

Strengthening and Enriching Your Professional Learning Community

The Art of Learning Together

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Foundations of Professional Development

The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.

—Alvin Toffler, author and futurist

Professional development is about learning.

Becoming more expert is essential in the best of times. This challenge applies to every profession, from neurosurgeons who are constantly having to be aware of new discoveries and master the latest methods, to football coaches who have to keep up with the times, to educators who are bombarded with findings from brain research as well as changes in every subject area in the curriculum. It is even more important in a turbulent world characterized by rapid social and economic changes that impinge directly on the lives of students everywhere. Educators, above all, must be—and be seen as—quintessential learners.

A key to success in any field is to capitalize on all the learning capacities with which human beings are endowed. That is why this book approaches professional development from the perspective of how people learn naturally.

How Do People Become More Expert—Really?

As you look back on your progress as an educator (or, indeed, with any other skill or in any other profession), remind yourself of what

it actually took for you to become more skillful. Ask yourself these questions:

- What state of mind were you in as you learned? And if you experienced many states of mind, which were most helpful and which were most inhibiting?
- What combination of theory and experience was required?
- Did you always learn exactly what you needed from the first experience you had?

These are the sorts of questions that have to be answered in a general way to gain the insight necessary to have programs that work. And research and experience are also available to show the way.

The goal of this book is to create a process that helps educators learn both for understanding *and* for real-world performance. For that to happen, the process needs to tap into how people learn naturally because throughout the ages, real-world performance has always been grounded in natural learning.

An overall understanding of how people learn naturally emerges out of the brain/mind learning principles that we have been developing for nearly 20 years (Appendix A has a more detailed explanation of the principles and the process). The core point is that meaningful learning that leads to real change engages every aspect of a person. It is just as important to teach the whole adult as it is to teach the whole child.

It becomes clear from the brain/mind learning principles that professional development is also a personal matter. When we realize that emotions and relationships and personal beliefs are involved, then we have to grapple with the fact that in professional development two different but parallel processes are taking place all the time: professional learning and personal learning.

Professional learning deals with mastery of new ideas and information and the development of new skills. Personal learning deals with developing new ways of seeing things, acquiring new capacities,

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Effective Learning Communities

The new kind of community building is not an event; it is a process.

—Beth Jarman and George Land,
“Beyond Breakpoint: Possibilities for a New Community”

Cast your mind back to a time when you sat somewhere (say, a coffee shop) and discussed work with a couple of friends, comparing notes and occasionally making suggestions about actions to take. You may also have done the same by phone or online. When this happened you were a participant in a community of learners.

Of course, there are different kinds of communities, and not all conversations lead to useful learning. The point, however, is that although people vary in how much they like to learn and work together, the brain/mind is social. Learning in the real world has always been a partially social process. We see this, for instance, in the fact that children play together at being adults in every society in the world.

The social nature of learning has been demonstrated by research in psychology, sociology, and organizational development. Cognitive psychologists (e.g., Lave & Wenger, 1991) use the term “situated cognition” to describe learning that is “situated” in a social context. Bank tellers, new parents, doctors, baseball players, journalists, and others pick up part of what they do and much of their understanding of their roles and jobs through conversations with, interactions with, and observations of their peers. Similarly, every teacher and administrator is in constant social contact with colleagues, parents,

district office staff, and others, and these relationships affect their understanding of what happens in school. System theorists argue, in fact, that an organization itself may learn (Senge, 2006) and that one of the best steps for improving an organization is to set it up so that conditions make it easier for individuals to learn more effectively.

In fact, it is now known that the social nature of people is embedded in their biology. In the 1980s and 1990s, neuroscientist Giacomo Rizzolatti and his colleagues (2008) discovered mirror neurons—nerve cells in the brains of observing animals that fire in a similar way to nerve cells of animals that they are observing. The neuron “mirrors’ the behavior of another animal, as though the observer were itself acting” (Wikipedia, which we use regularly as a quick and very useful introductory way of researching a host of topics). This applies to human beings as well as to animals. So the capacity for imitation and empathy is actually built into all of us and is a key to how we pick up our native culture and language (although who we imitate and whether empathy is reinforced or diminished are complex matters).

Types of Learning Communities

Learning together in groups can occur in many different ways, all having certain strengths and weaknesses, and all offering something from which we can borrow. Four to consider are study groups, action research teams, communities of practice, and conversation circles. In addition, online communication is facilitating new kinds of shared learning.

Study Groups

When people have the same material to study, it can be useful to do so together. A study group is essentially a reading and discussion group. Participants usually read material ahead of time and then analyze it collectively when they meet. University students do this often, and it is common in self-directed study groups, used

extensively in countries such as Sweden (Oliver, 1987). In schools, the process tends to be used by teachers who teach a common subject, but it is often useful to create whole-faculty study groups (Murphy & Lick, 2004). In fact, one of the best ways to prepare for an in-depth, schoolwide program of professional development is to spend time as a study group to evaluate the research, experience, and processes that are being advocated in any particular project or approach. Dry Creek Elementary had taken these steps before contacting us (see Chapter 1). One challenge for study groups lies in the material that is selected, which may vary from the trivial to the highly abstract, and in the makeup of the groups, whose members may vary widely in how much they already know and understand.

