really in trouble (see Frase, Downey, & Canciamilla, 1999).

The convenience of the Downey model was a real breakthrough on this increasingly turbulent landscape. Here was a way to gather short, time-lapse classroom snapshots and create a collage that then could be committed to paper when required by the formal, legalistic institutional requirements for traditional teacher evaluation practices. But the copycats and knock-offs bypassed the importance and radicalness of the reflective conversation, which is the heart of the Downey approach. They did so because embedded in the reflective conversation was a threat to traditional managerial authority and to the existing administrative power structure.

In short, resistance to the Downey reflective conversation can be visualized as a way to nullify any substantive change in the role of the classroom teacher in schools today and, hence, to preserve existing administrative hegemony. By *hegemony*, we mean the peculiar shape of power and power relations in schools and in the larger society.

Hegemony is a focus of constant struggle around points of greatest instability between classes and blocs, to construct or sustain or fracture alliances and relations of domination/subordination, which takes economic, political and ideological forms. (Fairclough, 1992, p. 92)

Thus, without the reflective conversation the walk-through, walk-about, learning walk, management by walking around, instructionally focused classroom walk-throughs, the Learning 24-7 walk-through, informally developed classroom walk-through, or whatever name has been given to the diluted version of the Downey model, are exercises in mere technical managerial efficiency. They are in the main, educational versions of the ideology developed by Frederick Taylor at the turn of the last century and called appropriately, *scientific management*. The purpose of Taylor's work was to give management more power and to rationalize the reduction of the costs of skilled labor by breaking tasks into more minute parts so that cheaper labor could be hired. In fact, this has been the approach used by many of the "pro-profit" models of schooling now employed in some of the nation's inner cities. This is what is meant by technical efficiency. The result was the reduction of the power in the labor force and the acquisition of a more permanent managerial authority in the workplace—in short, the domination of the workplace by management.

This book has been written to argue with greater clarity the importance, difference, and criticality of the reflective conversation not only as a way to improve teaching practice in classrooms, but as a way to democratize relationships within schools between teachers and administrators. We argue that it is in everyone's interest to further professionalize the work of classroom teaching in the nation's schools. Professionalization is the key to improved and enhanced competencies, skills, and understanding of

students and learning on the part of teachers as our schools become increasingly diverse—culturally, linguistically, and economically. But professionalization involves greater equalization of authority in schools as well as independence on the part of practitioners in them.

We proffer that teachers need increased latitude to determine instructional approaches to their work, and we see the reflective conversation as providing the means to that end. While none of the copycat and knock-off versions of the Downey model advocate increased administrative hegemony within schools outright, it is our contention that a failure to incorporate the democratization of relationships within the schools as embedded in the reflective conversation promote that end, even if unwittingly. We think it is a significant difference in the original Downey model and premise that the imitators have ignored because it is usually the administrative workforce that seizes the initiative with a walk-through model and begins to use it. Rarely has a walk-through model been proposed by teachers or their associations or unions. We think there is a reason for that, which will be explored next.

CONSIDERING THE GHOSTS IN THE CLOSET

Hegemony and Conflict Regarding Supervision and Evaluation in Schools

Walk-throughs in schools do not occur in a vacuum. Schools are contested places in our society. Such contestation occurs at the policy levels, administrative levels, and in schools on a daily basis. It is naïve to believe that schools and school systems are monochromatic politically. The resistance offered by teacher unions in some school systems where models of walk-throughs have been implemented or were proposed to be implemented, attests to the fact that something critical is going on. The Downey model is the only one out there that has been sensitive to this fact. Contestation is about power and control. When the classroom walk-through is reduced to scripted checklists to be tabulated at some future point to become a sort of summative judgment “laid on” a classroom teacher, the power and control of what teachers do in schools becomes a flash point. Because they represent an extension of administrative power in the traditional top-down model of imposed, authoritarian supervision (sometimes called “snoopervision”), walk-throughs can be visualized as a more efficient way to play the game of “gotcha.” In such situations, the emphasis is on what is going wrong, rather than the data from the walk-through becoming the fulcrum for a change in relationships and the elevation of the teacher into a professional role with much more independence in the school (and from the administration) as a result. This essential distinction

is effectively erased in the knock-offs and copycat versions of the Downey Walk-Through model. It attests to the fact that the “quickie” imitators see no change in the relationships between teachers and administrators in schools and have no agenda to promote the professionalism of the classroom teacher, nor do they see it as an objective of implementing a walk-through approach in the schools.

