

**Place of Learning, Place of Practice: Elements that Affect the
Transfer of Teachers' Professional Development
to Students' Learning in Classrooms**

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to bring to light elements that teachers require in order for learning gained during professional development sessions to find a place in their classroom practices and to affect student learning. Through their inquiry with K-12 educators at the Margaret Sue Copenhaver Institute for Teaching and Learning, a professional development program in southwest Virginia, the authors have devised recommendations regarding teacher needs and preferences for a climate that nurtures continuing professional growth. The authors also seek to define a data-gathering method that illuminates teachers' productive practices as framed by the Virginia Guidelines for Uniform Performance Standards and Evaluation Criteria for Teachers.

Introduction

For many teachers, the idea of professional development is met with groans, the result of conjuring up scenes of large, crowded auditoriums where teachers listen to an expert on one subject or another speak for two to three hours. The topic may or may not be the “theme” for the year, but frequently, after the presentation and a few weeks of conversations, the topic fades into the dustbin of themes, like so many before it. Does this have to be the way educators conduct professional development? (Heller, 2005, p. 7.).

The scenario that Heller describes above raises the following important questions about both the purpose and the *process of professional development programs*: *What is the intended aim of such programs? And, what elements support effective transference of professional development to the classroom and result in enhanced student learning?* The National Staff Development Council defines professional development as “the means by which educators acquire or enhance the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs necessary to create high levels of learning for all students” (2001, p. 2). This definition answers the first question with the premise that high-quality professional development should benefit not only educators, but also their students. It suggests that teachers’ learning within the context of a professional development venue is a means toward an end, not the end itself. The ultimate site to determine the effectiveness of professional development is each teacher’s classroom. Only when student achievement is enhanced as a result of improved teaching practice has the professional development program achieved its aim.

The purpose of this article is to consider characteristics of professional development that support transference to the classroom. Utilizing a framework designed by the National Staff Development Council (NSDC), the authors will explore three dimensions of professional development: *Content, Process and Context*. Particular attention will be focused on the Context dimension because of its emphasis on implementation within a school setting. The NSDC dimensions will frame examination of the effectiveness of the Margaret Sue Copenhaver Institute for Teaching and Learning, an annual professional development program for educators in southwest Virginia. Additionally, the

authors propose further assessment of the Copenhaver Institute's effectiveness through collection of data gathered using *Virginia's Uniform Performance Standards and Evaluation Criteria for Teachers* (VUPS). Examination of this data will allow exploration of the classroom context within which teachers transfer professional learning to impact student achievement.

Literature Review

In 2012, the Commonwealth of Virginia unveiled *Guidelines for Uniform Performance Standards and Evaluation Criteria for Teachers* (VUPS), its state-wide stipulations for high quality evaluation (Virginia Department of Education [VDoE]). According to VUPS (2012), the ultimate purpose of a teacher evaluation system is to "optimize student learning and growth." However, transferring teacher knowledge, skills, attitudes and beliefs from a place of learning to a place of practice, to a classroom where this knowledge can affect student learning, is not automatic. Without appropriate reinforcement through classroom practice, a newly learned way of thinking or a teaching skill will likely disappear into Heller's "dustbin of themes" (2005, p. 7). Educational theorists (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Murrell, 2001; Phelps, 1998; Randi & Zeichner, 2004; Sessums, 2006; Wegner, 1998; Zeichner, 2005) have issued a steady call to enhance in-service training by situating teacher learning in school-based professional learning communities. Without the support and shared risk-taking of a learning community, the innovations that are studied in a professional development session may remain "alien, literal, fragmented, [and] non-negotiable" (Wegner, 1998, p. 220). However, an intentional, "[m]utual engagement in a shared practice," conducted within the schools where teachers work, can instigate "a process of constant fine-tuning" (Wegner, 1998, p. 214) of new procedures.

