

Fight like a butterfly: Three critical elements for taking the sting out of  
professional development

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## **Abstract**

This paper describes the need for developing, implementing and sustaining professional development (PD) designed to provide a network of coaching support for teachers, an element of independent online study and a collaborative network of peers. Leaders recognize the importance of school structure but need to further address the impact of professional development as a means of creating a culture of change and support for teacher leaders focused on student achievement and shared values.

### *Keywords:*

Professional Development

Adult Learning Theory

Professional Learning Communities

“What is the recipe for successful achievement? To my mind there are just four essential ingredients: Choose a career you love...Give it the best there is in you...Seize the opportunities...And be a member of the team.” --Benjamin F. Fearless

## **Introduction**

According to Hall (2007), “Internal leadership development can preserve the core of a school or district's culture and allow it to stand strong against the buffeting winds of change despite new leaders taking over the helm” (p.45). It is with continuous embedded professional development for teacher leaders that this vision can become a reality within our schools. We have identified three critical areas that must be combined to reach teachers. They are coaching, collaboration and blending these elements using technology. Coaching implies leadership embedded practices. Administrators can embrace PD as a way to connect with teachers in a coaching role. They can model leadership and pedagogy while building relationships with faculty members. Collaboration among peers through professional learning communities of practice further adds to the sustainability of this model. Finally, technology is a continuous, accessible link to both on demand training as well as aiding with the interconnectedness among all members of the faculty. In order to develop an effective, sustainable model, planning and critical evaluation of the outcomes are essential (Gusky & Yoon, 2009).

Our literature review will examine the current research reporting on the most effective professional development practices. We hope to convey the sentiment that professional development must be embraced as an essential and integral part of teaching practices (Corcoran, 1995). It will answer the question, ‘How can technology support collaborative, analytical and reflective learning practices using job-embedded professional development strategies?’

## **Review of Literature**

### **Professional Development and Adult Learning**

#### **The need for teacher leader modeling**

Recently the ASCD published a new website called [teacherleaderstandards.com](http://teacherleaderstandards.com). The seven standards for teacher leadership are described as integral aspects of a successful teacher. This new model for professional development rests heavily on the ability of teachers to embody these qualities. The model will show what research teaches us in each of the seven areas and how these insights can be incorporated into job-embedded professional learning that offers sustainability. There are several questions that guide this research.

- What are the characteristics of adult learners and is there a framework for adult learning theory that should be part of our professional development approach?
- What is the relationship between teacher inquiry and student learning?
- What is job-embedded professional learning and how does it work?

#### **Adult learner characteristics and adult learning theories**

The most commonly accepted theory of adult learning was developed by Malcolm Knowles (1984), known as andragogy. It suggests that adults know what they need to learn based on their background experiences. Additionally, teacher attributes include the ability to problem solve, ask questions, adapt lessons to meet the need of their students. Teachers also need to feel like students, engaged and excited about learning. Adult learners need as aspect of self-directed learning available to them. All teachers come with a vast supply of pertinent experiences that must be valued so the opportunity to share and receive confirmation is critical to teacher learning. In short, our model must provide teachers a vehicle for professional growth and adaptation for the classroom (Beavers, 2009).

Mezirow (2000) defines a different kind of learning. It is the process of transformation which occurs when learners make a paradigm shift triggered by new situations and experiences that allows them to see themselves differently in relationship to the world. Professional learning can have this kind of impact. Teachers who are empowered to use new strategies successfully in the classroom have transformed their view of what is possible.

### **The relationship between teacher inquiry and professional learning**

Transformative learning occurs as a result of self-reflection and critical inquiry. How can teachers become better researchers? How might they also become more proficient in the area of self-reflection? When teachers conduct their own research they become part of the knowledge building community of practice. Like students, teachers must be passion-driven by a research question (Dana & Yendol-Silva, 2003). But all research does not take the form of case studies in the classroom. Teachers can also write and respond to current research in the field and share their findings with coworkers. Similarly, article and book studies self-selected by teachers with similar interests can effectively increase teacher awareness, connectedness and transfer to improved teaching practice in the classroom.

