

MENTOR TEACHERS

Tips and Techniques That Support Classroom Teachers

By Jennifer F. M. Padua

What is the role of mentor teachers? How can they assist their peers in the classroom? Assumptions are often made that when a mentor position has been created, all teachers will automatically understand what that person's role is. Responsibilities and expectations can be daunting, especially if the mentor teacher has little experience in this type of position. This article provides answers to these questions and suggests techniques that mentors will find useful in the classroom.

Goals

Mentor teachers are usually experienced, have a deep understanding of a specific content area, and know how to build capacity in others. The primary goals of a mentor teacher are as follows:

- to assist classroom teachers in refining existing instructional strategies;
- to introduce new strategies and concepts;
- to engage teachers in conversations about their teaching; and
- to provide overall support.

However, every teacher will have different needs. Mentor teachers must rely on their professional judgment to determine which goals are most suitable for each teacher.

Tips

Building trust and understanding is a key step in establishing professional relationships with classroom teachers. Mentors can begin by explaining their role and acknowledging classroom teachers' effort and commitment. These teachers will seek assistance if they feel safe, know that their feelings and experiences are valued, and trust that their actions are not being judged.

When mentor teachers engage in professional conversations with classroom teachers, appropriate language is essential. Language should be constructive and encouraging (*Here's*



Photo: Sksan Hanson

▷ Through observation and feedback, mentors can assist classroom teachers with instruction. Jennifer Padua with Enion Kalles and Uliga Elementary School students in Majuro, RMI.

another way of doing this), not critical and demanding (*You're doing it wrong*). Effective approaches include asking questions (*Can you share how you teach reading?*); paraphrasing (*So you're saying that teaching vocabulary is challenging?*); and providing specific feedback (*Teaching new vocabulary words before students read unfamiliar texts can boost their comprehension*). Mentor teachers must remember that they have more background knowledge in the content area. They will need to clarify unfamiliar concepts and vocabulary and provide examples in familiar contexts so that classroom teachers can easily understand and quickly integrate new knowledge or strategies.

In the Pacific, teachers come from diverse cultures. Mentor teachers should take the time to understand the appropriate cultural protocols. Knowing how individual schools operate is helpful as well. Through observation, mentors can learn how decisions are made, how teachers interact verbally and nonverbally, and how students are taught. And even when processes seem less than ideal, mentors should remember that their role is to support classroom teachers, not judge them.

Techniques

In her 2000 publication *Conversations: Strategies for Teaching, Learning, and Evaluating*, Regie Routman outlines her "Model for Effective Teaching and Learning" (22). Although it is designed to

Routman's Model for Effective Teaching and Learning*	Techniques for Mentor Teachers
Demonstration	The mentor teacher demonstrates a lesson
Guided Practice	Mentor and classroom teachers team teach
Independent Practice	The classroom teacher independently applies a new strategy or concept while the mentor teacher observes
Response and Feedback and On-Going Assessment	The mentor teacher continues to provide feedback and support as the classroom teacher strives to improve instruction

* Source: These components are taken from R. Routman's *Conversations: Strategies for Teaching, Learning, and Evaluating*, 2000, Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

facilitate student learning, the techniques Routman describes can be adapted for mentor teachers as well (see table on page 8). After all, teachers are lifelong learners too.

Before using any of the techniques described below, the classroom and mentor teachers should discuss the lesson's goal and focus, the instructional strategies that will be used, and why they were selected. After the lesson, the teachers should discuss it and plan the next steps.

Demonstration lessons. Modeling effective instructional strategies is one way a mentor teacher can help. In addition to seeing how concepts are applied and how students respond, the classroom teacher can learn appropriate instructional language, classroom management techniques, and how to pace a lesson.

Team teaching. This technique works especially well with classroom teachers who are not completely confident but willing to try new concepts/strategies. The classroom teacher leads the lesson, but the mentor teacher is alongside ready to give advice and assistance. In this context, risk taking is less intimidating.

Independent practice/observation. As classroom teachers gain the confidence and knowledge to implement instructional strategies independently, they may welcome observation and feedback. Mentors should make prior arrangements for observations to ensure that classroom teachers are not made uncomfortable by them. By discussing the goals of both the lesson and the observation in advance with classroom teachers, mentors can respond sensitively to their concerns and needs. The mentor teacher may take notes during the lesson but should not let that activity interfere with the observation. After the lesson, a good starting question to ask the teacher is "How did you think the lesson went?" The answer may provide valuable insights about the teacher's intentions. More importantly, it suggests how best to approach the rest of the discussion.

Feedback and ongoing support. Whether mentor teachers are demonstrating, team teaching, or observing, all these techniques should be followed up with timely feedback. The purpose of the feedback is to provide suggestions on how to improve instruction, increase student learning, and encourage the classroom teacher. Like students, teachers need continual support, and feedback should celebrate their successes as well as address their challenges. By revisiting classrooms, seeing teachers

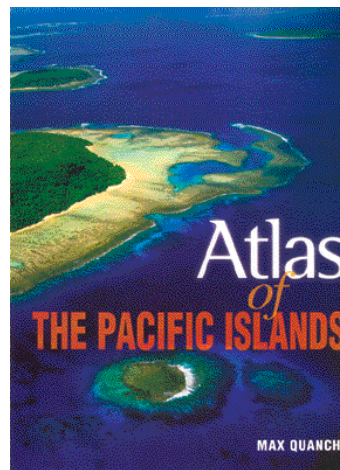
in action, and providing ongoing feedback and support, mentor teachers help classroom teachers grow professionally.

There is extensive research on how mentor teachers can provide effective on-site professional development. With increased demands for high-quality classroom instruction, it becomes even more important to develop mentor teachers' skills and examine ways they can assist classroom teachers in improving instruction. The sidebar provides questions that will help mentor teachers reflect on their own performances as they engage in this important process.

Jennifer F. M. Padua is a Program Specialist with the Pacific Comprehensive Regional Assistance Center. ★

PACIFIC CENTER BOOK REVIEW

By Patricia von Oelhoffen



Atlas of the Pacific Islands by Max Quanchi (Honolulu, HI: Bess Press, 2003).

This exceptional new atlas will capture and hold your attention from beginning to end. An excellent resource for home or classroom, it provides current detailed information on Pacific island history, political status, and economics, as well as

climate, geology, and the environment. Text is accompanied by high-quality illustrations, which include topographic and thematic maps, block diagrams, satellite images, and aerial photography.

The Pacific section opens with an overview of the entire region. More detailed treatment of each entity follows. The profile on CNMI and Guam includes a case study of the ocean floor and the Hawai'i pages feature information about Mauna Loa, the world's largest active volcano. The formation and impact of tropical cyclones are highlighted in the pages on Samoa, while the profile on the Marshall Islands describes the long-term effects of nuclear testing on Bikini Atoll and the resulting displacement of native islanders.

Author Max Quanchi has taught Pacific island history at the university level since 1973.

Patricia von Oelhoffen is a Program Specialist with the Pacific Comprehensive Regional Assistance Center. ★

Reflective Questions for Mentor Teachers

- Have you established a professional relationship with the teachers you mentor?
- How much time do you spend observing them? Do you make follow-up visits?
- Have you noticed changes in teachers' instruction since you started mentoring them?
- How often do you engage in professional conversations? What topics do you discuss?
- How often do you promote your own professional growth through reading or other activities?