In addition, a teacher's own students are often the strongest influences that guide her professional learning. Teachers point out trial and error and immediate feedback from students as factors that make the classroom a setting in which teachers' best professional learning logically occurs. Virginia's Uniform Performance Standards acknowledge this source of learning by mandating multiple data sources that demonstrate teachers' impact on student growth and by focusing on the relationship between teacher practice and student learning outcomes (2012).

For teachers to be able to process these multiple data sources, they require opportunities for self-questioning and reflection about their own practices and about the values and norms that underlie the schools in which they work (Flores, 2003). However, schools often fail to provide a generative, collaborative learning community during professional development offerings. Thus it is difficult for teachers to build bonds of trust among one another, enabling the group to examine its practice critically and to take risks that promote the entire group's development (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). To achieve this result, Asian and European teachers participate in learning communities that invite faculty members to plan together and observe one another's instruction. In these settings, teachers are offered a menu of school-based professional development selections which include such possibilities as 15-25 hours of planning and collaboration time each week at school, or up to a month set aside annually to attend professional seminars and visit other schools (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 198).

Though these international practices have clear benefits, schools in the U.S. tend to house anemic learning communities, yielding flimsy support for implementing best teaching practices. If we want "consequential changes in the lives of teachers" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 295), transformations that yield improved student performance and a better-informed teacher workforce, we will have to ensure that teachers receive opportunities to build professional development communities similar to the ones that yield results in international settings. To this end, NDSC challenges schools to set targets of devoting 10% of their budgets to professional development and a quarter of teachers' time to collaborating with colleagues (2001, p. 12).

Maintaining a focus on teacher learning in schools is a logical and significant step toward improving teacher preparation. Sessums (2006) writes, "[A] school must be more than a place of instruction or a 'knowledge distribution center;' it must also be a community of practice where members negotiate their own enterprise and shape their own boundaries while remaining congruent with larger institutional policies and procedures (2006, para.4)." When teachers feel a shared sense of responsibility and a collective intellectual purpose, studies show achievement gaps narrow (Darling-Hammond, 2010). In such

communities, teachers try out new learning in their place of practice, testing the fit of their new knowledge against the real-world constraints that are unique to their schools, and away from the rarified environment in which staff development occurred. For such communities to develop, Darling-Hammond points out that schools must establish an infrastructure that supports new and veteran teachers, a framework the US consistently fails to provide (2010, p. 194).

Research Question

Recognizing the challenges inherent in building professional communities that address complex student needs within an increasingly diverse student body, a team of staff developers in Virginia has considered several questions related to the transfer that must occur in order to move new knowledge and skills from the training site into the classroom. Through this research, the team is considering the following question: *What characteristics of professional development support effective transference of teacher learning to the classroom and result in enhanced student learning?*

Research Design and Methodology

The question has been explored in the context of the Margaret Sue Copenhaver Institute for Teaching and Learning (MSCI), an annual professional development program now in its fourteenth year. Two of the central purposes of MSCI are identified as: 1) to provide cutting-edge, relevant educational theory for educators, and 2) to offer opportunities for participants to consider effective ways to translate theory into classroom practice. Toward these aims, MSCI adopted a three-day program design, offering the institute each June shortly after schools recessed for the summer. The date was chosen at the suggestion of the Institute's Steering Committee, a group consisting mostly of PreK-12 teachers and administrators. The members believed the June date would allow teachers an opportunity to: 1) reflect with colleagues on their previous year's work, 2) find time for renewal and appreciation of their work commitment and accomplishments, and 3) glean new learning that could be processed over the summer in preparation for a new year.

On MSCI's opening day, participants are introduced to educational theory relevant to the institute's selected annual theme during keynote addresses and discussion sessions with keynote speakers. On the institute's second day, small-group breakout sessions are offered, presented by educators who model examples of classroom practices that implement the theory. On the final day, time is provided for participants to process learning and to begin to construct their own classroom plans. The three-day institute closes with a celebratory program.