EXAMINING THE CLASSROOM WALK-THROUGH WITH REFLECTIVE INQUIRY AS A DISCURSIVE PRACTICE

One reason that learning how to engage in the professional, reflective conversation is difficult for administrators is that the language of professionalism and true collegiality is largely missing from the lexicon of contemporary administrative practices. These practices have been thoroughly captured by business and military metaphors. Such metaphors and models eschew professionalism and espouse and impose managerial hegemony (see Cuban, 2004; Emery & Ohanian, 2004). In short, the Downey imitators have shed the reflective conversation as important because it just doesn't fit into the dominant ideology at work in most school systems.

Fairclough (1992) defines ideology as

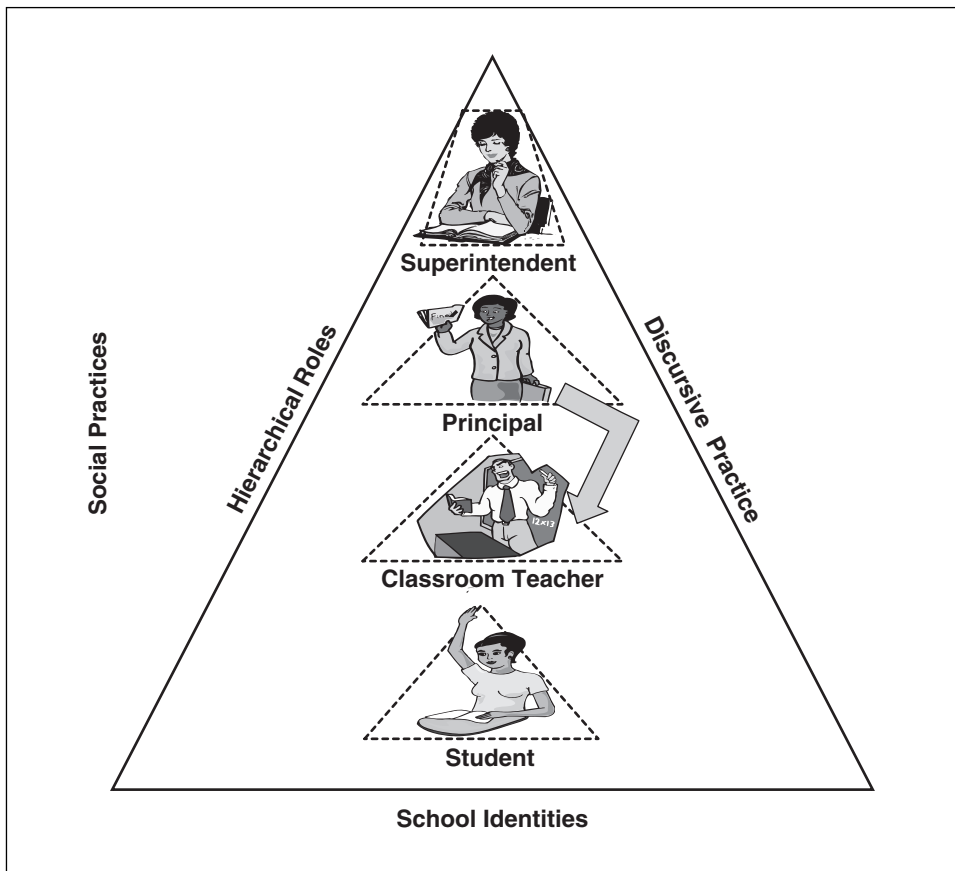
The significations/constructions of reality (the physical world, social relations, social identities), which are built into various dimensions of the forms/meanings of discursive practices, and which contribute to the production, reproduction or transformation of relations of domination. (p. 87)

