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Personalizing Professional Development

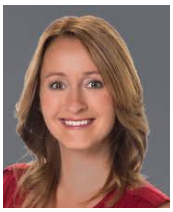
How empowered teachers can take charge of professional learning and growth

By Bryan Goodwin, Pete Hall, and Alisa Simeral

About the Authors

Bryan Goodwin, president and CEO of McREL, thrives on translating research into practice, scanning the world for new insights and best practices on teaching and leading, and helping educators everywhere adapt them to address their own challenges. A frequent conference presenter, he is also the author of *Simply Better: Doing What Matters Most to Change the Odds for Student Success,* and co-author of *Curiosity Works: A Guidebook for Moving Your School from Improvement to Innovation, The 12 Touchstones of Good Teaching: A Checklist for Staying Focused Every Day, Balanced Leadership for Powerful Learning: Tools for Achieving Success in Your School,* and *Unstuck: How Curiosity, Peer Coaching, and Teaming Can Change Schools.* Before joining McREL in 1998, Bryan was a college instructor, a high school teacher, and a business journalist.

Pete Hall is a dynamic educator and speaker with a proven leadership track record. In addition to teaching in three states at multiple grade levels, he served as principal of three Title I schools: Anderson Elementary School in Reno, Nevada; Sheridan Elementary School in Spospokane, Washington; and Shaw Middle School in Spokane, Washington. Each of these schools earned accolades and awards for student achievement. Hall has been honored with ASCD's Outstanding Young Educator Award and Nevada's Martin Luther King Jr. Award, was appointed to the Nevada Governor's Commission on Excellence in Education, and was selected to sit on the National Education Association's Great Public Schools Indicators Advisory Panel, among other recognitions.



Alisa Simeral, school turnaround specialist and veteran educator, has guided school-based reform efforts as a teacher, dean, and instructional coach. Her emphasis is, and always has been, on improving the adult-input factors that contribute to the betterment of the student-output results. She partnered with Pete Hall to write *Building Teachers' Capacity for Success: A Collaborative Approach for Coaches and School Leaders* and *Teach, Reflect, Learn: Building Your Capacity for Success in the Classroom.* She is also a co-author of the ASCD book, *The Principal Influence: A Framework for Developing Leadership Capacity in Principals* (2016). Passionate about providing support where it's needed most—at the classroom level—her mantra is, "When our teachers succeed, our students succeed."

About McREL

McREL International is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization committed to improving education outcomes for all students through applied research, product development, and professional service to teachers and education leaders. We collaborate with schools and school systems across the U.S. and worldwide, helping educators think differently about their challenges and providing research-based solutions and guidance that help students flourish.

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It's rare to meet a teacher who finds the vast majority of their professional development experiences to be time well spent.

Too often, PD sessions consist of little more than delivering lists of things teachers should know and should be doing—imparting declarative knowledge by "shoulding on" teachers, in other words. There's little to no follow up. There are few opportunities to think about how to adapt and apply the learning to fit your own classroom context, or to try it out and compare outcomes with fellow teachers. It's no wonder that most PD is ineffective in changing anyone's practices (TNTP, 2015).

This type of bad PD often widens, rather than narrows, the phenomenon that an influential business book identified as the "knowing-doing gap" (Pfeffer and Sutton, 2000) and that we (Pete and Alisa) used as a model for the "doing-thinking gap" in our book Teach, Reflect, Learn: Building Your Capacity for Success in the Classroom (Hall and Simeral, 2015). By focusing more on declarative than procedural knowledge, typical "old school" PD workshops don't give teachers the opportunity to practice and refine a new skill by observing what works and what doesn't and engage in lots of trial and error. And, we would add, reflection—a mental habit that makes all other learning possible.

This isn't to say that all large group PD is bad and should never ever be done again. There are times when teachers need information about foundational practices and expectations that apply to everyone in a school or district. But once these good core practices are established, teachers need something more to advance their skills and continue to flourish. Something that addresses the specific questions and challenges they face in their own classrooms, and that is tuned to where they are in their career. Something that empowers them to direct their own professional growth.