MSCI limits its annual enrollment to 100-150 participants and structures the three-day program to include ample opportunities for collegial, free flowing conversations. The manageable number encourages a sense of community with frequent interactions and opportunities for an exchange of experiences and knowledge. The result is a collaborative experience that has been described by participants as: "a place to meet academic needs ... (as well as) a time to sit and talk, share and laugh together," and "a professional development opportunity that provides restoration, revitalization and renewal."

MSCI is grounded in constructivist theory, a belief that knowledge is not given to individuals. Instead, learning is a process of individuals creating meaning in the world, not discovering it or having it defined for them. This process of creating meaning requires individuals to actively participate in a lesson vs. observing a model. The institute's annual themes align with this theoretical perspective, helping teachers develop a classroom practice that allows students to be active participants in their own learning. Researchers whose work informs the theory of constructivism are targeted as keynote speakers. Past presenters include:

- Carol Tomlinson - Differentiated Instruction
- Howard Gardner - Multiple Intelligence Theory and Differentiated Instruction
- David and Roger Johnson - Cooperative Learning
- Lynn Erickson - Concept-Based Curriculum
- Grant Wiggins - Understanding by Design and Differentiated Instruction

Each year, MSCI participants assess the effectiveness of the institute by completing a survey at the close of the program. The surveys use a five-point Likert scale. A one on the scale indicates a participant's strong disagreement with an evaluation statement. A response of five indicates a participant's strong agreement with the evaluation statement. A response of three indicates a participant's neutral response; he or she has not been impacted negatively or positively.

Over the years, this assessment tool has been revised to include many of the professional development standards noted by educational organizations and scholars. The National Staff Development Council provides a compilation of 12 standards for staff development which are particularly relevant to MSCI's underlying goals. The 12 NSDC (2001) standards may be considered in a three-dimensional schema – standards of *Content, Process and Context* – as a way to organize the research findings from which the standards are drawn. NSDC provides the following description for these dimensions:

- **Context** standards address the organization, system and culture in which the new learning will be implemented. They describe the structures that must be in place for successful learning to occur.
- **Process** standards refer to the how of staff development. They describe the learning processes used in the acquisition of new knowledge and skills. Process standards address the use of data, evaluation, and research.
- **Content** standards refer to the *what* of staff development.... Staff development content addresses the knowledge and skills that ensure all students are successful (p. 2).

Data reported in the following tables are based on MSCI surveys conducted from 2004-2011. For each year, a mean score is reported for selected evaluation statements reflective of the NSDC *Content, Process and Context* dimensions.

Results

In its early years, the MSCI assessment survey focused heavily on the *Process* and *Content* dimensions recommended in the NSDC standards. Participants were asked to respond to Content issues such as whether sessions were informative and the degree to which theory presented was applicable to classroom practice. *Process* was also addressed, including items that focused on MSCI’s learning environment, the structural design of the institute’s three-day program, and the significance of collegial interaction and collaboration as part of the learning process. Additionally, participants were invited to expand on their Likert scale responses with open-ended comments. One veteran participant described her experience as “inspirational and right on target in addressing actual classroom issues. At the same time, they keep me attuned to best practices (of) research and cutting-edge theory.”

Approximately 40% of each year’s MSCI participants are returning veterans; many have attended eight or more institutes. These individuals receive a slightly modified survey so that MSCI organizers can gauge the impact of previous institute participation on classroom practice, offering a glimpse of the implementation of participant learning within a school setting. Interestingly, the 2004 survey from veteran participants yielded noteworthy responses related to the third NSDC domain, *Context*. [See * items in Table 1]

Table 1

Veteran Participant Survey Results - Selected Items (2004)	(n=50)
A. The educational theory presented was applicable to my classroom.	4.88
B. Keynote speakers were informative and engaging.	4.92
C. The institute environment encouraged me to learn.	4.76
D. My teaching practice is noticeably different because of my previous learning at MSCI.	*4.16
E. My students are demonstrating more learning as a result of instructional changes that have resulted because of my participation in MSCI.	*4.00
F. Since coming to MSCI, other professionals have noted that my instructional practices have changed.	*3.29
G. I think attending the institute again will further my skills and understandings of teaching.	4.72

Responses are based on a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strong Agreement (5) to Strong Disagreement (1).

