



Transforming Professional Development to Professional Learning

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Abstract

This article reviews teacher professional development norms as they are shifting toward collaborative practice. It is posed that passive and individual practices are inadequate to prepare teachers to integrate the academic skills that learners need for both workforce and college readiness. Promising practices in professional development are identified. Specifically, learning in a professional community is considered to be more effective than traditional professional development methods. This paper discusses aspects of professional learning communities that could be incorporated into Adult Basic Education programs to improve teaching and learning.

Introduction

Teacher learning has gone through a “reform” movement over the past decade as prevailing belief links high-quality professional development (PD) to higher-quality teaching and high-quality teaching to student achievement (Borko, 2004; Smith, 2010; Desimone, 2009; Darling-Hammond, Wei & Andree, 2010; Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss & Shapely, 2007). Appropriate conditions and characteristics of PD augment the potential for depth of understanding that leads to change in teaching practice. This is a shift from passive and intermittent PD to that which is active, consistent, based in the teaching environment, and supported by peers in a professional learning community (PLC). PLCs that have demonstrated success are comprised of teachers from the same school who have autonomy to select their learning objectives and have gone through training on how to collaborate (Mindich & Lieberman, 2012).

Learning communities thrive when all participants are invested in the work they are doing.

If members of a learning group do not feel comfortable together, they may not be able to offer or receive feedback in a constructive manner. Difference of opinion and critical analysis of work should be discussed in an environment in which all have contributed to the organization of the group. This can be achieved in part with a needs assessment at the beginning of a group’s time together. If a formal or informal needs assessment is conducted to organize and plan the group’s work together, a group can become cohesive. If cohesion of the group does not happen, members are not able to honestly critique one another and the cycle of feedback and improvement will not take place which undermines the potential for a PLC to improve teaching.

Knight (2011) lists seven partnership principles that outline a healthy group learning environment in which teachers are personally motivated (see Table 1). Attending to these seven principles invites dialogue between group members to facilitate an equitable working environment. This dialogue allows participants to construct a learning environment that is relevant to each. The foundation of the partnership

principles is that people are motivated by goals that are their own. When all are committed to common goals resistance to constructive criticism is diminished (Knight, 2011). PLCs that attend to these principles invite honest feedback and can motivate teachers to innovate together.

Table 1
Description of Partnership Principles for Group Learning Environment

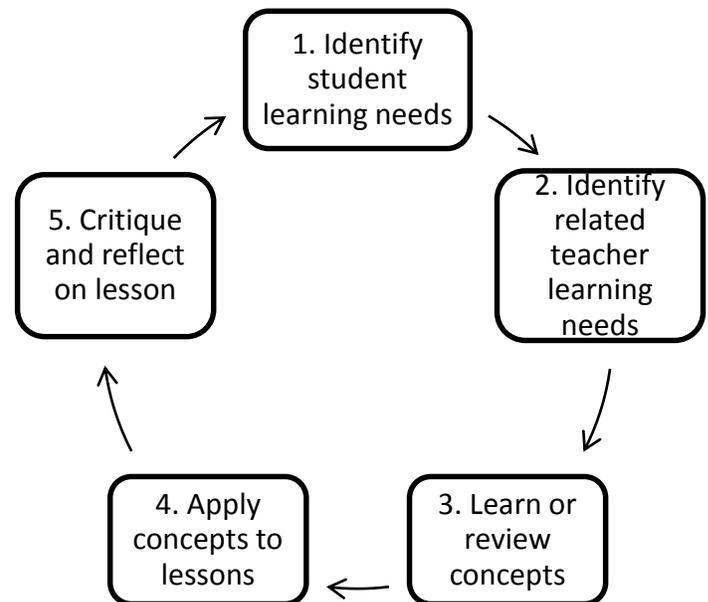
Principle	Description
Equality	Teachers have input in the planning of the professional learning activities, not simply required to attend PD
Choice	Teachers choose what and how they learn
Voice	Professional learning empowers and respects teacher voices
Reflection	Reflection is recognized as an integral part of learning Authentic dialogue is enabled
Praxis	Learning is applied to real-life practice
Reciprocity	Participation is an expectation: all offer and receive feedback

After a PLC is formed, collaboration should happen cyclically as teachers work together to identify needs for improvement and act upon those needs. These groups must commit to working together over the course of a semester or longer with the goal of professional improvement. The length of time is important, but more important is the process. Teachers should look critically at student work and data to identify specific gaps in student learning. Ideally, teachers work together in cycles to revise

lessons and implement them with observation and feedback (Jaquith, Mindich, Wei, & Darling-Hammond, 2010). The mission of a PLC is to gain a deeper understanding of how students learn content and then to apply that understanding to how content is taught.