We propose two guiding principles for restructuring professional learning:

1. Teacher learning ought to start with teachers' problems of practice; and
2. It ought to help them reflect on and refine new skills to address those problems.

With these two ideas as starting points, we think PD can become something teachers actually like and find useful. To accomplish this, professional developers and instructional leaders need to stop shoulding on teachers and, instead, put themselves in teachers' shoes to understand the problems they face, including how these problems— and their solutions—are often layered.

Teachers are learners too

Before someone sets out to help teachers learn, it'd sure be helpful if they knew something about how teachers learn at various stages of their careers. There are many variables in play as teachers develop their talents and, often, novices need something very different than veteran experts.

Many beginning teachers are often in "survival" mode, figuring out how to use curriculum guides to plan lessons, manage student behavior, and keep a grade book, to name just a few early challenges. For these teachers, the solutions to their problems tend to be straightforward and often a matter of becoming more consistent with a particular foundational practice (e.g., following a lesson planning template, sharing learning objectives with students, or setting and reinforcing expectations for behavior).

Once teachers internalize these practices and get beyond survival mode, they can—if they're reflective—consider how their own instructional practices and choices influence their students' learning. At this point, a new set of questions (i.e., problems of practice) emerge. These include how to motivate students with the right kind of feedback

and how to design cooperative learning activities that advance student learning. Solutions for these problems often build on more basic, foundational teacher practices—for example, incorporating "hooks," pacing, and mental processing time into lesson plans; referring to learning objectives when providing student feedback; and reminding students of shared agreements about behavior to keep student groups on track. These solutions often reflect teachers' earnest efforts to connect with students as learners.

For reflective teachers, enacting these solutions then leads to a new set of questions, especially as they recognize that students come to their classroom with different prior knowledge, interests, needs, and personalities. To really promote student learning, teachers must make a giant leap: figuring out how to individualize student learning experiences. To do this, teachers might begin to incorporate student choice into lesson plans, help students set and track their own goals for learning, and configure ad hoc student groups to address individual learning needs.

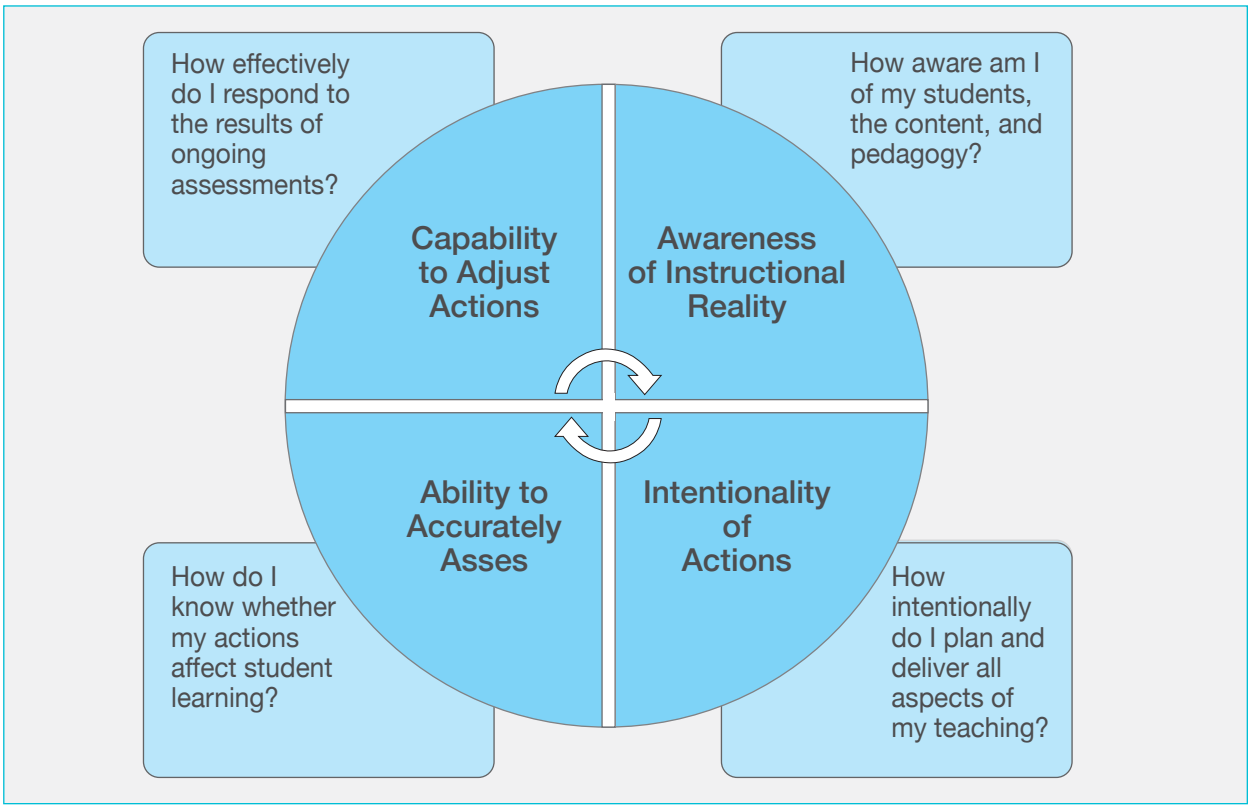
Doing all of these things requires that teachers have not only a broad repertoire of teaching strategies at their disposal, but also something else: expert mental models. That is, deep knowledge of students' learning needs so they can diagnose learning challenges and develop real-time solutions for them.

