



WHISPER

Using observations to fuel
professional growth

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Whisper: Using observations to fuel professional growth.

Seattle, WA: University of Washington College of Education.

Whisper basics

Whisper is an online software program designed by the UW District Leadership Design Lab (DL2) to help educational leaders collect and use data from observations to support the professional growth of teachers, leaders, and others. Whisper harnesses the power of qualitative data analysis software designed for scholarly research and adapts it to the realities of educational professionals.

With Whisper, educators can:

- Collect quality data when conducting observations of teachers, principals and other staff
- Easily retrieve data to show growth and track trends over time
- Integrate their observations with other data

Why Whisper?

Most school systems are awash in data. Generally, though, these data do not provide much actual information about teachers', principals', and others' day-to-day work important to their professional growth. Teacher, principal, and central office evaluation systems typically require observations as part of the evaluation process. However, the checklists and numeric ratings in such systems do not help educators see their practice or how they might improve. If leaders do take notes during observations, those notes are not easily searchable unless converted to scores and other numbers that can strip the observation notes of meaningful details. Educators may use notes from their most recent observations but over time, without the ability to search such notes easily, much observation data goes unused.

Based on research suggesting that descriptive observations of professionals as they work in real settings over time are a powerful tool for improving professional practice, DL2 designed Whisper to address these shortcomings:

- Whisper focuses educators on **the right data**—concrete examples of practice for reflection and feedback.
- Whisper moves beyond numbers and checklists to capture **lasting descriptions** of practice.
- Whisper helps users turn observations into pieces of data that are **easily searchable and sortable** for use over time.

How does Whisper work?

The online application works on both computers and tablets. It stores data online, accessible from most devices. When educators use Whisper, they follow a process which reinforces best practices in observations, note-taking, and analysis.

Why not just use video instead of notes to record observation?

Advances in video technology offer educators many options for filming their practice. However, even in a single setting like a classroom, activity happens in various locations and can be difficult to capture with good sound. For leaders whose job spans multiple settings, video is an even less practical option for capturing daily work, given the time involved in setting up cameras and microphones. Software for tagging or annotating video can be expensive, and even when annotated, video can be difficult to review over time, requiring users to take considerable time to review videos rather than having the option to quickly scan notes. By contrast, using Whisper to take notes allows users to be more nimble, faster at documentation, and the resulting notes are more easily searchable.

Is Whisper just for observation data?

No. With Whisper, you can upload, code, and analyze various text-based data including student work. For instance, as part of their evaluation system, some teachers may be required to submit student work samples annually. Teachers could upload those samples into Whisper and tag them for easy retrieval later. Then, over time, that teacher and others could review those student work samples as partial evidence of that teachers' growth.

Educators can also use Whisper to record teachers', leaders' and others' reflections on their own work or any other data that they want to be able to retrieve in text rather than numerical form.

Whisper process overview

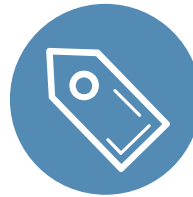
When educators use Whisper, they follow a process which reinforces best practices in observations, note-taking and analysis. That process includes four steps: note, clean, tag, and discuss.



In **NOTE**, observers collect high-quality, real-time descriptive data about the people they are observing. The system can time-stamp notes to provide added information about the duration of time spent on tasks. Observers may also upload images, audio, or video along with their descriptive notes..



CLEAN turns notes into a lasting data set by prompting observers to correct errors and add detail to improve the usability of notes. While cleaning, observers can separately record their initial thoughts about what the notes mean and add questions for follow up.



In **TAG**, observers sort their notes into categories, then label them with tags to track information over time. For example, if one section of the observation notes captures a principal providing feedback to a teacher, the observer might tag that section as “providing teacher feedback.” With TAG, observers can review all the cleaned data associated with a tag in one place instead of searching through their original notes. A suggested process for creating tags aligned to professional standards is below.



In **DISCUSS**, observers review their tagged notes and have options to use templates to plan feedback sessions using the data. In the example above, the observer could click on “providing teacher feedback” to see all the data with that code, regardless of when it was collected, and copy and paste these examples into a handout to share during a reflection session.