A PLC should understand all phases of a project that make up the cycle of continuous improvement (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Professional Development Cycle for Continuous Improvement



First, the greatest needs are identified using local student data. When the greatest areas of need are identified, necessary areas for educator learning can be defined. At that point, targeted learning content is identified. Content can include teaching theory, teaching strategies and other activities, such as aligning a curriculum to content standards. The PLCs then work continually in developing, analyzing, and improving their instructional materials. Lessons and assessment are created or adapted to then be observed, critiqued, reflected upon and improved

(Wei, et al., 2009). The improvement cycle begins again in reviewing student data from the previous cycle. Any type of school, including an adult literacy program, could adopt a framework with these specific phases for professional learning.

Professional Learning Activities

Activities that are recommended for professional learning groups include “examining data on student progress, analyzing student work, determining effective strategies to facilitate learning, designing and critiquing powerful lessons, and developing classroom-based common assessments to measure progress” (Professional Development Partnership 2008 cited in Mindich & Lieberman, 2012, p.12). These activities are recommended to focus teachers’ attention on students’ performance in their classrooms. When teachers take the time to investigate the work students are doing, they can then develop professional learning projects around targeted improvements in lessons and assessment.

Designing and evaluating activities is complex. As shown in Table 2, Desimone (2009) proposes a core conceptual framework with five key features of professional learning that can lead to depth of teaching practice: content focus, active learning, coherence, duration and collective participation. When these features are incorporated into a project, a cycle of continuous improvement can take place. First, the work is focused on how students learn concepts, so learning is linked to teaching practice. Next, learning is active, which requires teachers to learn together and from each other. Learning should be compatible with both state initiatives and each teacher’s belief system to ensure that it is relevant. Activities should occur over a length of time that will allow them to be thoroughly investigated, tested and improved upon. Finally, activities should be collaborative with those from the same school or those who teach similar levels of content.

Table 2
Description of Key Features in Professional Learning Activities

Features	Description
Content focus	Understand learning objectives and deepen understanding of how students learn the content
Active learning	Review student work and data, lead discussions, observe others teach and be observed with feedback afterward
Coherence	Establish relevance both to teacher’s belief system and to state initiatives so that project is connected to the “big picture”
Duration	Work as a group for at least a semester and at least twenty hours of “contact time”
Collective participation	Work with teachers in the same program or who teach the same levels

Smith (2010) has outlined a list of activities and how they affect depth of teachers’ learning utilizing Desimone’s (2009) core features of professional learning (see Table 3). The first two types of activities (i.e., reading and attending a training) consist of exposure to content and do not impact a teacher’s practice unless they are reinforced through further exploration and practice. Passive learning alone has not been found to create changes in teaching practices (Smith, 2010; Wei, et al., 2009; Joyce & Showers, 2002; CAL, 2010; Borko, 2004).

The final two approaches (i.e., multiple workshops and PLCs) require active learning working with content to create lasting changes. Active learning that allows for teachers to focus on specific needs within their classroom has been found to improve teaching practices.

Table 3
Professional Development Activities and Relation to Depth of Learning

PD Approach	PD Activities	Objective	Core Features
Reading about a resource or method	Individual	Build awareness	Content focus
Training	A single workshop	Build knowledge	Content focus
Professional Development	Multiple session workshops	Change practice	Content focus, Active learning, Duration, linked to teacher beliefs and standards
Professional Learning	On-the-job, In a community of practice	Change theories and assumptions	Learning in the workplace, using student data, learning through experience, learning through reflection

The distinction from passively gathering information to actively working with information occurs as the approach deepens from reading or training to professional development or professional learning. Awareness of the objectives and limitations of each approach to learning can be helpful to teachers as they plan their learning activities.

Minimally, one could build his or her awareness and knowledge of new information through a reading or training activity. Ideally, passive activities should be part of professional learning that includes active reinforcement within a community so implementation can be analyzed, evaluated and improved upon. Borko (2004) explains that students learn concepts when teachers have a rich and flexible understanding of the subject matter. Teachers gain a rich and flexible understanding of subject matter when they grapple with it through cycles of exploration, implementation and improvement. No matter how interesting a passive learning experience is, if there is not application beyond the initial meeting, impact is minimal (Joyce & Showers, 2002).

Attending to the components of professional learning activities within a PLC can provide the structure needed to forward adult literacy teaching. These learning opportunities should be aligned to broader initiatives and goals within programs and states that allow connections from research to practice with feedback and reflection. Teacher learning is most impactful when participants are part of a community of practice with others from their program or those who teach the same student levels and type of content. Professional learning activities should be job-embedded, informed by data, centered on student work and how students learn, active, and occur over a length of time that will allow for cycles of development, implementation, and evaluation. Content should be focused, specific, and correlated to learning theory and content standards informed by nationwide workforce and college preparation benchmarks.

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