As teachers reach (and surpass) this level of expertise, they often come to see their role in a new light: less about teaching than about guiding and empowering learning. And they begin tackling ever more sophisticated problems of practice—problems that early-stage teachers can barely wrap their heads around, like using project-based learning and performance assessments to encourage deep learning, helping students provide themselves with constructive feedback, and creating student "base" groups that provide one another with "critical friends" support.

All of this goes back to the questions they've been asking themselves all along.

See this? It's reflection

Asking such questions requires that teachers be reflective. Here's how we envision the reflective cycle:



From *Teach, Reflect, Learn: Building Your Capacity for Success in the Classroom* (p. 39), by P. Hall and A. Simeral, 2015, Alexandria, VA: ASCD. Copyright 2015 by ASCD. Reprinted with permission.

If we consider our journey toward excellence as characterized by the development and strengthening of our reflective habits, then we must think of the reflective cycle as the treadmill, bench press, or stair climber used to achieve our metacognitive goals. Let's zoom in on this instrument and begin by identifying four habits of thought that combine to define the behaviors of effective, accurate reflection: awareness of instructional reality, intentionality of actions, ability to accurately assess, and the capability to adjust action. Each spin around the cycle drives us from broad, generalized *macro-level* thinking toward narrow and specific *micro-level* thinking, increasing the frequency, accuracy, and depth of our self-reflection.

To really promote student learning, teachers must make a giant leap: figuring out how to individualize student learning experiences.

The key idea in the reflective cycle is that we learn by asking ourselves questions; seeking answers (ideally in research); testing them out in the classroom; analyzing (and ideally receiving feedback on) the results; refining our practice; and starting the process all over again until we can skillfully apply the new practice with a level of automaticity in the classroom.

Where most PD gets it wrong

With all of this in mind, it's not hard to see why most teachers view professional development as ineffective or a waste of time. Let's consider two examples.

First, imagine a district that decides to plunge into personalized learning. The principal calls the teachers down to the library for a workshop on personalized learning to teach them, for example, about the ins and outs of project-based learning.

Can there possibly be a less personalized approach to personalized learning? For a handful of teachers, this may be great. By sheer luck, project-based learning just happened to be the next problem they were looking to solve, and the workshop hits all their questions. Many others, though, are probably in a different place. New teachers are likelier worried about more basic questions like, *How am I supposed to cover all of this content?* The prospect of keeping up with pacing guides already gives them palpitations, and now they're being told to leap ahead to personalized learning? It's too much, too soon.

