

The

PD Curator

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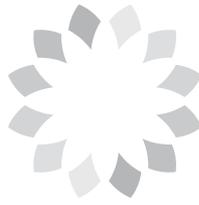
The PD Curator

HOW TO **DESIGN** PEER-TO-PEER PROFESSIONAL LEARNING
THAT **ELEVATES TEACHERS AND TEACHING**

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Introduction: A Case for Peer-to-Peer PD

My former colleague Sharan was one of those absolutely *brilliant* teachers, yet for a long time, I didn't know this from actually watching her teach. We didn't have a culture of peer observation (even though we wished we did). Sharan and I were discussing this one day, and we agreed that we would try to start a new trend of popping into one another's classrooms. A few mornings later, when she was teaching and I wasn't, I visited her.

I learned a ton. I thought my sense of pacing was good, but she managed to pack more learning into 45 minutes than I would have thought possible. Her students always began with what she called a cognitive warm-up (which I won't describe because I'm hoping she'll write her own book about it). Next, Sharan had her students write diary entries from the perspective of either Romeo or Juliet right after they met. Every student had actively participated in two different meaningful activities, and it was only 10 minutes into the period.

The diary entries also springboarded into the main lesson on foreshadowing. Sharan's students defined *foreshadowing* in their own words, offered examples of foreshadowing from *Romeo and Juliet*, and then read the prologue to Act II. Her students quickly pushed their desks against the walls, formed a circle, and read the text several different ways to begin to understand its meaning. Sharan then had her students get into pairs, sit on the floor (where they'd been standing in a circle), and analyze the prologue. She also harkened back to the beginning of the lesson by asking how the prologue foreshadowed later developments in the act. By the time I was headed downstairs to teach my class, I'd taken five pages of notes.

One of the best ways to learn how to be a better teacher is by watching, listening to, and experimenting with the practices of great teachers. I started to think about other colleagues I could learn from. From Abena, I could learn how to raise the issue of justice from within the curriculum, ask appropriate questions, and push students to discuss them within a safe environment. From Vincent, I could learn how to use music to help students better understand the content—and more generally, how to create a stimulating atmosphere for learning. From Elizabeth, I could learn how to keep students focused on respecting their diverse thinking processes over finding a “right” answer. I also thought about what my colleagues could learn from observing me.

Meanwhile, our school was spending thousands of dollars a year sending teachers to conferences and institutes and bringing in high-priced consultants to tell us about the latest education fads. Sometimes these consultants gave us nothing but jargon and slideshows, and we were left wondering why their paychecks were so much larger than ours. But even when the presentations advanced our thinking and gave us clear takeaways, the message was still that *this person* was the expert . . . which meant *we*, the teachers, were not.

I don’t want to sound ungrateful; lots of schools and districts make teachers fund their own whiteboard markers, so high-quality professional development (PD) is out of reach for far too many. It’s important for teachers to stay current and not get so trapped in our own bubbles that we miss opportunities to learn from innovators outside our schools. But what about the innovators inside our schools? Why couldn’t we learn from them?

I was lucky enough to have a department chair who encouraged teachers to learn from one another and created opportunities for us to learn together at our meetings. That was how I found out about some of Sharan’s practices and why we originally ended up talking about observing each other. But then it was up to us to find time to visit each other’s classrooms.

It was also up to us to keep our minds busy when we sat through speaker after speaker who talked about stuff that didn’t directly relate to our experience or that we already knew—or that someone in the room could have presented better. No wonder so many of us spent those sessions texting, emailing, doodling, or whispering to one another. It’s not especially respectful when teachers behave this way, but it’s also understandable. Teachers have very little patience for PD sessions that lack relevance to their students and subject, when purportedly new information and strategies are just repackaged versions of the same old same old, when a high-priced consultant tells

them what they already know and lacks interest in their own perspectives, or when they have no opportunities to generate and share ideas.

Right around the time I was noticing how much untapped talent my school had, I joined Twitter. There, I found a huge community of teachers who were actively seeking professional growth. I started participating in Twitter chats, which is when a large group of users discuss a predefined topic at a specific time, and quickly discovered there are chats on every topic imaginable—from assessment to game-based education to LGBTQIA+ equity. There are chats for teachers of every grade level and subject, and there are chats for teachers in specific states and districts. In every case, teachers use their “free time”—time that could be spent with their families or leisure pursuits—so they can learn not from an edu-celebrity but from one another. Why can’t we also do this within the confines of the school day and with our own colleagues instead of with a bunch of internet strangers?

Twitter chats and rogue peer observation sessions are just two examples of teachers seeking more meaningful professional learning from and with one another. Other forms of peer-to-peer PD include edcamps, where participants just show up and share their expertise (Edcamp Foundation, n.d.); pineapple charts, which are ways teachers let colleagues know they’re doing something cool and worth watching; #ObserveMe signs, which invite people into classrooms to offer feedback; and book clubs, which happen in person and online.

However, even though today’s teachers have more choices than ever in what and how they learn, personalized PD creates its own set of problems. First, given a choice, people often gravitate toward what’s familiar, easy, comfortable, or fun (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999; Waltz & Follette, 2009). Teachers might seek PD in the very areas in which they’re already strong and avoid PD in the areas that would be most beneficial to them—out of a fear of exposing their weaknesses, a lack of interest (which contributed to their lack of skill in the first place), or a belief that they already know as much as they need to in a given area.