According to Guskey and Yoon (2009), improvements in student learning could be attributed to the influence of outside experts. This suggests that in-house efforts are less effective. Could it be that by incorporating outside expertise through articles and videos, the in-house learning experiences could have a positive impact on student learning? With a focus on teacher research and reflection, new ideas would become part of the existing practices leading to transformational learning for teachers and students. Guskey and Yoon (2009) highlighted four significant factors leading to successful professional learning experiences. They include: time, follow-up, activities, and content. Time can be maximized by well-structured encounters and

self-directed and self-selected, learning opportunities such as web-based modules. Follow-up is another critical area of professional learning. Sustained professional learning requires consistent, systematic follow-up support. Activities and content were shown to be closely related. No specific activity-types arose outside of their direct relationship to the content delivery. In terms of content, the rule of thumb is to keep the focus on how teachers can interpret and translate the information to their students.

### **Job-embedded professional learning: How it works**

What are the implications of job-embedded professional learning? According to Guskey and Yoon's research (2009), four requirements must be in place to yield effective results. First, measurable goals must be established for professional development and an assessment made of its impact. Second, prior to adopting any professional learning modules, a careful study must examine the nature of research supporting its implementation. Third, new strategies should be tested on a small scale to reduce waste of time and money. Lastly, teaching professionals should insist on rigor. Rigor refers to the merits of the program based on empirical evidence found in research.

Increasing the performance and skill levels of teachers must be an ongoing process. Professional learning can influence positive student outcomes. In order to create an environment with effective job-embedded professional learning, administrators must take an instructional leadership role and build a distributed leadership network of teachers. Pedagogic leadership is leadership dedicated to influencing a change in teaching practices (Macneill, Cavanagh, & Silcox, 2005). A principal must determine the real goal of education. Will the focus become instruction or learning? Pedagogical leadership encompasses more fully the aspects of how children learn rather than how they are instructed. The pedagogic leader is one who is constantly

engaged in influencing changes impacting student learning. Ongoing dialog, involving all stakeholder in the learning process facilitate change over time. Interpersonal relationships have the greatest influence on leading change.

Distributed leadership plays a pivotal role in establishing job-embedded collaborative support for the implementation of new teaching strategies (Spillane *et al*, 2001). Katzenmeyer and Moller (1996) show by extension the role of teacher-leader involved in the decision-making process. Yost, Vogel and Liang (2009) underscore the importance of building a bond of trust between administrators and teacher leaders. Additionally, a coaching or mentoring role is integral to generating a sustained impact of professional learning among teacher participants. In sum, Yost et al (2009) provided evidence that job-embedded professional learning positively impacts both teacher efficacy and student learning.

### **The influence of teacher leaders in the area of professional learning**

Reeves (2008) claims teachers may be more influential than books and lectures. He studies the impact of teacher influence and the value of strong teacher models as an aspect of professional learning. Authenticity is a key component of successful professional learning within schools. Schools can increase the credibility of examples by capturing their own teaching staff in the classroom. To dispel the question about quality, Reeves suggests that the learning environment for teachers should be safe and allow for others to consider alternatives to mastery that meet their own classroom needs. Teachers should be encouraged to share best practices, anonymous case studies and demonstrate how they overcame academic or behavioral challenges. This can be of particular benefit to less experienced teachers. Finally, teachers often struggle to strike a balance between upholding the standards and allowing for creativity. Professional boundaries must be established but not use to micromanage teachers in their classrooms.

## **Professional learning communities**

### **Professional development**

There has been a paradigm shift gathering momentum for over twenty years (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2006) regarding teachers and their professional development. Specifically, during the current climate of teacher accountability, professional development needs to consist of more than merely teachers' acquisition of new knowledge and skills. Collaboration among peers through professional learning communities of practice is an essential element of professional development for teachers that should not be overlooked.

Successful collaborative cultures are formally recognized as communities of practice or professional learning communities (Sergiovanni, 2005) where members have faith in the craft of knowledge and wisdom of those closest to the classroom. It is through the development of effective networks that allow teachers to share thoughts, ideas, and best practices that we can begin to create a vision that allows for the development of teacher leaders and adequate and sustainable professional development for teachers. Professional learning and professional development should provide teachers with opportunities to engage in learning over longer time frames. Professional development (Duncan- Howell, 2010) needs to be supportive, continuous, and allow teachers the ability to reflect on teaching practices over time.

In order to support professional development that allows teachers the ability to reflect on best practices over time, professional learning must be sustainable through the development of professional collaboration and learning must meet the specific needs of busy classroom teachers (Duncan- Howell, 2010). The establishment of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) is just one way in which this vision can be accomplished.