The term *discursive practice*, taken from the writings of Michael Foucault (1972), means attention to how language and linguistic practices embedded in social contexts involving subordination and domination are used to produce and reproduce those forms in the larger society. And schools are time-honored social mechanisms for the reproduction of the social order, wars, inequalities, prejudices, biases, and all (see Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Katz, 1973). Conversation between principals and teachers occurs with relationships that are structured and uneven. The principal/teacher conversation involves the construction of social identities carefully crafted, legally defined, and reproduced again and again in school practices. In this sense, the roles and social identities of principals and teachers constitute a *discursive practice*—that is, a consistent way of talking, thinking, and acting within existing modes of subordination and domination in schools and in the larger society.

UNDERSTANDING THE THREE STAGES OF TRANSFORMATION WITH THE DOWNEY APPROACH

Moving to the Downey model of classroom walk-throughs usually occurs in stages. These match the normal “learning curve” of school administrators, who are not only learning a new language but also a new way of thinking about working with teachers as well. Figure P.1 illustrates the traditional and well-established top-down model of classroom observation and supervision that is dominant in nearly all public school systems today.

Figure P.1 Traditional Teacher Supervision Model of Top-Down Observation and Evaluation



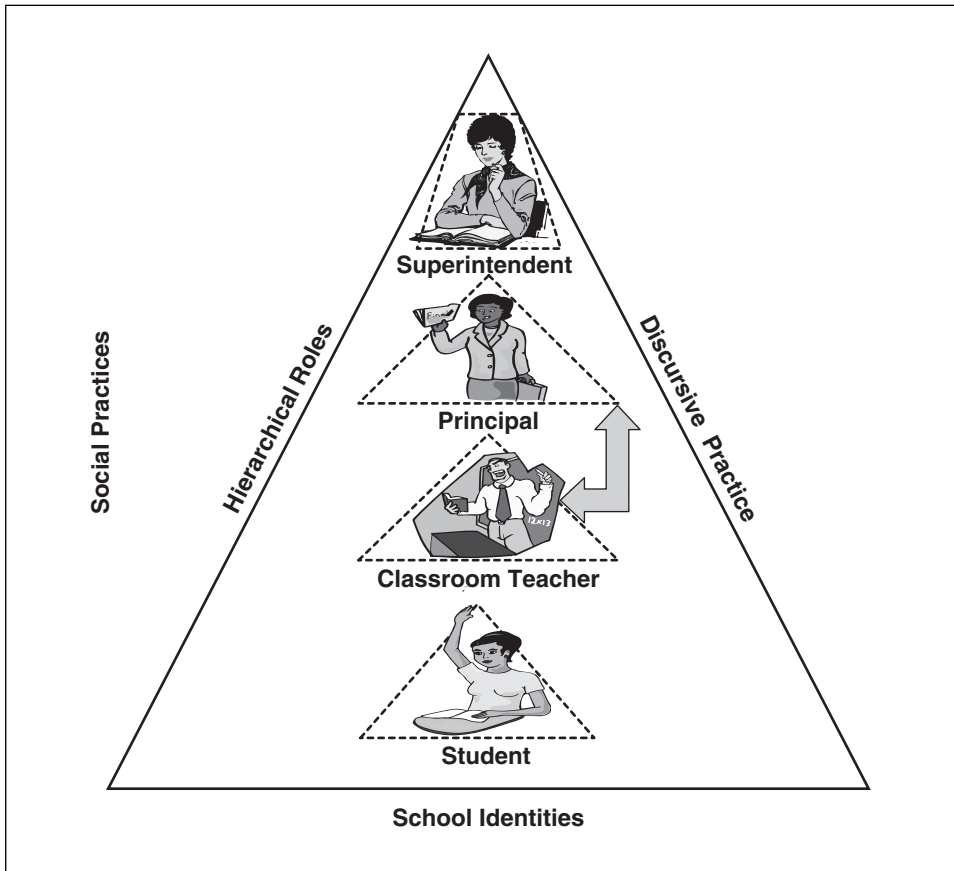
Social practices are constructed routines and relationships and encapsulate expectations as well as obligations and interactions. They make up the fabric of the macro social structure in which schools function in any society. In turn, schools incorporate constructed identities such as student, teacher, principal, and superintendent. In turn, these identities are cast into hierarchical relationships within roles that are arranged on continua of power. The concept of discursive practice includes the idea of forms of discourse, of which within institutions such as schools the practice of classroom observation and evaluation occurs. This form of the discourse is a kind of text, both spoken and written, and a form of a social practice. And in one sense, as Fairclough (1992) notes, "Discourse is a mode of action, one form in which people may act upon the world and especially upon each other, as well as a mode of representation" (p. 63). We examine the practice of the reflective conversation as a form of discourse and as a text.