Second, just because teachers are the ones creating their own professional learning events doesn’t mean those events are good. Just as there can be a boring, incoherent, and ultimately worthless keynote speaker, there can also be a boring, incoherent, and ultimately worthless edcamp session, Twitter chat, or book group. The events teachers create for themselves, or at least those they choose for themselves, won’t necessarily include diverse perspectives or give everyone a way to contribute. Arguably, education

consultants create better sessions simply because they have more practice and opportunities for participant feedback.

Finally, if each teacher goes off on his or her own personal PD journey, then there's no *shared* journey. Colleagues don't necessarily discuss their learning, learn together, or learn from one another. The learning events don't necessarily build on each other in an intentional way or change practice at the school level.

This book is about how professional learning experiences can become more inclusive, participatory, cohesive, and effective—and about the role you, as a leader, can play in creating those experiences. That role isn't so much administrative as it is *curatorial*—selecting content, creating a process for how people interact with it, fitting the pieces together into a meaningful whole, and discovering whether the event has been successful.

When I first started teaching, I'm not sure I'd ever used the word *curate*. I knew what it meant, but since I didn't work in a museum or the art world, I don't think I ever had occasion to say the word out loud.

Now, everybody is talking about curating. We curate our news feeds, our playlists, our weekends, and our sock collections. In this book, we'll explore what it might mean to curate professional learning.

Some professional curators lament the fact that *curate* has become a buzzword, used whenever anyone selects and assembles a bunch of stuff they like. They argue that curation is a more serious and demanding pursuit than picking out tapas for a dinner party or not-obnoxious people to follow on Instagram. They want to give the word *curate* back to museums, art, and artifacts. It seems like this gripe has less to do with which things can be curated and more to do with what the act of curation entails.

Although I'm not usually one to get excited about etymology, the word *curate* has a history that matters for purposes of this book. *Curate* comes from the Latin verb *curare*, meaning "to take care of." Curation is care. At a museum, curators care for the collection. They know about each photograph, gown, or fossil. They can tell you what an object is, point out details, and explain how it was found or made. They know how to preserve and protect it. They know how to display it so others can appreciate it. Increasingly, they care not just for the objects themselves but for the people who come to view, understand, admire, honor, interrogate, and learn from them.

Curators design ways for people to interact with objects and with one another, creating an immersive intellectual, emotional, and social experience—or at least the potential for one—while attending to people's needs. The artwork and artifacts, and the

experience they contribute to, need to be accessible to and respectful of everyone. As a PD curator, you're not just giving teachers an exciting menu of options to choose from—or even weeding out the boring and pointless ones. You're caring for the professionals and for the profession.

Each chapter of this book includes practical tools and protocols you can use alone or in combination to help you become a curator of meaningful in-house professional learning. Along the way, we'll explore some of the psychology behind tapping into the expertise and interests of a diverse faculty, accounting for the vulnerability that peer-to-peer PD invokes, building professional learning units, and supporting teachers as they adopt and adapt new practices.

Chapter 1 discusses how to *structure* teachers' schedules to make time for in-house professional learning, along with how to set up their spaces to create a learning culture. Rather than encouraging large-scale changes, this chapter offers suggestions for how to use the resources you already have at your school.

Chapter 2 is about how to make professional learning *inclusive*. Just as museum curators can legitimize artists by including their work in a show, PD curators have the power to legitimize the work of diverse teachers and the entire teaching profession. Instead of only looking to “thought leaders” and hot topics for material worthy of study, you can discover talent inside your school building and deliberately elevate teachers' voices. The tools in this chapter are designed to help you build your awareness of faculty expertise, interests, goals, and needs, which you can then leverage in peer-to-peer PD.

Chapter 3 is about how to make professional learning *participatory*. Just as many museum curators don't simply display work but rather invite active engagement, PD curators can provide teachers with safe, authentic, and flexible ways to learn from and with one another. This chapter contains six ways to structure professional learning so teachers will find it relevant, dynamic, and enriching for their personal practice and relationships. Each of these professional learning structures includes a step-by-step process, reflection questions, and suggestions for how you can support teachers who use them.

Chapter 4 is about how to make professional learning *cohesive*. Good curation, whether of art, artifacts, or PD, involves more than selecting things that go together and pleasing the audience. It also involves designing a set of experiences that build on one another and move in a clear direction. This chapter shows how to create a meaningful professional learning series or unit so that instead of being one-and-done, each

PD event contributes to a larger outcome. The chapter discusses two kinds of PD units, gives examples, and explains how to create your own based on priorities at your school.

Chapter 5 is about how to make professional learning *effective*. For any curator, assessing how well the curated content worked depends on what we mean by *working*. This chapter offers three different definitions of what we might mean by effective PD and includes assessment tools based on each of those definitions.

Finally, whereas the first five chapters focus on how to curate professional learning, **Chapter 6** focuses on why that work might be worthwhile to *you*—even with everything else you have to do. It includes self-reflection exercises to help you bring your own values to the work of curating inclusive, participatory, cohesive, and effective PD.

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