

Keynote Speech from Charlotte Danielson, Creator of the Danielson Framework for Teaching

Announcer: So I think you have a sense now of what happened across the country over the past couple of years and how we got to this place and I think it's an exciting place and as David said, we don't actually have that chance, 2014 is a few years away but the kids are in our schools and teachers are in our schools, who are going to be working on this, so as we thought about how do we go with this work it was clear that we had to link the teacher quality and the work we do to develop teachers to the work that we're asking kids to do. And so I want to introduce to you Charlotte Danielson, who is one of the leaders nationally in thinking about this. She is a former teacher and administrator and staff developer. She worked in many cities around the country and helped them to do exactly the work that we're starting to do. We have copies of her book that will be available for you when you go out to your breakout sessions, along with another great book called The Global Achievement Gap and hopefully what we can learn from her is how to make a connection between supporting kids as they engage in new curriculum and new experiences with learning and what that takes from the side of the teachers, so, Charlotte please join us.

Charlotte Danielson: Thanks very much and thank you for that welcome. I must say this is an absolutely fascinating time generally in education. I've discovered that I've become a noun, like, "we're doing Danielson, right?" I'll tell you what's worse, I've become a verb, and the worst of all I've become a passive verb, "we've been Danielson", so but let me just say it's an honor to be part of this effort and as David just said, the work you're doing here in the city is absolutely at the heart of it and so I would like you to exactly as Shael suggested, which is to make the link between the learning that we want to provide and then sort of generate with students and what that means for teaching and so here we have just the initiatives that know and I'd like to just say a few things about my framework for teaching. Now any such framework is grounded in some assumptions about learning, about what's worth learning, about how students learn and therefore what teaching is required and most such frameworks don't actually make these assumptions explicit but I did do that and I'd like to just be clear about what they are. That first of all, that it is about learning, but the question is what is it about the learning and I'd like to just make the obvious point that it would take breath-taking audacity to say right now the specific content of what we would want our students to know 25 years from now, 40 years from now when they'll still be in the workforce, it would take breath-taking audacity.

And so we have to of course teach them things but mostly what the Common Core standards are asking us to teach are the tools, the tools of learning, the tools of generating new knowledge, which is why the focus on argumentation and on defending a position and on reading critically for understanding are so essential, as to say nothing then of the thinking in mathematics and in other disciplines, it's about the thinking and it's about the tools of learning.

Now the good news here is that this comes very naturally to students. Now I can't speak for you but I don't think I have ever known an intellectually lazy four year old. I mean think of the four year olds you know right, they're at it, but you know I have known a lot of intellectually lazy fourteen year olds. Now granted a lot happens between 4 and 14 but one of the things that happens is they go to school and I would

hate to think that we play any part in turning off the lights. But I do think we better take a good look in the mirror on this one. But the good news is that the new, these Common Core standards help us do better there and that is when a 7 year old says when you ask them to do something, they say, or you tell them something, they say “who says?” That’s a question for evidence. It comes to kids naturally, we can build on what is natural in their learning and in their thinking. It's all there for us. We just have to exploit it and when you ask a kid who doesn’t like school, why he doesn’t like school, have you ever heard a kid say it's because it's too hard. Well what do they say?

Boring! We know this and so nearly all we’re going all we’re asking ourselves to do is to make it more interesting. That happens to be exactly consistent with what the Common Core standards are asking. So then the challenge is how do you do that, how on earth do you do that? Well one way is to look seriously at what we mean by teaching and to recognize that it is purposeful and it's professional work and there are many definitions of professionalism. The one I like best I think that applies to teaching is, “it is complex decision making under conditions of uncertainty”, that would be teaching. That teachers make hundreds and I mean this literally people have counted this, hundreds of decisions a day, often under what we’d have to call rather unfavorable circumstances like in a hurry, right, or based on incomplete information. Teaching in other words, is a thinking person’s job, which has enormous implications for you and for anyone who supports teachers, that is if we really accept the notion that teaching is cognitive work then the conversations we have about practice must be about the cognition. This teaching isn’t following a recipe in a cookbook, it's not ticking off little behaviors. It's making decisions about what's best to do next given the circumstances in my class.