The language school administrators typically use at the juncture of their relationships with teachers reveals assumptions about their role as the "boss" of the subunit in which teachers work. It usually reflects a one-way, minimalist, and institutionalized vision that views teaching primarily in terms of its adherence to generally accepted social norms and modes of action/reaction. Observations are primarily about gathering data to show conformance to existing or prevailing rules or procedures of the day. The principal's visit to a classroom is about managing conformance and is seen, and correctly so, as a measure of institutional control over what teachers are allowed to do and to think about in their work spaces known as classrooms. Classroom walk-throughs that do not include or emphasize anything other than a new way to gather "dip-stick" data at one point in time reinforce administrative and bureaucratic control of teachers' work.

This is a contested juncture in the discursive practice of schools, and it is why teacher unions usually seek to control and limit administrative access to classrooms. Unions know that they can't eliminate administrative incursions outright. But they can regulate them by limiting the nature and extent of the incursion and control them by forcing the administration to provide formal notification of when they may occur. Thus, informal and unannounced visitations such as walk-throughs represent a source of uncontrolled expansion of administrative power. Hence, as walk-throughs are seen not as a vehicle to advance teacher professionalization and independence but as subversion of the existing form of contractual control of administrative hegemony, they will be resisted. We see this as a miscalculation of the persons introducing the walk-through process to bypass the importance of the Downey reflective conversation as part of the total walk-through concept.

Figure P.2 illustrates the point at which the Downey reflective conversation occurs and begins to open up the process of administrative observation of teaching to the point where *both* the principal and the teacher are talking jointly about professional decisions in classrooms without engaging