Getting ready to use Whisper

Like many pieces of software, Whisper is only as useful as the human processes that go into it. Accordingly, DL2 recommends that you and your team work through the following as you begin to use each step of Whisper.



NOTE

How can we ensure we are taking high-quality notes during observations?

Research and experience emphasize the importance of capturing *descriptive, low-inference rather than evaluative, high-inference* notes during observations. Table 1 provides a comparison of these two general types of note-taking. When we capture high-inference notes, we are actually recording our own evaluations and not thinking about

the practice of the person we are observing. By contrast, low-inference notes include rich descriptions of what we actually see and would look more or less the same if recorded by another observer—data we can then analyze or evaluate in different ways over time.

Table 1. Comparison of Observation Note Types

LOW-INFERENCE NOTES	HIGH-INFERENCE NOTES
<p>Example: "The principal asked the teacher, 'Why did you decide to use those materials?'"</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Descriptive• Details actions• Generates data about the practice we are observing• Would look mostly the same if two different people took observation notes	<p>Example: "The principal asked good questions."</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Evaluative• Interprets actions• Generates data about our own thinking• Would look different if two different people took observation notes

Consider working with your team to build the skills for collecting low-inference notes during observations. For example:

- As a team, conduct independent observations of the same event live or video, taking descriptive notes in the process about what the people observed are doing and saying. Trade notes with a partner and give each other feedback: Are the notes sufficiently descriptive? Are the notes free of evaluative comments? Do they sufficiently distinguish descriptive from evaluative comments?
- Try to practice conducting low-inference observations each week to build your skills at listening, looking, and typing in real time.

- Take notes of a colleague and ask the observed colleague for feedback. How helpful do they find the notes as a representation of their practice or as suggestions for improvement?
- As a team, review notes that members recorded many months or a year ago. How well can you see what the observer observed just from reading the notes? What reflections do you have about how to ensure that the notes you take with Whisper provide a more enduring record of observed practice?



CLEAN

What do we need to know about “cleaning” notes?

Observation notes of even the most seasoned researchers contain typos, shorthand, and other errors until they “clean” them. Cleaning involves going over notes to make corrections and ensure that someone else could read and understand them as well as you did when you conducted the observation. When cleaning, take care not to edit the notes by changing what you recorded people said and did. Instead, fix any wording that is hard to read. In the process, put any clarifications into brackets.

For example, when taking notes you might write:

AM: What did Ts say when they saw the F & P scores?

When cleaning those notes you might write:

ALEX MORGAN [Principal]: What did teachers say when they saw the F & P [Fountas & Pinnell, district’s current benchmark assessment] scores?

Cleaning notes in such a way ensures ensure that observations turn into an enduring record of practice, useable over time by multiple people. Effective cleaning depends on team agreements about how to format notes. For instance, do brackets indicate what a speaker said as an aside or do brackets contain evaluative information from the note taker about what notes mean?

Work together to come to agreement about the particulars of cleaning notes in your district.

Discuss if you are willing and able to take the time to read each other’s practice notes for clarity, raising comments and questions to help each other create a clean record of notes.



TAG

What kind of tags might we want to use in common across the system?

At the start of each observation, you will record general information about the observation, called *base tags*, to the entire document. Those tags come preloaded with Whisper and relate to who is being observed, the observation date, and the observation type to allow for easy sorting of notes by observation.

After you take notes, Whisper prompts you to tag portions of the notes with *descriptive tags* to help you easily retrieve pieces of data within observations related to the same category over time. You and your team must decide which descriptive tags you want to use and provide them to the software developer who will load them into your district’s version of Whisper for your use.



TAG

How do we create tags?

We suggest starting with the performance standards for the position you are observing (e.g. the NPBEA Professional Standards for Educational Leaders, the DL2 Principal Supervisor Performance Standards, or the Danielson Framework) and consider what kinds of tagged data you might want to review to analyze people's performance along those standards.

