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# Cheryl L. Poole: Helping Our Evaluators Understand What We're Doing

[Heather Vaughan-Southard](#) [agency](#), [arts education](#), [arts instruction](#), [Demonstrating Educator Effectiveness](#), [early career](#), [educator evaluation](#), [MAEIA assessments](#), [storytelling](#), [teacher observation](#)

## **Eavesdropping on a Teacher's Conversation**

Recently, I had the opportunity to be present with a small group of art and music teachers. They were young and relatively new to their career. Their voices were animated with sharing about their projects, their students, their administrators and the challenges of full days and equally full evenings of preparation. Listening from a position of post-retirement, I enjoyed eavesdropping on their conversations. It made me a bit nostalgic for the years when my career was in full swing and I was still striving to improve my teaching every day.

One brief conversation has lingered with me. A young teacher was frustrated because of a contentious exchange she'd had with an administrator who evaluated her. The feedback she received on her instruction showed little understanding of her teaching goals. She continued saying that she gathered her thoughts before confronting the administrator about her evaluation. She asked why she had received such mediocre feedback. She explained that she had been instructing for higher-level thinking and analysis of the project in a historical context. The administrator listened closely then apologized saying that she didn't realize what the teacher was doing.

The remainder of the conversation I overheard went something like this: "I can't believe that she would give me a low score just because she couldn't recognize what I was doing! She even admitted that she didn't understand what I was trying to accomplish with my kids. If she couldn't recognize what I was doing, she shouldn't have been evaluating me."

## **Experiencing a Flashback**

That is the part of the dialogue that stuck with me. It caused me to flashback to myself as a young teacher, indignant after an evaluation, because I remember thinking that the assistant principal assigned to observe my teaching and write an evaluation clearly didn't know what I was attempting to do.

Now, from the far end of my career – post-retirement – I look upon that young teacher’s frustration, along with own, through a wholly different lens.

Wondering Why, as a Young Teacher, I Didn’t Ask Myself ...

Why was my default position as a young teacher to believe that my observer’s opinion was absolute and final (albeit, in my opinion, wrong)?

Why didn’t I assume more agency for my own teaching? It had taken me 4 years of college plus several years of practice to learn how to best teach the curriculum I was teaching.

Why did I expect that a randomly-assigned assistant principal (one who hadn’t taught for almost 30 years) would understand what I was doing and why? Especially after only a 30-minute observation? Even an administrator with a background in arts education would likely not be able to do much better.

*Analyzing the recent conversation and the flashback I wondered why, way back then, I didn’t I take a more active role in advocating for myself.*

I suspect it was lack of confidence. Maybe I assumed my opinion wasn’t valued? I think the attitude at the time was that the evaluator had the expertise necessary to do his job and I was just a beginning teacher.

Looking back on that long-ago experience, I know that he didn’t have the expertise and couldn’t have known what I as a professional was attempting to get my students to demonstrate. He was told to go into my room, observe me and interpret what he saw....and he did.

### **Making Powerful Instruction More Transparent**

Remembering the painful experience of being judged (evidenced by the fact I recall it with a sting even 40 years later) and recently hearing young teachers reflect on similar ‘injustices’ makes me think about how easy it would be today to help the evaluator see more clearly the how and why of instruction.

The MAEIA assessments – all readily available and searchable online – contain tools to make instructional goals more transparent. Each has a concise list of standards associated with the assessment and at least one rubric that describes the preferred student performance.

The sting in an evaluator’s interpretation of a teaching observation often comes from what is a chance interpretation of what the evaluator sees. He/she might simply not understand what you are trying to get your students to deliver.

How better to eliminate the chance factor with a well-timed, one-page sheet listing the standards and a rubric showing the complex behaviors you and your students are seeking!

-It takes is a modest amount of pre-work to search the MAEIA assessment catalogue to find one that comes closest to your instructional goals.

-Then, if necessary, tweak the rubric to be clearer for your evaluator.

-Cut and paste the standards and the rubric into a handy one-pager.

-Make sure it's available to your evaluator during the observation or drop it off before your evaluation has been processed.

Although the MAEIA tools were not even in the dream stage back when my evaluator critiqued my instruction, what if they had been? I could have helped him see and interpret the performance goals for which my students and I were reaching. He would have been so impressed. I'm sure he also would have been relieved to not have to create a respectable interpretation of what he saw my students and I doing in my classroom.

Here are two thoughts that have condensed from my eavesdropping the conversation between young arts educators and my time-travel back to when I was one of them.

-Don't assume your observer or evaluator knows how to teach any arts discipline as well as you do or that they are able to decipher your instructional goals by merely observing.

-Be prepared for any observation by having a focused list of standards and one or more rubric(s) that illustrates what standards underlay your instruction and what performance you are seeking from your students.

Search [MAEIA online assessment catalogue](http://maeia-artsednetwork.org) (maeia-artsednetwork.org) for an assessment that is as close as possible to your current lesson and targeted standards.

Revise the assessment's rubric to match precisely what you expect your students to achieve.

Print off the rubric(s) and the associated standards on a single page to help your observer interpret what he/she is seeing.

Editor's Note:

MAEIA has developed and continues to develop tools to facilitate greater ease in the educator evaluation process. [Check out our Demonstrating Educator Effectiveness](#)

[videos, \(scroll to mid-page\)](#), particularly DEE videos 3 and 4, to consider your own agency while interacting with administration and sharing the stories of your students and of your teaching more dynamically. See our [Educator Effectiveness page](#) for guidance in using the MAEIA resources in the stages of your educator evaluation process.

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