

Professional Learning That Energizes Teachers and Brings Change to the Classroom

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It's time to admit that professional learning sessions that both interest and excite teachers *and* result in educational innovation in classroom practice do not happen, and will never happen, in done-in-a-day professional development presentations. Fly-by professional development presented by an animated speaker with skinny knowledge and a joke a minute may seem appealing, but in the end, what are teachers really taking away? And will it make any difference in students' success in learning?

So how do we increase the likelihood that professional development will actually change teaching and learning? First, we establish a *framework for effective professional learning* that commits time and support to teachers as they work to apply new ideas:

1. Build a solid and agreed-upon foundation of common vocabulary, definitions, and understandings related to the educational innovation.
2. Start small by providing some initial teaching and learning strategies that are ready for classroom application.
3. Provide teachers with time for planning, sharing, and problem-solving in job-alike discipline or grade-level groups.
4. Up to a year later, extend previous strategies with a second level of classroom ideas.
5. Provide instructional coaching with a trusted school leader who can give teachers descriptive feedback on new instructional strategies.
6. Move teachers into more-autonomous peer support through collaborative planning and lesson study in groups; this may involve professional learning communities.
7. Consider implementing co-planning and co-teaching models to lighten planning and management demands.
8. Provide ongoing critical reflection on how the innovation is implemented in the classroom, and modify and adjust plans as necessary to ensure teacher success.

This framework represents a comprehensive and long-term approach to professional learning that increases the likelihood that new ideas and strategies will actually take root in teachers' classroom practices.

Next, we consider what makes professional learning sessions engaging and exciting.

Professional learning that engages and excites teachers . . .

1. **Is teacher driven, relevant, and applicable to their work in the classroom.** If we want teachers to make instructional decisions based on data, facilitators of professional learning should do the same. Prior to sessions, I use online inventories to gather information on the frequency teachers use particular differentiation strategies so that my plans align with their needs. Along with conversations with their school leaders, this data enables me to help teachers improve, using new strategies that actually extend teachers' practices. Posing a series of statements at the beginning of a professional learning session and asking teachers to respond with "thumbs up or down" or "fist to five" enables you to gather data on the spot to differentiate your plans. I may offer a list of topics for each training session and then ask teachers to prioritize their degree of interest in each: *What topics are of greatest urgency in the work you do in teaching and learning?* Then I determine on the spot which topics to simply touch on and which need more in-depth focus. These strategies result in greater enthusiasm, engagement, and high praise from teachers who are too infrequently consulted about what they want or need in professional learning.
2. **Clearly places new initiatives within the context of present school practices, mission, and vision.** Although school leaders may see how a new initiative fits with previous efforts, teachers may not. Each year there is the next new thing that past experience shows will fade away over time. Connect the dots! Graphically represent how this year's professional learning topic builds on or complements past efforts or the school's mission and/or vision.
3. **Honors their work.** Are there opportunities during the session to enable teachers to share with a partner or the group, a similar experience, problem, or practice? Invite teachers to provide examples of the instructional practices in play in their classrooms. Encourage them to share problems presented and resolved by a particular innovation. Has a teacher or group of teachers already been trying this innovation? Can they share stories, student products, or tips for effective classroom implementation? Remember that, just like students in an inclusion classroom, teachers are in very different places in their professional practice.
4. **Is highly interactive and provides lots of modeling and active engagement with strategies.** Sequence direct presentation of new ideas with periods of active engagement, conversation, and hands-on/minds-on work. Consider brain breaks every 20 minutes or so to have teachers get up, move about, share an idea, or reflect on a practice. Tell teachers to find someone they have not talked with, someone wearing the same color, or someone with similar shoes and chat for two minutes about what they have learned thus far.
5. **Briefly connects strategies to research foundations.** As professional educators, we need to know how what we do reflects best practices. Quickly remark on the source or evidence for a practice you are promoting, note the source on your presentation slide, or include a list of citations or resources for additional reading in your handouts. Prepare for "who says so?" questions.

6. **Provides time to reflect on, consider, react to, or adjust thinking or perspectives.** The brain needs time to process new information. Give teachers time to jot down or sketch out an idea or to talk with table buddies.
7. **Sets up an expectation for direct classroom application.** What's the homework assignment for teacher application of new strategies or ideas? Consider making it an expectation that teachers will try something out in the classroom. Remind them to start small but start someplace: Choose one new strategy or idea and work with it for a while, then add another once you feel confident with the first. Provide an avenue for a feedback loop so teachers can share what they tried, how it worked with students, and any adjustments they would make when they try it again. Encourage them to share with colleagues student work samples or digital photos of student products. Could this exchange occur during before-school coffee or at lunch? How about at roundtable discussions by grade level or discipline on an early release or late start day?
8. **Promotes a sense of enthusiasm for teaching and learning.** Teachers want to know how the strategy will “look” in the classroom. You can show this using a YouTube clip, a specific student example, work samples, and teacher-tested tips. Make sure what you present is both doable and practical!

As facilitators of learning experiences, it is critical that we recognize teachers as professionals with valuable insights that need to be shared. Committing to an effective professional learning framework and skillfully planning sessions that respond to teachers' needs and interests are critical not only for meaningfully engaging educators, but also for making a difference for the students in their classrooms.



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