Below, we provide two sets of illustrative tags based on a standard. The first is for Principal Supervisors based on the DL2 Principal Supervisor Performance Standards and the CCSSO Model Principal Supervisor Professional Standards; the second is for principals, based on the NBPEA Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL).¹

DL2 Standard 4; CCSSO Standard 3: Data and differentiation

To what extent did this PSs use evidence to differentiate their supports to each principal?

ILLUSTRATIVE TAG	DEFINITION
Collecting data of principals' practice	Collecting data/evidence of principals' practice
Collecting other data	Collecting data/evidence about teachers, students
Using student data	Using data/evidence about student learning or experience
Using teacher data	Using data/evidence about teacher practice or experience
Using principal data	Using data/evidence about principal practice
Using other data	Using data/evidence about school, district, family, or community relevant to improving instruction or culture
Providing feedback to principals	Providing feedback to principals with or without data
Differentiating supports to principals	Providing each principal with supports appropriate to his/her strengths and areas for growth

PSEL Standard 1: Mission, vision, and core values

Effective educational leaders develop, advocate, and enact a shared mission, vision, and core values of high-quality education and academic success and well-being of each student.

ILLUSTRATIVE TAG	DEFINITION
Leading processes to develop mission/vision/values	In collaboration with school community, the principal leads processes to develop shared missions, vision, and core values
Connecting decisions to mission/vision/values	In a conversation, meeting, or presentation, the principal specifically articulates and connects decisions to the school's mission, vision, and/or core values of the school
Tracking progress toward vision	In collaboration with school community and using relevant data, the principal develops, implements, evaluates, and/or articulates how the school is moving toward their vision, and adjusting as needed

¹ Council of Chief State School Officers. (2015). *Model Principal Supervisor Performance Standards 2015*. Washington, DC: CCSSO. District Leadership Design Lab. (2017). *Principal Supervisor Performance Standards*

Version 2.0. Seattle, WA: Author. National Policy Board for Educational Administration (2015). *Professional Standards for Educational Leaders 2015*. Reston, VA: Author.



TAG

What else can we do to create quality tags?

Once you have a draft set of descriptive tags, check them with the design principles in Table 2. No matter which standards or other leadership priorities you work from to develop tags, the following lists can help you check whether your tags are likely to support the kinds of data analysis and organization Whisper is designed to facilitate.

Plan to work together with your team to decide not only which tags you will use, but what each tag means and when a piece of observation notes fit a given tag. To do so, consider working together to tag a common set of data, noting decisions and rules about tag definitions and applications as you go. Your team may find it useful to revisit how you are tagging periodically to ensure you are well calibrated over time and also to discuss revising the tags you are using.

Table 2. Design Principles for Descriptive Tags

TAGS SHOULD BE	TAGS SHOULDN'T BE
BRIEF Tags should be no more than four words. <i>"Providing teacher feedback"</i>	WORDY If tags are too long, they are unwieldy to use and hard to sort. <i>"Engaging in a collaborative debrief session with a teacher"</i>



DISCUSS

How can we start building a data-sharing culture in our district?

The sharing of observation data supports professional growth when users develop a positive culture around sharing data about their professional practice. However,

developing a positive data culture takes time, as data has been used to evaluate and penalize in recent years, creating a negative data culture in our field.

Discuss and plan as a team:

- What experiences will we create for ourselves to help create a positive culture supporting the use of observation data?
- We know that when leaders are vulnerable about their own practice, others in the district are more likely to become open to being observed and discussing observation data as a way to grow. Who in your district might strategically volunteer to pilot the Whisper process?
- Once you have some culture-building plans in place, consider: How will we check ourselves that we are on track with deepening such a culture?

Accessing Whisper

Where can my district access Whisper?

DL2 partnered with School Data Solutions to create Whisper. To access Whisper, please visit School Data Solutions at <https://www.schooldata.net/>.

Do I need to purchase Whisper to work with observation data in the ways Whisper allows?

No. We have created this guide and Whisper to help push the field of educational leadership to move beyond numbers and work ably with text as a main data source. We encourage all districts to examine their data practices carefully and consider if the functionality of Whisper described here might become an integral part of their local data system, either by purchasing Whisper as a plug-in or programming in similar platforms to help educators capture and use observation data.