

RESEARCH BRIEF: Using a classroom observation protocol like PLATO to improve teaching & learning

Overview of PLATO: The Protocol for Language Arts Teaching Observations (PLATO) is a classroom observation protocol focused on middle and high school English/language arts (ELA) instruction. Stanford Professor Pam Grossman and her team developed PLATO during a research study on classroom practices. Grossman found that structured observation tools:

- Provide a common technical vocabulary for describing instruction
- Provide a consistent lens for looking at instruction
- Allow for rating teachers across different components of instruction
- Allow us to compare quality of instruction across classrooms

The PLATO instrument is based on existing literature on effective instruction in secondary level English language arts. As seen in Table 1, PLATO includes 13 elements that encompass a number of key areas of ELA classroom instruction.

Table 1: The elements of English/language arts classroom Instruction captured by PLATO

Purpose focuses on the expressed clarity of ELA objectives, both in the short and long term	Representation of Content captures the effectiveness of the teacher's explanations and examples in addition to his or her content knowledge	Connections to Prior Knowledge measures the extent to which new material is connected to students' previous academic knowledge	Time Management focuses on how well-paced and efficient tasks and transitions are in the classroom.
Connections to Personal and Cultural Experience focuses on the extent to which new material is connected to students' personal and cultural experiences	Accommodations for Language Learning captures the range of strategies that make a lesson accessible to non-native and native English speakers struggling to develop ELA skills	Models captures the availability of exemplars to guide student work	Intellectual Challenge assesses the cognitive and intellectual demand of classroom tasks and teacher questions
Text-Based Instruction focuses on how grounded ELA instruction is in a variety of texts	Explicit Strategy Instruction measures the teacher's ability to teach ELA strategies that can be used flexibly and independently	Guided Practice forces on the opportunities provided for students to practice ELA skills, concepts, or strategies in a structures and scaffolded way	Classroom Discourse reflects the opportunity for and quality of student conversations with the teacher and among peers

Use of PLATO in research: PLATO was tested in two studies in New York City and is currently being used in two other studies related to effective teaching practices. There were a number of important steps Grossman's team took to collect data about teacher practice using PLATO:

- They observed between 3-6 days of instruction per each teacher.
- They sometimes captured additional evidence including teacher logs, student work, & open-ended notes.
- The raters received training on using PLATO that helped make the scores more reliable.
- Elements are scored on a 4 point scale from 1) provides almost no evidence through 4) provides consistent strong evidence.

The New York studies found that the teacher use of the different strategies described by PLATO differentiated between teachers based on their impact on student achievement, as measured by value added scores.

Teachers seen as increasing student achievement at higher rates scored higher on many elements on PLATO.

The future of PLATO in SFUSD and beyond: Professor Grossman was recently awarded a grant from the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) that will allow her research team to work with a set of SFUSD middle schools to develop professional development for using PLATO in SFUSD classrooms during the 2011-2012 school year. Professor Grossman will be working closely with Assistant Superintendent Jeannie Pon and her Middle School team to develop the professional development associated with using PLATO.