Now imagine a district that has grown frustrated with the lack of consistency in teachers' approaches to instruction. The central office decides it's time for everyone to get on the same page with an instructional model, so everyone is called down to the gym for a workshop on instructional design. For some teachers, the workshop is revelatory, providing them with long-needed clarity about how to sequence learning. For others it's a rehash of a problem they solved years ago and serves only to create cognitive dissonance about how to fit practices they've perfected (like project-based learning) into what seems like a teacher-driven approach to learning.

What did both of these districts get wrong? In addition to not considering teachers' individual problems of practice, both failed to understand that true professional learning occurs not in a workshop, but rather, back in the classroom, with teachers applying (and refining) a limited set of new strategies in their classrooms. Too often, professional learning takes a scattershot approach, giving teachers more than they can possibly apply. Or it's vague and theoretical, failing to provide teachers with practical how-to's—things to take and apply in their classrooms. Or it fails to equip teachers with what may be most important: questions to guide their reflection, including prompts for peer-to-peer coaching.

A Better Way

So is there a better way? We believe so. It starts with identifying common teacher problems of practice—the questions they're actually asking right now about their own practice. We can do this by listening to teachers, of course, and also by dissecting their challenges to help them develop consistent foundational practices, connect those practices with students more effectively, develop more-expert practices that help them individualize learning for

students, and ultimately, empower them to own their own learning with guidance from teachers.

At each step along the way, we can help teachers to explore research and best practice to solve their problems—so they understand not just *what* to do, but also, *why* to do it. Often, we get this backwards, shoulding on teachers with sentences that begin, "Well, research says you should [fill in the blank]." We also need to help teachers translate research into practice with concrete strategies—things they can do right away in their classrooms. Often, we get this part backwards, too; in an effort to help teachers, we barrage them with clever strategies, some of which may be a) faddish with no research base, and/or b) disconnected from any sort of mental model of learning, leaving teachers with a bunch of *what* to-do's but little understanding of *why* they work or when to use them.

Finally, we fail to help teachers consider what they ought to be thinking about as they try the new strategy in their classroom. What reactions should they look for in students? What should they consider about their own practice? How will they know if they're doing it well? What adjustments will they make? This sort of reflection, after all, is the heart of teacher learning.

What to look for

Let's illustrate how reflection-based learning would work to address a teacher's problem of practice. Consider this question, one that vexes many teachers:

How do I keep students focused and on task?

Here's what research has to say about this question. At some point in our careers as teachers (or actually at every point in our careers) we struggle with getting kids to pay attention. That's likely because in many ways, as cognitive scientist John Medina (2008) explains in his book *Brain Rules*, our brains did not evolve in classrooms, but rather, outdoors, where our survival depended on our ability to detect hidden dangers, food opportunities, and changing conditions in the world around us. As a result, our brains naturally tune in to what's unexpected, unpredictable, or triggers emotion, and tune out what's ordinary, predictable, and void of emotion—or basically, much of what happens in many a classroom setting. As Medina puts it, "If you wanted to create an education environment that was directly opposed to what the brain was good at doing, you probably would design something like a classroom" (p. 5).

In other words, when students are off-task, it's likely because their brains have decided to tune out of learning because it doesn't register as interesting, novel, or worthwhile. That may be because they've lost interest in it or never found it interesting in the first place. Or maybe you've asked them to learn or do something they cannot. It may also be because they lack self-regulation skills, goal-directedness, or other issues. In a sweeping synthesis of 800 education meta-analyses (studies of studies), John Hattie (2008) found that one of the most effective ways for teachers to support learning is to follow a clearly organized sequence or model of learning. To wit: Dozens of studies have found that one such approach, called Explicit Direct Instruction, had a strong, positive effect on learning—among the strongest of any education technique. (Explicit Direct Instruction starts with teachers hooking student interest and setting learning goals at the beginning of a lesson, followed by teaching key concepts directly, then scaffolding deeper learning through guided and independent practice before reviewing learning at the end of a lesson.)
In other words, one of the most important things teachers can do in the classroom, and a foundational practice to designing engaging learning, is to be clear about how everything they're doing in the classroom fits into a larger scheme or sequence of learning—that is, how A leads to B which leads to C and so on. (When we and our colleagues lead professional learning sessions, which we do often, we strive never to neglect this need for clarity—and never to "should on" our audience.)