### **PLCs and collaboration**

Lujan and Day (2010) stressed that “twenty-first century teaching initiatives place emphasis on the formation of collaborative professional cultures” (p.10). Collaboration among peers through professional learning communities are developed to support teachers by developing a network of peers with which teachers may share ideas, problem solve, analyze data, and develop curricular decisions. Principals and teachers should focus on collaborative learning based on shared responsibilities in order to facilitate school effectiveness and teacher satisfaction.

Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009) stressed that developmental opportunities for teacher leaders should “build teachers’ skills such as ...listening, facilitating groups, and learning techniques to negotiate with administrators, other teachers, parents, or other key stakeholders in order to influence positive action” (p.105). Professional development and supportive collaborative leaning communities are needed to allow teachers to develop these necessary skills. Learning communities have the opportunity to maximize learning by learning from successes and failures. PLCs focus on continuous learning, dispersing what they know, peer collaboration, and viewing learning as a professional obligation (Sergiovanni, 2005). Professional learning communities are focused on two main principles. First, it is assumed that knowledge is situated in the day-to-day lived experiences of teachers and best understood through critical reflection with others who share the same experience (Buysse, Sparkman, & Wesley, 2003). Second, it is assumed that actively engaging teachers in professional learning communities will increase their professional knowledge and enhance student learning (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2006).

With the move towards 21<sup>st</sup> century teaching and learning, online communities for professional development could be used to increase collaboration and communication among

colleagues within different schools, districts, states, and even countries (Duncan- Howell, 2010). The use of active online communities and learning environments can support and increase collaboration among teachers. Online professional learning communities provide busy teachers with the flexibility to engage in on-line synchronous or asynchronous two-way communication with colleagues that is not constrained by time, thus giving teachers the ability to reflect on teaching practices over time, the opportunity to collaborate with peers, as well as the freedom to balance additional professional and personal commitments.

### **PLCs and student achievement**

PLC's support that the core mission of formal education (DuFour, 2000) is to not only simply ensure that students are taught but to also ensure that they learn. In order for students to learn it is essential that schools have the means necessary with which to increase student achievement and promote continuous professional development among staff. One crucial concept that affects a school's ability to increase student achievement and effectiveness is the way in which professional learning communities and professional development are utilized within the school structure (Sigurðardóttir, 2010).

By ensuring the development of sustainable PLCs teachers can begin to engage in a process of collective inquiry (Marx, 2007) and use best practices guided by data from multiple assessments of student learning to create a reflective dialogues about instruction. Teachers work together to determine what impact instructional strategies play on student achievement and learning. PLC members are then able to engage in a process of collective inquiry and use best practices guided by data from multiple assessments of student learning to create a reflective dialogue about instruction.

DuFour (2000) ascertains that “collaborative teacher conversations must quickly move beyond what we are expected to teach, to how we will know when each student has learned” (p.9). Using reflective dialogue allows teachers to work together to determine what impact instructional strategies play on student achievement and learning. The intended outcome of these opportunities is to reflect upon continuous improvement and the creation of conditions for ongoing learning in schools (DuFour, 2000). Sergiovanni (2005) offered leaders a clear and compelling way to help their schools achieve extraordinary results by building a school culture that not only supports a culture of leadership but also clearly defines how to build trust that leads to the creation of a common vision that unifies principals, teachers, parents, and students under a common set of shared values, goals, and beliefs. Schools that achieve are not constructed overnight. It is with the continual professional development of the staff that best practices are developed, executed, challenged, and developed again to meet the needs of ever changing school populations that success can be achieved.

### **Technology and...**

#### **Traditional versus current professional development trends**

Over ten years ago, Killion (2000) correctly predicted the role that technology would come to play in many areas of professional development for teachers: obtaining and renewing certification and licenses, obtaining advanced degrees, keeping up with new developments in the teaching profession, and networking with peers. Just four years later, Carter (2004) had identified different online learning models already in existence and was examining them for varying degrees of success. Carter referred to online learning as “anytime/anywhere” learning and noted its potential to save school systems thousands of dollars a year over traditional face-to-face professional development sessions. Lock (2006) acknowledged the increasing importance of PD

and its implementation in online or technology-driven contexts but also was quick to criticize past PD efforts by school systems. Lock noted that traditional PD efforts failed because they focused on events or periodic activities and were designed with a one-size-fits-all mentality; designing PD with a focus on a specific context would deconstruct the idea of generalizability behind PD and provide teachers opportunities to reflect on their professional beliefs and practices.

