'Fitbit' for Monitoring Student Voice

BY JARON E. FRIED/School Administrator, February 2021

During COVID-19, school districts are struggling to engage students, particularly the most vulnerable learners, in virtual classrooms. Traditional forms of teacher professional development haven't adapted to this radically changed environment.

In the Anaheim Union High School District, we're pursuing a novel approach to teacher learning that we believe addresses the student engagement challenge with lasting impact even after the pandemic.

Our district's teachers use a "Fitbit"-style feedback system, called TeachFX, that uses voice-activated artificial intelligence to measure student engagement directly, by analyzing discourse patterns in the classroom. The data are organized into personalized feedback on the teacher's instructional practice that she or he can access on demand.

Raising Voices

Our 30,000-student district began using this unique method of teacher learning in early 2019 as we sought to meet an audacious goal: to raise student voices, particularly those of our English learners, such that they were speaking at least 30 percent of class time (about 16 minutes out of every 54-minute class period).

Initially, the district had no way of assessing progress or providing feedback toward this goal. We wanted to focus our attention on student voice — a theme central to Anaheim's 5 C's: *communication*, *critical thinking*, *creativity*, *collaboration* and *compassion/character*. To do so, we believed teachers would benefit most powerfully from frequent feedback on student voice and engagement in their classrooms. With limited resources and a staff already putting in 110 percent, leveraging artificial intelligence to automate this feedback made our ambitions possible.

What sort of feedback? The software provides teachers with data and insights on key levers for promoting student voice such as lesson design, talk ratios and questioning technique. (It highlights and tags, for instance, each open-ended and closed-ended question a teacher asked during a lesson.) Teachers see evidence of other high-leverage instructional strategies, including use of think time and students' use of academic language.

A favorite focus of our teachers is promoting what we call "volleyball"-style conversations. The data are private to the teacher — at the district we see only aggregated, anonymized metrics — and usage is entirely voluntary. This autonomy encourages teachers to engage freely in self-coaching and continuous improvement.

Helpful Metrics

As we've shifted to virtual classrooms in response to the pandemic, even more powerful data are at our fingertips for achieving equitable talk. Teachers now see complete metrics and can play back highlights of each student's contributions to the classroom discussion.

As a district, we have rich data about which student groups are getting opportunities to speak, which aren't, and trends over time. In our efforts toward equity in the classroom, this is game-changing.

Our teachers tell us that these insights are eye-opening by helping them build a more reflective teaching practice that meets the needs of diverse learners. The results back up their statements. Anaheim teachers increased the amount of student voice in their classrooms from 6 percent to 24 percent of class time (as measured by TeachFX), in addition to increasing substantially the use of think time and open-ended questions. Teachers working with TeachFX data in collaboration with our district's 5 C's coaches have greatly extended the trainers' reach and impact.

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A Virtual Fit

The pandemic has sent everyone scrambling to figure out how to engage students online. Yet our teachers were able to move their engagement strategies to the virtual classroom more easily — in part because we've stayed focused on our 30 percent student talk goal and track progress toward it.

We still have a ways to go to create engaging, challenging, equitable classes that drive student learning both virtually and in-person. But we expect to continue this new approach to teacher learning long into the future.

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