One of the most important things teachers can do . . . is to be clear about how everything they're doing in the classroom fits into a larger scheme or sequence of learning.

On the following pages are a couple of strategies teachers can use to address this problem.

Strategy One: Inner voice. Help students engage in productive self-talk to self-assess progress toward goals

Why to do it: Self-questioning is a powerful memory aid and the ability to self-assess progress toward mastery learning is what differentiates successful learners from unsuccessful ones.

How to do it: Here are a few key ideas and guiding principles for helping students nurture an "inner voice" to guide their own learning.

- **Help students pause and reflect.** Prior to reading a text, teach students to ask themselves these questions:
  - *Why* am I reading this?
  - What do I *already know* about it?
  - What am I *curious* to learn?

  Afterward, teach them to ask themselves these questions:
  - *What* did I learn?
  - What *surprised* me?
  - How do I *feel* about what I've learned?
- **Help students keep their self-talk positive.** If students feel pessimistic or that they have no influence over their achievement, their self-talk will likely be negative. You can help students have positive self-talk by understanding the strength training paradox: *failure leads to success*. The whole point of weight lifting is to tax a muscle until it fails, triggering it to rebuild stronger. So, too, cognitive struggle—failure to grasp something—builds new neural pathways and reinforces existing ones, making our brains "stronger." Remind students of this when learning gets tough. You can also give the "voices in their heads" these go-to phrases:
  - I can do this.
  - Struggle makes my brain stronger.
  - If I can't figure something out, I should try a different learning strategy.
- **Help students engage in *deliberate* practice.** The best athletes, musicians, or performers don't practice *longer*, they practice *smarter*—they devote more practice time to what they do not already do well. Students can apply this same principle to their learning by asking themselves these questions:
  - What have I *not yet* mastered?
  - What do I *need to do to* master it?

When to do it: Teaching self-questioning can be done relatively quickly. After a few sessions of directly teaching these techniques, students will begin to internalize them. Afterward, occasional reminders will suffice. Before practice sessions (e.g., homework assignments) encourage students to focus on what's most challenging, instead of what's easy. If they're doing math problems, for example, encourage them to skip over problems they already do well to devote most their practice sessions to problems or computations that *don't* come as easily to them.

Strategy Two: Expand Your Toolkit of Hooks

Why to do it: Because novelty is key to engagement, when you expand your repertoire of teaching and learning activities, students are more likely to stay engaged. Once you've developed a solid familiarity with the model above, begin to enhance your use of it by "plugging in" best practices that engage (and hook) students throughout each of the eight steps of that model.

How to do it: There are countless resources online that provide lists of instructional strategies that enhance student engagement. Here, we highlight just a few and encourage you to expand your toolkit and intentionally plug one into your lesson model to engage students during any part of your lesson.

- **Picture Prompt**. Show students an image (related to the content you are planning to teach) with no explanation. Ask them to identify, describe, and/or justify their thinking as they look at the image. What do they know about this picture? What inferences are they making? You may even ask them to write as much as they can about the picture using as much terminology as they can. Do not give any information until they have completely shared their thinking. This works best as a group activity. When finished, continue to introduce your content and allow students to make connections to their thinking as you teach.
- **Pro and Con Grid.** Throughout the lesson, pause occasionally and ask students to create an ongoing list of the pros and cons for a given subject. Another version of this is to partner students with one another. In these pairs, students take opposite emotional sides of a conversation and engage in discussion. Pause at several points during the lesson and ask students to talk with their partner.
- **Visible Thinking.** Give each student three sticky notes. As you make your way through the lesson, pause at several points and give students an opportunity to write down an "aha" (something they've just learned) or a question that they have. After one minute, ask them to stand and share their thinking with a neighbor. The neighbor should answer the question if they are able. When the lesson is nearing the end, collect the sticky notes and use them to identify the learning that has taken place.
- **Rank the Information.** Place students in small groups of 3–4. After introducing the concept you are teaching, pause and ask students to determine the three most important things they've learned so far. They must all agree on the same three pieces of information and write them down. Continue with your lesson, then pause and again ask the groups to identify the three most important things they've learned. They can only keep three items on their list so if they need to add a new item, they must cross something off first. Continue with this process until the end of the lesson, then ask groups to compare their ranked list of information with other groups and discuss why they placed the items they did on their list.