Action Research Teams

Action research has been explored vigorously for several decades (see, e.g., Reason & Bradbury, 2007). Briefly, it involves taking action in a real-world setting, reflecting on the experience, discussing the implications with colleagues, and then perhaps taking additional action based on the conclusions drawn. It generally uses systematic procedures to learn from experience. Here is a simple definition from Wikipedia: "Action research is a reflective process of progressive problem solving led by individuals working with others in teams... to improve the way they address issues and solve problems."

It is absolutely essential to try things in real-world settings and then take the time to learn from that experience. This aspect of the PrLC process ensures that participants take action systematically and reflect on it. So there needs to be a discussion about implications for practice, a decision to take some action, and procedures for learning adequately from the action taken. In a very general sense, that is what we mean by action research.

Action research can involve a variety of approaches and goals. One type of action research occurs when a group of educators work together to identify a problem, develop a strategy to solve it, and research their own results (Brighton, 2009). For example, a common

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The Process Learning Circle Format

The whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

Process learning circles generate a field of listening while implementing the three elements of professional learning described in Chapter 1. As you'll recall, those elements are the following:

- Relaxed alertness as the optimal state of mind in individuals and the community
- The orchestrated immersion of learners in complex experience in which the content (information, ideas, and skills) is embedded
- The active processing of experience

The complete PrLC procedure is partly linear and structured, in that each meeting has a precise number of phases (four) and each phase has some essential ingredients. However, it also allows for dynamism and change and individual differences.

Each phase can stand alone as an individual process, powerful in its own right. Based on what is now known about how people learn, we suggest that all four need to be present somewhere, in some systematic way, in any effective program of professional development.

Process Learning Circles in Context

Although short talks and single days of inservice training can provide some benefits, it is clear that effective professional development

takes time. In fact, professional development should be ongoing. We suggest that a program with a specific focus should usually last for at least a year.

Professional learning circles are the fulcrum—the central leverage point—of this ongoing professional development process. The learning circles need to meet frequently enough to build relationships and to sustain learning. For that reason, we suggest holding a two-hour meeting at least twice a month.

The groups are suitable for any adult working in or with a school or larger educational unit. Most commonly participants are teachers and administrators. However, invitations to participate can be extended to special resource personnel, librarians, psychologists, secretaries, custodians, and teacher aides, as we did with Dry Creek Elementary, provided the content is appropriate and useful.

The reason for including all members of staff is that every adult contributes to the community that is created for children, and children learn from every adult. Ideally, all adults should have a common mental model of how people learn, their roles and functions should be mutually reinforcing, and they should all be contributors to the community. For instance, a positive and pleasant atmosphere in the school office and on the playground indirectly helps all teachers maintain orderliness and build a good learning environment in their classrooms.

© In general, we suggest that the participants should be volunteers. The reason is that they will be discussing beliefs, sharing practices, revealing uncertainties and doubts, and reflecting on experiences that could have been joyful but also challenging. Participants need to be willing to do that.

The Structure of Process Learning Circles

As the name implies, process learning circles are structured with people seated in a circle, which reduces any sense of hierarchy and makes it easy for everyone to see and hear everyone else. A process leader guides the group. This person can be an “outside” consultant

or a member of the circle. And sometimes leadership rotates, for reasons discussed later.

Each two-hour meeting has four phases, which we briefly describe here. Each phase is also discussed in more depth in one of the chapters that follows.

Phase 1: Ordered Sharing (10–15 Minutes)

Primary purpose: Initiate a field of listening.

This activity calls for each participant to respond to a question or a short, powerful saying introduced by the group leader (see Chapter 5 for some examples). Each shares a personal story, a thought, or a reflection. The sharing continues around the circle, with each person speaking in turn. Everyone pays full attention to each speaker without interruption. This is the core process for developing listening skills and building the atmosphere of respectful listening and relaxed alertness that is so essential to the process.

Phase 2: Reflective Study (1 Hour)

Primary purpose: Understand and personalize core ideas.

In this phase new material for the session is introduced. This can be done in different ways (see Chapter 6), but in any case, it is extremely important during this phase to examine the material intellectually *and* personally. In other words, the core ideas and skills need to be analyzed and discussed, and participants should also bring to mind personal experiences that seem to be related and raise questions of personal or professional relevance. During this phase, the discussion is open and need not go around the circle.

Phase 3: Commitment to Action and Action Research (25 Minutes)

Primary purpose: Learn by doing and reflecting.

Now is the time for participants, either individually or in discussion with others, to decide on, and to commit to, actually using some aspect of the material in the following weeks. The commitment