And so we have to accept then that teaching is enormously complex work and I think it's best stated by Lee Shulman in this quote of, and I would just read it very briefly together, “After 30 years of doing such work, I have concluded that classroom teaching is perhaps the most complex, most challenging, and most demanding, subtle, nuanced, and frightening” I love that word, “frightening activity that our species has ever invented. The only time a physician could possibly encounter a situation of comparable complexity would be in the emergency room of a hospital during or after a natural disaster.” Think about that, doctors, for all the challenges of their work, they do see their patients one at a time. We don’t get to do that. It's a much more complex type of work.

So alright, so well what is the complex work, let’s find and try to describe it in the framework, divided this complex work into these 4 domains and each of them divided to some components, either 5 or 6. Let me say just a few words about this. First of all it is research based and validated and those are both significant statement. Every item on this list has a solid research base behind it and were just summarized in the chapter in the book which I'm delighted to know you are – you will be receiving, but furthermore the system as a whole and an instrument developed from the system to observe teaching and other aspects of teachers work has been demonstrated to correlate with higher levels of student learning. That’s a significant finding, it's rather recent and because the framework has been around for about 15 years and it's continued to evolve over that time, their second edition is a little different than the first and I have no doubt that it will evolve further, but the notion of validation is absolutely essential to you being able to use

it with confidence and know that when you work with your teachers you are helping them do things that help students learn better, so it is validated.

It's common sense though, I mean there's nothing on this list that is unusual or creative or innovative. My aim was not to be creative or innovative. My aim was to be clear and to be able to write on one piece of paper without trivializing the work, what are the important aspects of teaching and that's what I tried to do, but I'd like to mention one thing about this. I wouldn't want you to think that I think that because these components of teaching are listed separately, they are described separately, I wouldn't want you to think that I think that teachers do them separately, I know better than that. Teaching is very intertwined and entangled and it's easy to demonstrate that actually, you can take any one of these,, lets say questioning discussion techniques, for example in domain 3.

If a teacher were really highly skilled at that, what else would that teacher have to be good at also in order to be good at that. Well right, they'd have to know their content right, but have to know their students, what's an appropriately challenging question for this group or this individual. They'd have to have clear outcomes in mind: what is that I want the kids to learn from this discussion. There would be issues in domain 2: an environment of respect and rapport where it's a safe place for kids to take risks. They're not going to be belittled or demeaned. There will be procedure, do you raise your hand, do you not and so right. So then you might say, well what's the point then of describing them all out separately, and the answer to that I think is best offered to you through an analogy of a Theater-in-the-round. Now think of the Theater-in-the-round, you have a play, think of the lesson like the play, now because it's a Theater-in-the-round, the audience is sitting all around right and because the audience is sitting all around, the lights have to come from all directions. I think of these things like the lights, here's a lesson but lets just focus on the questioning skills, on their routines and procedures, on the interactions right.

So when you think of it this way, this framework then becomes an analytic tool and in a sense that's really all it is, it's an analytic tool. Now sometimes people look at this framework and they say well it's okay it's fine as far as it goes but it's missing a few things. They'll say, "well, like, where's technology? Has that gone missing? Where's high expectations? Tons of research on high expectations." Those relate to items that I call common themes, which are not components of teaching, not because they're not important, because they are, but it's because the framework for teaching describes the work of teaching; they describe what teachers do. Whereas the common themes describe the manner in which they do what they do. So for example, a teacher who holds high expectations for student learning, those high expectations will play out in the choice of learning outcomes, in the questions that they frame, in the feedback they get, in the communication with families that this is all done within the context and the expectation of high level learning on the part of students.

So the common themes are not relegated to be common themes because they're not important, no they are super important, in fact they apply all across the framework. That's an interesting activity to do with teachers, actually, is to identify which ones apply to which components and how. Okay now each of these components has a description as you'll see in the book and then a rubric like this, this one happens to be

the one for engaging students and learning which is the centerpiece of the framework and if I were to have asked you the way we do it when we do workshops, “if you were to walk into a classroom, what would you see or hear that would convince you you’re in the presence of an expert teacher?” and most people would say something around engagement, right? And then I would say “and I’m guessing you don’t just mean busy, right?” and you would say “yeah I don’t just mean busy”, so then the questions were “what do you mean by engagement? What does it look like? How do you cultivate it? How do you help teachers get better at it?” and that’s what this framework tries to do. It tries to unpack the critical aspects of teaching into their elements and then to describe in these 4 levels what it actually looks like at 4 levels of performance. And let me just say briefly that there are some big ideas that underlie each of these levels and at the, what I call, unsatisfactory level, that I don’t know if you’ve had any experience with licensing, but there’s an important concept in licensing called do no harm right?