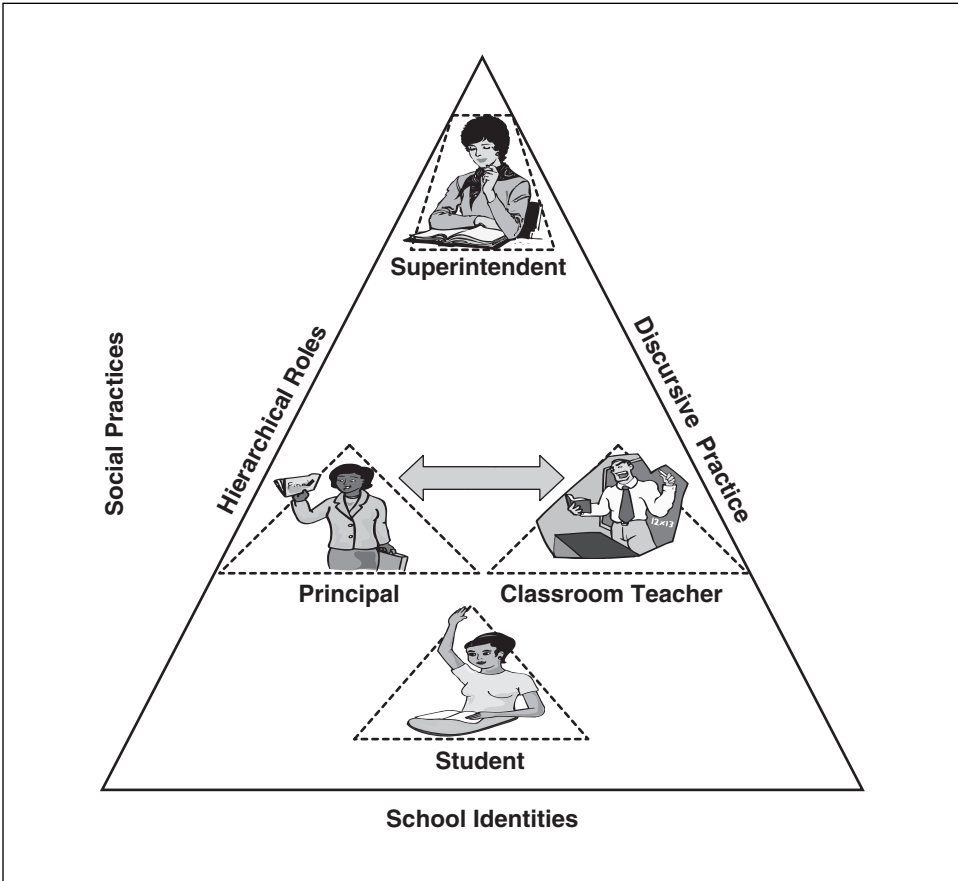
Figure P.2 Initial Downey Reflective Conversation Approach Which Still Remains Within Dominant Discursive Practice



in “gotcha” or in the usual “you could do this better” notation, which translated means, “this is what you are doing wrong.” The *observation-evaluation-correction* cycle of typical traditional supervision is very hard to change. It is deeply embedded in ways of thinking, socializing, and acting in schools. This is why learning how to do a true reflective conversation is so very difficult for both principals and teachers. It not only involves learning how to speak differently but how to act differently. And it means initiating challenges to the prevailing institutional norms and related discursive practices that have been operational for very long time periods.

Figure P.3 represents a transformational situation where the principal and teacher are working within a true collegial relationship and both questions and replies are initiated by each. The question of who initiates the

Figure P.3 Mature Downey Reflective Conversation Which Professionalizes and Equalizes Roles and Discursive Practice



reflective conversation is important as a bellwether as to how the relationship is progressing. In dialogic, hierarchical relationships embedded in structured subordination, usually the person with the most power initiates a conversation, especially in the workplace. The well-worn phrase, “It is better to ask for forgiveness than to seek permission,” is indicative of how one operates within a structured, bureaucratic setting if one must be “supervised” by someone else. It means that the questions teachers ask are about compliance with work rules and procedures and not queries about working in between the “spaces” of such settings in creative ways. To do so is to seek a likely rejection and to be told to conform. Most teachers learn such ways of conformance rather quickly in their orientation to the workplace. It is not only a structural but a major psychological barrier that has to be overcome when initiating the Downey reflective conversation.

EXAMINING THE TEXT ANALYSIS OF THE THREE TRANSFORMATIONAL STAGES

We now shift to examine the Downey reflective conversation from the perspective of text analysis. Considering speech a form of text is a very old tradition in linguistic evaluation. In fact, writing is simply a coded speech form. Texts can be analyzed and grouped into four principal headings: *vocabulary*, *grammar*, *cohesion*, and *structure* (Fairclough, 1992, p. 75). *Vocabulary* refers to the selection of words. *Grammar* is about how words are grouped together. *Cohesion* includes how clauses and sentences are linked. *Structure* deals with macro organizational properties of texts. Fairclough (1992) has added to these dimensions such things as the “force” of the speech acts, referring to whether the textual utterance is a threat, promise, or a request. This would be revealed in the past relationships between the participants and the specific contexts around which previous interactions had occurred. The total interaction functioning within the histories of the persons, the procedures, the relationships, institutional settings, and situations may be referred to as *the architecture* of the exchanges in which a specific conversation as a text takes place.

