

Designing and Implementing Effective Professional Learning

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The Need for Change

Using the same ineffective approach again and again while expecting different results may not be the definition of insanity, but it sure isn't smart.

—Unknown

Traditional Approaches to Teacher Professional Learning

In the United States, every K–12 educator participates in some form of professional learning each year. My experiences with professional development at the start of my career as a high school science teacher more than 20 years ago may not be so different from what many teachers experience today. As a new teacher, I was often confused about why a lesson fell flat or how to connect with a difficult student. I wanted and needed professional learning that was relevant and useful but little was forthcoming. My principal observed me once each year and provided feedback in the form of a checklist, my department head never visited my classes, and school cultural norms made teachers visiting one another's classes taboo. I made incremental improvements in my teaching by trial and error, guided by my instincts about what worked and what didn't. Several times each year we had professional development days, during which an outside "expert" would speak on an educational topic chosen by school administrators. The

focus of each professional development day was different, and there was never any follow-up or opportunities for reflective dialogue with colleagues. These days seemed to be based on the premise that learning happens as a direct result of exposure to new information, as if upon hearing new information we would learn it. We usually competed for seats in the back of the room where we could grade student assignments, plan for classes, or think about how to best support a challenging student.

Schools in the United States historically have been dominated by an egg-crate culture in which teachers are isolated from one another in separate classrooms as well as insulated from the need to demonstrate their own learning and growth. Richard Elmore (2002), professor of educational leadership at Harvard, argues that many schools in the United States are “hostile and inhospitable places for adult learning” (p. 4) because there are few mechanisms by which new knowledge about teaching and learning can enter schools; few structures and processes in place to help teachers adapt, practice, and polish new practices; and few sources of assistance for teachers struggling to make improvements. Teacher learning is often pushed aside in schools as teachers and administrators race through the day meeting all of their other duties.

Perhaps at least partially due to the fact they are easier to schedule, and interfere less with other responsibilities and obligations, professional learning opportunities for teachers typically have consisted of workshops, speakers, conferences, and short-term courses. These approaches have been shown to be ineffective in bringing about improvements in teacher knowledge, classroom instruction, and student learning and have been criticized for being disconnected from the real issues and challenges teachers face on a daily basis (Blank, de las Alas, & Smith, 2008).

Why is this? First, these approaches rarely address specific teacher needs, student needs, or school needs. Professional development programs are meant to improve the classroom practices of teachers and enhance student learning, but these goals are almost impossible to achieve without tailoring them to specific teacher and student needs. Yet teacher and student needs often are not considered when schools select professional learning activities—a sure recipe for teacher cynicism and resistance. We expect teachers to assess student needs and design learning activities to address them, yet many schools continue to ignore these fundamental principles of instructional design when selecting professional learning opportunities for their teachers.

Second, teachers are often passive recipients of information in traditional professional learning rather than being engaged in the

design and delivery of the activity. In the traditional paradigm, professional development is seen as something that is done to teachers rather than as a process requiring teacher participation. However, when teachers actively involve students in activities rather than just lecture to them, students are more engaged and their learning is enhanced. Educators know this learning principle but often fail to apply it when considering professional learning experiences for their teachers.

Third, opportunities for follow-up on the ideas presented are rare and poorly organized. A teacher once told me a story about how she spent several days in workshops focusing on differentiated instruction, received no follow-up instruction or support, and then was asked to demonstrate at the end of the semester how she had implemented differentiated instruction principles with her students. Again, good teachers do not expect student learning to occur without reinforcing concepts and skills, but follow-up for professional learning activities is frequently fragmented or nonexistent.

Fourth, teachers have few opportunities to collaborate with colleagues on the skills and ideas presented. When teachers can collectively reflect on what they have learned, share insights about what it means, and share thoughts about potential applications to their instruction, they are much more likely to add what they have experienced in a professional learning activity to their instructional repertoire. But because school culture has favored teacher isolation and few structures exist to encourage collegial sharing, collaboration among colleagues remains rare in our schools.

Finally, opportunities to develop and practice new lessons and approaches based on what is presented are rare, and opportunities to receive feedback on attempts to practice new methods are even more unusual. Teachers and coaches expect that multiple opportunities for practice, with accompanying feedback, will be needed for significant improvements in learning and performance to occur. No professional learning experience can lead to significant improvements in teaching and learning without building in regular opportunities for teacher practice and feedback, and yet this rarely happens in our schools.

Despite multiple studies demonstrating the ineffectiveness of traditional forms of teacher professional learning (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009; Desimone, Porter, Garet, Yoon, & Birman, 2002), and despite teachers and school leaders criticizing them for wasting time and resources, research indicates that professional learning opportunities in U.S. schools continue to consist primarily of traditional workshops, speakers, and conferences