While veterans provided consistently positive ratings to survey items focused on *Content* and *Process* (Items A, B, C and G), several items on the survey received significantly lower responses. Conspicuously, these items included: Item D. - "My teaching practice is noticeably different because of my previous learning at MSCI," Item E. - "My students are demonstrating more learning as a result of instructional changes that have resulted because of my participation at MSCI," and Item F. - "Since coming to MSCI, other professionals have noted that my instructional practices have changed." The data suggested that, while educators responded favorably to their three-day professional development experience, their acquired knowledge and skills were not necessarily transferring to their classroom practices and subsequently were not increasing student learning effectively.

In response to this finding, the MSCI team revised the assessment instruments around the *Context* dimension. On surveys disseminated in 2005-2011, the issue of knowledge and skill transfer was probed more deeply. During these years, under the category, "What I Learned at the Institute," veteran respondents again confirmed the effectiveness of *Content* and *Process* items. [See Table 2] Items such as H. "has provided me with new teaching skills," I. "has provided me with new knowledge," J. "is authentic or has relevance in my classroom," K. "can change my classroom practice," and L. "caused me to reflect on my beliefs about teaching and learning," received ratings ranging from 4.34 to 4.67, with a mean of 4.6.

Table 2

Veteran Participant Survey Results – Selected Item: “What I Learned at the Institute”	2005 (n=102)	2006 (n=74)	2007 (n=98)	2008 (n=103)	2009 (n=69)	2010 (n=64)	2011 (n=77)	Mean (n=84)
H. has provided me with new teaching skills.	4.57	4.38	4.35	4.40	4.35	4.66	4.34	4.43
I. has provided me with new knowledge.	4.67	4.54	4.58	4.67	4.66	4.59	4.47	4.59
J. is authentic or has relevance in my classroom.	4.50	4.65	4.51	4.49	4.56	4.48	4.55	4.53
K. can change my classroom practice.	4.41	4.53	4.53	4.44	4.35	4.41	4.34	4.43
L. caused me to reflect on my beliefs about teaching and learning.	4.52	4.62	4.67	4.75	4.60	4.55	4.55	4.60
M. will be difficult to implement due to my school division policies and practices.	2.55	3.00	2.88	3.00	2.58	2.69	3.00	*2.81
N. will be difficult to implement due to my local school’s administration.	2.27	2.86	2.81	2.86	2.52	2.72	2.97	*2.71
O. will be difficult to implement due to state policies and regulations.	2.67	3.00	2.79	2.85	2.38	2.97	3.22	*2.84
P. will be difficult to implement due to federal policies and regulations.	2.55	3.00	2.62	2.83	2.29	3.03	3.16	*2.78

Responses are based on a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strong Agreement (5) to Strong Disagreement (1).

However, responses to Items M. through P. raised additional questions. These items, which connected a teacher's difficulties in implementation to local, state, and federal regulations, as well as to school administration, received ratings between 2.27 and 3.22, with a mean of 2.78. Because the items are stated in terms of respondent agreement or disagreement, the data suggests a neutral response to these items. While this finding did not necessarily confirm a significant classroom implementation problem, it suggested that MSCJ planners had not adequately considered the potential disconnect between the professional training provided during the institute and the climate in which teachers practice. According to NSCD (2001), this *Context*, "the organization, system and culture in which the new learning will be implemented" (p. 2), is a vital dimension in transferring teacher learning. Thus, it is plausible that when professional developers do not intentionally consider transfer of teachers' knowledge and skill, the effectiveness of professional learning is undermined.

