No time for learning? Just take it in tiny bites and savor it

Working groups in professional communities have three persistent challenges: getting work done, doing the right work, and developing themselves as groups. Never, in anyone’s estimation, is there enough time for each. Indeed, rarely do faculties feel there is enough time to accomplish work — much of the work urgent — much less focus on developing as a group.

In Indonesia at the Jakarta International School, Shelley Quinlivan, a 1st-grade teacher from New Zealand, started a “cherry biter” group that addresses group development by taking one small bite at a time.

CONTEXT

Three faculty members from the Jakarta school, including Quinlivan, attended the annual summer conference in 2005 on Adaptive Schools. A school requirement for attending a professional development session is that participants share their newly gained expertise with other faculty. However, limited time and unexpected conflicts often conspire to make such sharing difficult.

Schools everywhere are busy places — a gross understatement. Time is filled with the daily demands of teaching: planning lessons; executing those plans; reflecting on the work; responding to student assignments; dialoguing about data; meeting with parents; lesson studies; grade-level, department, faculty, and special focus meetings; and, yes — testing. Taken together, these tasks conspire to place schools permanently on tilt, responding to what is urgent and delaying what is important, amidst laments that if we had more time, we would address bigger issues.

GETTING WORK DONE

Within harried days, faculties naturally focus energy on the urgent. At Jakarta and at other schools, issues demanding immediate attention on team agendas include addressing students’ learning challenges, preparing for special events, managing schedules, and debugging existing practices that have been found wanting.

For school groups to get work done effectively, with minimum time and maximum results with maximum member engagement and satisfaction, members must learn specific concepts and skills. Groups need information about group member responsibilities and skills, agenda design, how to maintain focus in meetings, and how to keep decision-making authority clear. It is not enough that meeting leaders know these things. Everyone must learn these skills. At Jakarta, an external consultant worked with eight different groups over a weekend and two school days to differentiate instruction. Still, not everyone was reached.

DOING THE RIGHT WORK

Doing the right work often requires different skills than those needed for getting work done. A major tool for focusing on doing the right work is dialogue — conversations in which the purpose is to understand, not to promote. Norms for dialogue — listening more than speaking, speaking toward the center, suspending thoughts and perceptions that could interfere with hearing another, taking the time to reflectively put one’s own thoughts on the table — are foreign to action-oriented cultures. Dialogue, common in many indigenous groups, must be taught in school settings.

DEVELOPING THE GROUP

Working groups are best considered not as they are, but as they might become. At least two dimensions must be addressed to develop groups. One is to teach skills and concepts related to getting work done and doing the right work. The second is to foster the identity and skills of being a self-directed group. Such groups set goals for their own practice and development, monitor progress toward those goals, and modify practices as needed. Being self-directed requires that members commit to reflection — at nearly each meeting — about how they function as a group.

HOW THE CHERRY BITERS APPROACHED GROUP DEVELOPMENT

Getting people to commit to an extended workshop is difficult, especially when no credits are offered beyond per-
Nor should staff returning from an intensive professional development experience be expected to have enough information internalized to run a full workshop.

Quinlivan started the Cherry Biters after the summer conference with the idea of supporting the staff’s effort to develop a more collaborative professional community. She writes that her motivation for starting the Cherry Biters was that “these collaboration ideas are new for many, and I believe very strongly in the notion of ‘slow knowing’ ... time to understand new ideas, mull them over, and finally come to terms with them” (personal communication, 2005).

The group meets for 20 minutes before school each Tuesday, when people are fresh. The 15 or so members of the Cherry Biters participate voluntarily. The sessions are organized so that missing a meeting is not a big deal. Quinlivan wanted a venue for safe learning and wanted people to feel comfortable if they missed a session.

At the first meeting, Quinlivan gave an overview of what she had learned at the summer conference and invited the group to choose several areas members would like to work on. Dialogue was one of the first topics selected. The group spent several weeks on this, taking one skill per meeting.

For example, the group selected a topic relevant to all, but about which people held different assumptions. Members used a specific protocol to address the topic. The result — skills development in a domino effect, in which new skills were used and adopted in team meetings and other venues in which the Cherry Biters work.

Initially, Quinlivan led the meetings at her campus, but after quite a bit of work on facilitation skills, she asked others to lead. The group now selects topics, and members share facilitation. A teacher from the school’s other campus manages the meeting there. Agendas are fairly informal. The agendas list pages for relevant readings, outline the topic, and include a reminder of when and where the meeting will occur.

After six weeks, a teacher from another campus expressed interest in attending the group session. The Cherry Biters arranged to hold the meeting via teleconference. With teleconferencing, members had to establish norms for that medium. The norms included things like only nodding to people if they joined in late rather than greeting them, being aware of the topic by looking at the notice in front of the camera, and raising one’s hand to speak because it’s sometimes hard to see those on the edge of the screen.

I met with this group in April, six months after they started work. Skills not found in many faculty groups already were evident among the Cherry Biters. Members paraphrased one another with ease. They inquired and probed for specificity. Group member participation was balanced, with an absence of dominant talkers. They listened to one another. Taken together, these ideas and skills resulted in group conversations in which members articulated assumptions, candidly examined varied perspectives, and had minimum misunderstandings. This is the type of teacher talk that makes a difference for student learning (Garmston & Wellman, 1998).

Today, Cherry Biters facilitate some meetings; they influence agenda design in others. In all settings, they model skills of enlightened group members and act as ambassadors for improvement. Leadership teams from each campus meet with the Cherry Biters to select common facilitation processes for faculty meetings. The group is now self-directed, or as Quinlivan writes, “group-driven.” “If I stopped attending, I believe it would still exist,” she wrote (personal communication, 2005).

Professional communities are developed, not born. Since workplace collaboration is not taught in either teacher or administrator preparation programs, it must be taught in schools. It is naive and counterproductive to expect teacher interdependence without teaching the skills for learning and creating together. Teachers have time constraints and hectic schedules, but those who take and savor tiny bites of learning discover they can manage, to some degree, a portion of their work environment. This finding fuels the sense of efficacy (the belief that we can make a difference), a critical factor in school success.

REFERENCE