The conversation between principals and teachers occurs within defined social identities, role properties, and power relationships within a system of authority specified contiguous to these properties. For example, a typical comment after a principal’s observation of a classroom teacher might be something like, “What were those students doing in the corner?” or “Why did you only call on students in the first two rows?” or “Are you following the textbook’s sequence?”

A textual analysis of these comments is that the question is posed within a judgmental posture that reveals that the person asking the question has the right to ask it and expect an institutionally correct (and usually prompt) reply; there is an implied “proper” answer that is determinative by past histories and precedents and even personal proclivities; the questions posed are about compliance and norms. This interaction is the “architecture” of power, privilege, and compliance. The principal is operating within implicit and explicit normative expectations. Normative expectations are almost always hierarchical. They include the role of one participant to make judgments of the other and demand responses to those judgments. This kind of architecture is embedded in checklists, observational write-ups that require a signature on the bottom of the page, summative evaluations, and directive memos.

The second stage (Figure P.2) is representative of the time when the Downey reflective conversation begins to take hold as discursive practice in a school. This stage is one in which both the principal and the teacher are becoming more aware of how they interact with one another. The teacher becomes conscious that the questions asked by the principal are changing in that there is not always a “right” answer and even on occasion

when there is no answer expected at all. But the principal is beginning to struggle with his or her own history and while he or she is trying to change the language patterns, it is still deeply embedded in the architecture of power and privilege. It is still almost largely the principal who initiates a conversation. In this state, it would not usually be the case that a teacher would seek out the principal to ask him or her a reflective question. Questions remain pretty much one way. The overall impression is that while the language used is “softer” and “gentler,” it is still embedded in the old architecture of power. Conversation as text still coheres to the lines of subordination in the process of interaction. Typical questions in this stage are (as the principal is learning a new language), “I’d like to talk with you about when you determine to use cooperative learning and when you would use a different type of grouping practice” or “I’ve noticed that you use a lot of different ways of checking for understanding with your students. I’ve been wanting to sit and chat with you about your thinking when you choose to use one method or another.”

In the third stage (Figure P.3), the principal has changed his or her total interaction with teachers. In this transformation, the teacher is empowered by the principal’s questioning to the point where the teacher initiates the conversation with the principal, and it is a *continuing conversation* as opposed to specified junctures in the formal evaluation process. In this stage, a question might be something like, “I’ve been in your classroom a number of times on my walk-throughs, and I have a question you may find useful to consider. Is there a good time for us to talk about it? I’ve noticed that you’ve changed the pacing of your lessons dependent upon the results you get for checking for understanding; what thinking has taken place that causes you to alter the pacing as you are delivering the lesson?”

In this example, the principal does not expect or require an immediate response. The question posed could have many answers, and each of them could be very useful and appropriate, so there are no “right” answers in the conventional sense. The principal has made no judgment about what he or she has observed, except to focus on this particular feature of something observed in the walk-through process. In this situation, the walk-through interaction has been separated from the formal, legalistic evaluation procedures, and therefore, it is not lodged in the normative requirements of the institution. While the question is asked within the old authority structure, it shifts the dialogic nature of the relationship to one of colleagues instead of a superior-subordinate one. When the principal does not require or expect a “right” answer (and one would not even make sense), then there is not the kind of checklist-compliance mentality that is so hard to shake.

In the final stages of the Downey reflective conversation, the architecture of power and privilege has been recast to a more equalitarian, collegial one. The reflective conversation becomes the means to the enhanced professionalization of teaching. The teacher is recognized as an independent

professional, still having to function within the trappings of corporate bureaucratization but with a very different immediate relationship with the building principal. It is an old rule in architecture that form follows function. When the function of observation is not bureaucratic compliance but enhanced professionalization of teacher decision making, we have the beginnings of a changed educational system, one teacher at a time. It is to this end that this second walk-through book is dedicated.