The NSDC Context standard (2001) extends consideration beyond the places where teachers learn, such as the Margaret Sue Copenhaver Institute, to the climate that must exist in order for the content of professional development sessions to become a part of teachers' classroom practice. NSDC (2001) identifies three elements of *Context* – learning communities, leadership and resources – elements that must be addressed to ensure that teacher professional development enhances student learning:

- ***Learning Communities*** – Staff development that improves the learning of all students organizes adults into learning communities whose goals are aligned with those of the school and district.
- ***Leadership*** – Staff development that improves the learning of all students requires skillful school and district leaders who guide continuous instructional improvement.
- ***Resources*** – Staff development that improves the learning of all students requires resources to support adult learning and collaboration (p. 5)

Discussion and Implications

In order for teacher learning to transfer into classroom practice, teachers need sustained learning communities, supportive leadership, and adequate resources (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Heller, 2005; NSDC, 2001). However, a school's budget and institutional restraints may limit the extent to which schools can provide these elements to support effective professional development transfer. Here, external professional groups can assist, by providing quality opportunities for ongoing learning and supporting the development and upkeep of a professional learning community.

Data gathered in past MSCI evaluation surveys suggests that the annual three-day event's "place of learning" experience is positive. Consistently strong survey responses from veteran participants during 2005-2011 [see Table 3] indicated that the seeds for an ongoing professional learning community are planted during the annual MSCI experience.

Response items such as Items Q. and T. (mean scores of 4.37 and 4.46) point out the value placed on professional resources such as time and teachers' experience. Items R. and S. (mean scores of 4.43 and 4.63) are among those that illustrate the significant role educational leaders can play in enhancing professional development sessions. Most notably, the number of responses related to professional collaboration (e.g., Items W., X., and DD. with mean scores 4.66 4.53, and 4.64) indicate the perceived significance of a collegial learning community in the professional development process.

Capitalizing on the potency of professional collaboration (Arnau, 2006; Palmer, 1998), MSCI additionally schedules ample time for teachers to meet and converse with one another and with guest speakers. As one teacher reported, the institute's setting "causes us all to reflect on our practice. It helps us want to improve and the tools are given to us...to implement the approach." MSCI's environment is designed to emanate a sense of professional respect, and participants work in a comfortable and resource-rich space.

One veteran participant labeled the institute's opportunities for professional conversation as "room for growth of understanding." At times, the conversations are scheduled at

Table 3

Veteran Participant Survey Results		2005 (n=102)	2006 (n=74)	2007 (n=98)	2008 (n=103)	2009 (n=69)	2010 (n=64)	2011 (n=77)	Mean (n=84)
Q.	My classroom experience was valued by others.	4.14	4.32	4.42	4.47	4.43	4.39	4.43	4.37
R.	My knowledge base was valued by others	4.26	4.45	4.60	4.41	4.50	4.31	4.51	4.43
S.	I was treated with professional respect.	4.74	4.61	4.72	4.54	4.67	4.62	4.54	4.63
T.	My time was valued.	4.43	4.53	4.60	4.33	4.58	4.38	4.37	4.46
U.	I felt encouraged to continue teaching.	4.63	4.68	4.74	4.64	4.69	4.62	4.66	4.66
V.	I found the environment enjoyable.	4.84	4.84	4.84	4.94	4.86	4.86	4.69	4.83
W.	I found the environment encouraged me to engage with others.	4.67	4.51	4.74	4.69	4.72	4.76	4.57	4.66
X.	I gained a new appreciation for a colleague(s).	4.51	4.41	4.70	4.60	4.39	4.62	4.54	4.53
Y.	I gained a deeper appreciation for a colleague(s).	4.42	4.41	4.67	4.47	4.53	4.66	4.56	4.53
Z.	I learned more about what my peers do as educators.	4.40	4.43	4.43	4.56	4.47	4.52	4.40	4.45
AA.	My teaching network was strengthened.	4.23	4.22	4.51	4.25	4.43	4.28	4.40	4.33
BB.	My interaction with peers encouraged me to continue teaching.	4.33	4.39	4.42	4.36	4.34	4.38	4.54	4.39
CC.	Presenters talked with me rather than "at me."	4.42	4.51	4.53	4.58	4.61	4.48	4.66	4.54
DD.	A mutual respect for colleagues was fostered.	4.56	4.58	4.67	4.60	4.67	4.72	4.68	4.64

