

When Teachers Are the Experts

How Schools Can Improve Professional Development

By Ross Hunefeld

I think I'm going to miss the coffee and Danish most of all. I won't miss staring at the clock with my politely disengaged colleagues. And I won't miss the guy up front, some former principal or ace teacher, who's going to teach us about some topic that has been deemed important for the entire staff.

These whole-school workshop sessions that many of us have experienced are what I'll call "old PD": professional development in the form of an expert up front and teachers listening passively. If improved teaching practice and better student outcomes are the goal, then these methods of keeping teachers up to date and growing professionally are not working.

What my school is learning, and what current research suggests, is that teachers don't improve by listening to someone tell them how to do something newer or better in their classrooms. They learn by working together to address problems they themselves identify in their schools and classrooms. This type of staff development goes by many names, but I'll use the term "collaborative PD." The problems with old PD are so many, and the benefits of collaborative PD so great, that the days are surely numbered for the former. Yes, old-style professional development is doomed.

But, some will say, if we've been doing it for so long, what can be wrong with bringing in experts to share their knowledge with teachers? One major issue is the variation in teachers' experience and ability levels. Any group presentation runs the risk of being too advanced for some and too basic for others. Teachers also have different interests and needs, so the topic of the day may lack relevance for many in the room.

Given this, is it any wonder that we tend to see terrible rates of carry-over from presentation to classroom practice? Studies show that techniques taught in old-style professional-development workshops result in extremely poor classroom implementation. On top of this, the cost of hiring experts to provide such programming is high. In today's economy, no one has extra money to throw into ineffective training events.

The truth is, these expenditures are unnecessary. A staff of hardworking teachers with access to basic technology could learn much more together than they would under the tutelage of an imported expert. Rather than hiring external presenters, schools can see much better results by putting the responsibility for, and the control of, professional growth in the hands of their own teachers.

There are few problems teachers can't solve, and few techniques they can't master, given adequate time and resources. Collaboration allows them to share the expertise within a school, and gives veteran teachers the opportunity to take on leadership roles. Teachers are also able to work together to learn about areas in which the school has no existing expertise.

Professional learning in this context becomes much more authentic, as teacher-learners choose their own topics to emphasize and proceed at a pace that is appropriate to them and to their students' needs. Experimentation with new teaching methods happens in a classroom-as-laboratory setting, so the implementation is virtually automatic.

Technological improvements in communication and the transfer of information have made professional learning communities like this highly feasible. Teachers have much more access to information today than even a few years ago. Through the Internet, they can pull up full texts of scholarly and more-general articles on education, as well as view video libraries of excellent teaching. They are also able to share and read the opinions of other educators on countless edu-blogs. And they can expand their learning through online presentations and webinars. Such resources are readily available, free or for a small fee.

At my Chicago high school, Noble Street College Prep, we gave up doing old PD and organized professional learning communities, what many call PLCs, instead. These are groupings in which teachers have the chance to work collaboratively with members of their departments.

Each PLC began by looking at student test data from the previous year, to set a clear goal for student achievement. Then, to meet the goal, each PLC followed an action-research model involving new learning, choosing a strategy to meet the goal, experimenting with the new strategy, and checking progress against the goal.

Math teachers, for example, worked together to improve the level of questioning in their classes. English teachers worked on vertical alignment of their planning. And science and elective teachers began implementing reading strategies in their classes. Reading teachers worked on pre-, during-, and post-reading strategies to better reach their students.

At the end of each semester, we held a “share fair” at which teachers shared with one another what they had learned. The result was soon apparent: As teachers learned from each other, student learning also improved. This collaborative approach is one of the reasons our students’ test scores have reached their highest point in the school’s 10-year history.

Our system is by no means perfect, and implementation has not been easy. We had initial missteps in determining how much structure to provide, we spent too little time on team-building and establishing group norms, we struggled to find time in the workday for meetings, and we had difficulty establishing the best ways to measure progress. Still, the obstacles highlight another of the approach’s benefits: With good teacher feedback, we can continually adjust and improve our system. And we believe a flexible, collaborative approach to professional development, while not easy, is one that can be implemented at any school.

A widespread shift to collaborative PD, however, would require some changes in the education world. A first one would encompass education consultants and academics, who play a major role of discovering the best practices we hope our teachers will implement. These experts are certainly important, but in the new plan they would have to change how they presented their material. Increasingly, experts would respond over long distances, in individualized ways, to targeted groups of teachers.

Rather than having a reading expert address an entire school staff, for instance, groups of teachers working on content-area reading strategies in various schools around the country could interact with and learn from a university-based expert via conference call, webinar, e-mail, or video.

Second, schools of education would need to include some components of collaborative “action research” in their undergraduate programs, producing students ready to direct their own continuing professional development. Independent research and study is a common

component in undergraduate work in science and engineering. Our teachers need to be as adept as our scientists at working in teams to uncover current knowledge in their field and pushing themselves to new learning.

Finally, schools must place an emphasis on hiring staff members who are willing to collaborate and who wish to constantly improve their practice. A new teacher willing to work and learn with colleagues will quickly surpass a more experienced colleague who is not interested in collaborating. Principals should take this into account as they look for new members to add to their teams.

With these changes, and a continued call from researchers for more collaboration, it will not be long before old PD practices fade away and collaborative PD is the norm. And schools will reap the benefits: Students will have more creative and engaged teachers; budgets will balance, with professional-development funds used on resources that yield greater returns; and experts will expand the use of technology to reach teachers more efficiently and directly.

My only hope is that somehow, even in this new world of teacher growth, we can hold on to the best parts of the old way: free coffee and Danish.

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