While Killion praised the potential that online professional development programs hold for educators as a time-saving and convenience device in terms of cost, flexibility, and ease of access, the author also stressed reservations that perils or pitfalls come with the implementation of any new system that has not been properly assessed for merits and shortfalls for its potential target audience. Noting the role of teachers as stakeholders that always had been involved in decisions and actions surrounding the type a nature of their professional development, Lock (2006) stated that educators would have to change their perceptions of professional development in order for online professional development or online learning communities to reach their full potential. All three authors on this paper currently use or have used technology in each of the ways cited by Killion (2000) and more. The authors are particularly concerned with the effects of technology use by educators within the contexts of collaborative learning, analytical learning and reflective learning and how they fit with Lock's prescription that PD needs to be individualized, sustained and intensive.

### **Collaborative learning practices**

Lock's recommendations for collaborative learning practices are based on work by multiple authors whose research supports her assertions that a virtual or online community, much like any community, is defined by the group of people who routinely interact with each other and

share common goals (2006). It is the camaraderie, the interactions, and the partnerships that form among and between various members of the community that define the community; the use of online contact is simply the manner of interface among community members and is not the learning community itself. The question, if not the challenge, remains with how to best foster a learning community in an online setting, which Lock stated is best done in an environment that is driven by grass-roots initiatives instead of top-down directives from within a school system. Carter (2004) reported that despite the money- and time-saving benefits of online learning, there still is a strong preference for some traditional face-to-face learning, thereby supporting the use of a blended approach as a happy medium for professional learning environments.

### **Analytical learning practices**

According to Lock (2006), digital-based learning needs to be designed based on how the members of a collaborative community learn instead of on how much the instructional provider can offer or teach, such that analysis and inquiry work interdependently to foster perspective for growth. Traditional PD methods equated analysis with a strategy or a product of the PD process. For Lock, the paradigm shift from PD in a traditional face-to-face classroom setting to online learning environments is cultural and requires educators not only to acknowledge instructional technology and online learning as the methods *de rigueur* for their own learning but also to embrace them and integrate them in their own professional learning and application much as is the expectation for their students. Once educators make this change, they then can move forward in the interest of taking control of their own learning and analyze their individual learning needs with regards to PD. Lock warned that this cultural shift constitutes the development of a new learning community, one whose progression towards effectiveness will require much vision, dedication, perseverance and time.

### **Reflective learning practices**

In their study about online knowledge-sharing via a listserv environment in the healthcare field, Hara and Hew (2007) reported positive findings that support the use of an online learning community, particularly in respect to reflective learning practices in situations where participants 1. were one among very few practicing their profession in a given healthcare organization or location or 2. were the only person in their profession within a given healthcare organization or location. They found that knowledge-sharing and solicitation were the two online activities in which community members were the most involved. Furthermore, the results of their study enabled them to identify various factors that helped sustain knowledge within the online community they studied, including validation of one's practice with others in a similar work situation, the need to gain better understanding of current knowledge and best practices in the field, acceptance of the asynchronous online communication medium, and an environment that was viewed by participants as non-competitive. Hara and Hew's findings exemplify the collaborative ambience that Lock (2006), Carter (2006), and Killion (2004) deem a necessary presence for an online learning community to experience success with PD endeavors.

### **Challenges**

Despite a paradigm shift that has been gathering momentum for over twenty years regarding teachers and their professional development (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2006), challenges are still apparent in providing effective leadership that positively impact student learning. Lock (2006) noted that the face of PD is changing from a traditional face-to-face classroom setting to online learning environments in the form of collaborative professional learning communities and online social networks. This change in PD expectations requires educators to acknowledge instructional technology and online learning as a new way of

receiving PD. Challenges can arise as educators search for balance between acclimating to the online learning environment and incorporating new knowledge to meet the educational needs of their students. This is what Mezirow (2000) defined as a transformational process that occurs when learners make a paradigm shift triggered by new situations and experiences. In addition to collaboration with peers, continuous feedback, and the development of online social networks, effective PD learning can empower teachers to transform their view of themselves in the world as they begin to take on leadership roles, thereby positioning them to influence educational policy and the possibilities for future learning endeavors.

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