Responses are based on a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strong Agreement (5) to Strong Disagreement (1).

close of formal addresses. At other times, the conversations occur informally in dorm rooms, coffee shops, the dining hall or other local venues. Wherever they unfold, these professional dialogues focus on teaching and are filtered through the experiences and knowledge of MSCSI participants. The sharing is significant because it gives voice to personal processes of transformation and individual stories of student success. In addition, teacher sharing enables staff developers to identify teachers' professional proficiency and then to intentionally design the agenda for future institutes.

A critical question to consider is how or whether the professional learning community that emerges at the annual MSCSI event can be extended to support teachers in their places of practice at their home schools. To that end, institute planners have begun strategically to design year-round mechanisms with the purpose of providing an ongoing sounding board and source of support. To date, these intermittent contacts have included an online database where participants may post instructional activities they are using in their classrooms, a mid-year meeting to exchange ideas, and ongoing connections shared by members of the MSCSI steering committee. Several past participants have completed a learning cycle by returning to the institute as presenters themselves, providing an opportunity to share their classroom innovations. College faculty and K-12 teacher participants have also written and presented collaboratively at regional and national conferences. In 2012, an additional opportunity emerged that may potentially provide a sustainable year-round professional learning community for MSCSI participants.

Project Proposal

At the June 2012 institute, a group of returning participants engaged in a workshop focused on Virginia's *Uniform Performance Standards and Evaluation Criteria for Teachers* (VUPS). The session provided teachers with an opportunity to examine VUPS components, as well as instructional strategies learned at MSCSI that may support their efforts to successfully navigate the new evaluation process. Following the workshop, 21 educators committed to participate in a two-year research project designed to measure how their learning at MSCSI transfers to their

classrooms. VUPS will be the common criteria used to measure teacher performance and student growth, the hallmark of effective professional development.

During the workshop, each participant drafted intended growth goals for his or her students. In October 2012, 16 of the 21 teachers met to revise these goals based on the characteristics of their 2012-13 student groups. Additionally, teachers identified two differentiated instructional strategies to implement throughout the year to support student attainment of the goals. Differentiated instruction was identified as a base from which teachers selected instructional strategies because it has been a recurring MSCI theme for which all participating teachers have received training. In March 2013, the group will meet again to report their baseline data and mid-year formative data points. They will evaluate their use of the identified differentiated instruction strategies and make necessary modifications to their strategies based on the data. At MSCI in June 2013, the participants will meet to report summative data for their student learning goals. The data collection cycle will continue through the 2013-2014 school year. To culminate the project, participants will present their research on implementation of differentiated instruction and its outcomes documented by VUPS in MSCI 2014 breakout sessions.

The two-year research cycle is intended to 1) provide teachers evidence of their impact on student learning, 2) offer insight into how a place of learning and place of practice are related and influenced by professional learning communities at macro and micro levels, and 3) allow participants to demonstrate teacher-leadership, a requirement for Virginia's pay for performance structure. Among the participating teachers are those who are collaboratively partnering in the research with others in their building or division, and others who are the sole project participants in their educational settings. These varying layers of support will be examined throughout the study. Ultimately, the project will explore what NSDC names as Context elements of teacher professional development – learning communities, leadership and resources – documenting “effectiveness” in terms of the primary purpose of teacher learning, that of creating “high levels of learning for all students” (NSCD, 2001, p. 2).

Data from this project can offer valuable insight about transfer of professional learning to classroom practice. Implications of the research may be relevant for other staff developers to consider as they seek to build and shape professional development programs that ultimately result in enhanced student learning. For MSCI planners and participants, the research can underscore ways through which both school leaders and external staff developers may effectively root teacher learning in places of practice.

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