Now you can drive your car across a bridge and it’s unlikely to fall down because it was designed by a licensed engineer right? This building probably won’t collapse, it was designed by a licensed architect. Now there’s nothing in the, I mean that’s what the license means, it means it’s the state’s guarantee to the unwitting public, in this case us, that we won’t come to harm as a consequence of this person’s work. Now there’s nothing in the licensing requirements for architects that says a building must be beautiful. As is evident if you look around you, there are plenty of ugly buildings, right? It’s not about aesthetics, it’s merely about safety. That’s what a license to teach is: it’s the state’s guarantee to the public that children, students will not come to harm in this person’s class. Not a very high standard, a really important standard, however, and I wrote the statements at that lowest level deliberately to be below or right at that standard. Learning is being shut down, the environment is chaotic and it plays out differently in the different components, but that’s the concept which means the implications for you are that if you should encounter practice at that level, in my view this is intervention time, because your first obligation is to the students and you can’t permit harm.

Now the other levels of performance are degrees of good. The basic level performance is typical practice of novice teachers, who are doing everything for the first time, and so it’s rough, it’s inconsistent right. The proficient level, that I call proficient, is good, solid teaching; the distinguished level practice is a different order of magnitude. It’s qualitatively different, in a classroom of a teacher practicing at that level, the students assume a lot of responsibility for the class. It is their class too, so they take initiatives, they have ideas, they contribute to the way the class is going. So let’s be clear here about what’s so important about this city’s initiatives for your role in supervising teachers and it’s absolutely critical. First of all let’s acknowledge it’s about learning. That no matter how good a preparation program is that teachers have gone through, this is a career long endeavor to be good at teaching and when I say that I believe professional learning is everybody’s job it’s not because I think that teaching is of poor quality and has to be fixed.

It’s that teaching is so hard that it’s never perfect, it could always be better and that then is your challenge and so what you’re doing I think in this work is enhancing the capacity of teachers to make even better, ever better, decisions that will affect the students in their class. So it’s about enhancing capacity, it’s not

about inspection, this is not about inspection, right? So I'd like to point out a few things about what we know about learning, now I don't know if you noticed on an earlier slide I pointed what every cognitive psychologist tells you by the way, they don't agree with each other on everything but they do agree on this: it's about learning. Learn in the sense, don't just say this but we have to say it because we tend to forget it, learning is done by the learner, through an active intellectual process, period full stop.

Now let's think about a typical observation supervision cycle. Let's say I'm the teacher and you're the principal okay, you come to my class, you watch me teach, you go away, oh you take notes right, you go away, you write up your notes, you come back and you tell me about my teaching. I would simply ask you who's doing the work? What am I doing, nothing, no I'm teaching my class, I am under contract to do that, but for this process what am I doing. Oh and it gets worse. Now in your office and we're talking about this lesson, I know that from the standpoint of that conversation, all I actually have to do is endure it. You will eventually stop talking and I can leave. So should we be surprised when teachers don't actually learn much from this process? Well no, this is exactly what we would expect if we think about what we know about learning.

So, well, what contributes to professional learning? It's these things and the big ones, of course, an environment of trust and a culture of professional inquiry, but then your self assessment reflection on practice and professional conversation, those are the absolutely big ones and you can do that and I would want you to do those things when you drop in for a brief observation and then have a conversation after, you're not there to inspect and tick off and do that this and this and this, no it's looking at what the students are doing. What is the nature of the task? Are they being asked to think? So when I do observations I mostly watch the kids, I really do, I mean of course I have to watch the teacher but, and because the teacher has settled in, and the teacher is responsible, let's never forget that, for establishing the environment, but the key question is what are the students doing and are they doing the intellectual work that will result in their learning?

So I'm just simply saying that I'm honored truly, I mean I really mean this, honored that my framework has been called out as one of the recommendations for you all to use and I think it offers contributions to professional learning and to your efforts, and that it does provide a research based definition of their teaching and it gives you an architecture to think about it. It offers a roadmap and it also describes the development of both experience and more importantly, expertise from novice to expert, so thank you so much for your attention on this, I appreciate you did that, thank you.