When to do it: These activities can be used during any lesson at any time. Select one to try at a time.

While doing it: Notice student engagement. What happens when you make learning more interactive?

Questions for deeper inquiry

Here are some questions teachers can ask themselves about the problem of practice, *How do I keep students focused and on task?*

> Are my students clear what the task is? Do they deem it worth doing?
>
> Am I clear what the task is?
>
> Do I know why I'm asking students to do it?
>
> Do I know how it will promote deeper learning?

Inevitably, these questions will likely lead to others:

> What kind of structure or format do I use when I plan and teach?
>
> What habits have I developed to assure consistent, careful planning and implementation of lessons?
>
> What resources do I use?
>
> How do I use my school or district-provided lesson plans, curriculum guide, pacing guide, or teacher's edition of a textbook?
>
> Do I search for lesson plans online?
>
> Do my lessons follow the same sequence and structure?

Thus, teachers can continue with inquiry-driven learning.

Personalizing learning for teachers

Many teachers have, no doubt, noticed a funny hypocrisy at work when it comes to their own professional learning. They're often urged, in a top-down, hierarchical way, to create personalized, inquiry-based learning opportunities for students, yet so little of their own learning reflects these principles. Or sometimes, in a zealous effort to empower teacher learning with "un-conferences" and teacher-directed learning, we pepper them with a whole bunch of (often unproven) things they can try in their classroom. It's a little like personalized learning run amok.

So, what if we could help teachers direct their inquiry into solving critical problems of practice that, when solved, accelerate student learning—and make their own jobs as teachers more productive and enjoyable?

A new approach to guiding teacher learning

In a forthcoming book, that's exactly what we'll do. We start with teachers' problems of practice, like these:

- How do I connect with students?
- How do I challenge students of different abilities?
- How do I make learning interesting to students?
- How do I help students to become more receptive to feedback?

To avoid peppering teachers with lots of disconnected things to do, we'll group these problems in what we call pathways that show teachers how to build on foundational problems to solve ever more complex classroom challenges. For each problem of practice, we'll offer a quick synopsis of research (to help teachers understand not only what to do but why to do it), practical tools (to help teachers quickly apply best practice in their classrooms), and reflection questions (to support thoughtful practice).

It's a new approach to guiding teacher learning—one that starts with teachers, grounds solutions in best available research, and provides concrete how-to guidance followed by professional reflection. Ultimately, our goal is to help teachers (and those who support them as instructional leaders and coaches) internalize the process of carefully identifying a problem of practice, consulting research, identifying or developing a solution, testing and refining it, and expanding their repertoire of strategies and expert mental models.

And that's how we think teachers can actually start loving professional learning!

Reach the authors and other experts at McREL who are exploring effective professional learning models:

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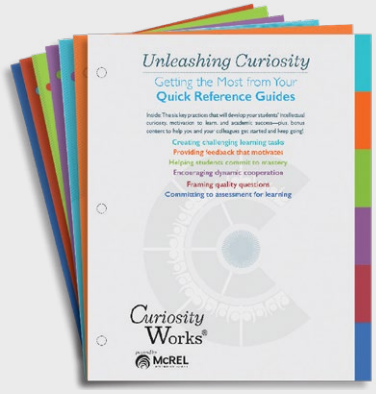

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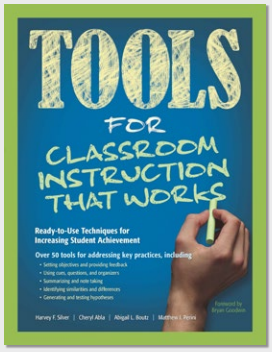

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