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THE LEARNING
Principal

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF SCHOOL LEADERS ENSURING SUCCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS

A collegial conversation

Talking about instruction helps teachers find new ways to engage students

BY HOLLY HOLLAND

In his previous career as a manager of sporting goods stores, Darin Long routinely evaluated products and services. But after three years as a high school business teacher, Long had not conducted a similarly thorough review of the way he served his students.

That is, until he participated in a collegial conversation about designing engaging instruction developed by the Center for Leadership in School Reform (CLSR).

In January 2003, Long sat in the library at Iroquois High School in Louisville, Ky., and let 10 teachers, an assistant principal, and a senior associate from CLSR critique a marketing unit he had designed. The teachers had been asked to participate because as teacher leaders they would be conducting similar examinations of the school's instruction in coming months.

The process "permits us to mine deeply the wisdom of teachers," explained Marilyn Hohmann, the CLSR facilitator. "Who knows better how to analyze a lesson than a group of teachers? We don't have to all be from the same content areas. We don't even have to all be high school teachers. You're the experts, and giving a colleague feedback about lessons they've worked on, worked hard to design ... is the highest form of professional development."

For Long, it was an unusual and vulnerable proposition to allow colleagues to dissect his lessons. He never lost his cool during the discussion, however, and he gained valuable advice about strengthening his instruction. The key was following CLSR's five-step protocol developed to help faculties conduct focused conversations about designing quality work for students.

"This gives us a common language" to discuss the way we teach, Long said after the critique. "It's got to make the lessons better, and it's got to be more engaging for the kids."

To start, Long distributed a copy of his unit. It covered six 87-minute block classes and involved two group projects, textbook readings, and class discussions. One project asked students to develop a marketing proposal for

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EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S **NOTEBOOK**

Dennis Sparks is executive director of the National Staff Development Council

Work on the final 2%

Skillful school leaders understand the importance of teachers' continuous learning and the quality of teamwork and relationships among adults in schools. They ensure that teachers engage in learning activities that literally alter their brains and that create relationships within the school that look and feel different to those who experience them. The activities that immediately precede these changes in the brain and in the quality of relationships are what I call the "final 2%" of professional development.

Schools and schools systems do many things in the name of professional development that may be important and even essential but, in and of themselves, do not affect learning and relationships in schools. Among these activities are establishing policies, forming planning committees, hiring instructional coaches, and providing released days. I think of these activities as the "initial 98%" because they consume most of the time and energy devoted to professional development, although they have little demonstrable effect on teaching, learning, and relationships.

The "final 2%," on the other hand, is that cluster of experiences that physically change teachers' and administrators' brains and alter their professional relationships in ways that improve teaching and learning in schools. Activities that comprise the "final 2%" can take many forms, some familiar (for instance, direct teaching of a skill) and others less familiar to many teachers (for instance, lesson study or the examination of student work).

It is critically important that professional learning employ methods that align with the school or system's sense of "good teaching." Like students, teachers' brains are changed when they are fully engaged in cognitively demanding processes such as reading, writing, observing, using various cognitive strategies, listening carefully, speaking thoughtfully, and practicing new habits of mind and behavior.

CONSIDER:

Engage teachers in discussions regarding activities that produce lasting and meaningful changes in the brains of learners — whether adults or students.

In *Primal Leadership: Learning to Lead With Emotional Intelligence,* Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Annie McKee (2002) cite the importance of practice to "reconfigure the brain." "The more often a behavioral sequence repeats," they write, "the stronger the underlying brain circuits become. People thereby literally rewire their brains: Learning new habits strengthens pathways between neurons and may even foster neurogenesis — growth of new neurons" (p. 156). The same results, they point out, can be obtained from mental rehearsal of new behaviors. "Brain studies have shown that imagining something in vivid detail can fire the same brain cells that are actually involved in that activity," they note (p. 161).

The "final 2%" also includes the culture-shaping and relationship-building activities that affect the subjects teachers discuss, the manner in which they are discussed, the openness with which various perspectives are offered and absorbed by group members, and the energy generated by connections to a worthy purpose and to respected colleagues (Sparks, 2005). These activities address the interpersonal challenges of leadership — the unpredictable and emotionally laden experiences that have a significant affect on human performance and relationships.

Read more of Dennis Sparks' writings, www.nsdc.org/library/authors/sparks.cfm

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Goleman, D., Boyatzis, R., & McKee, A. (2002). *Primal leadership: Learning to lead with emotional intelligence.* Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Sparks, D. (2005). *Leading for results: Transforming teaching, learning, and relationships in schools.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

FOCUS ON THE **NSDC STANDARDS**

Nothing that's worth doing is easy

Pat Roy is co-author of *Moving NSDC's Staff Development Standards Into Practice: Innovation Configurations* (NSDC, 2003)

Many principals I have worked with spend so much time planning and designing professional development that they have little time left to think about evaluation. The standardized evaluation survey, which includes Likert-scales and fill-in-the-blank responses, addresses presentation style, organization, and relevance as well as room temperature and quality of food. But, professional development evaluation needs to go further than those typical questions. Each of NSDC's standards begins with the same phrase: *Staff development that improves the learning of all students…* which indicates that the evaluation needs to determine whether staff development has impacted student learning.

EVALUATION
Staff development that improves the learning of all students uses multiple sources of information to guide improvement and demonstrate its impact.

The principal needs to **develop a comprehensive plan for conducting ongoing evaluation of staff development programs**. That plan includes eight elements (Killion, 2002). First the plan needs to specify evaluation questions. For example, *did student achievement in grades 3 and 5 increase at least one grade level as measured by the Informal Reading Inventory (IRI) during this academic year*? This question would be appropriate for a professional development program that focused on implementing a new reading program including new instructional practices.

Second, a comprehensive plan would determine **multiple data sources**. For example, the IRI is mentioned in the question above, and other data such as the state reading assessment and quarterly assessments might also be included. More than one data source lends more credibility to your evaluation. Third, the plan specifies **data collection methodologies**. This section of the plan identifies what data will be collected, who will collect it, and how frequently it will be collected. It is much more difficult or impossible to collect some data after-the-fact. That is why outlining all these details is helpful from the beginning of the process. Fourth, **data analysis strategies** are identified. For example, typical school data includes the collection of lessons plans but how to analyze those plans also needs to be determined. Analysis of lesson plans might involve developing a scoring rubric or specifying key words. The sixth step includes planning for **data interpretation**. This step uses pre-established criteria against which the findings of the evaluation will be measured to determine the level of impact. The evaluation question above established a criterion of one-year's growth in reading. When evaluation questions are written well, using a SMART goal format for example, the criteria for data interpretation are included in the question. The seventh step is to plan for **dissemination** — determine the audience and how it might want to learn about evaluation results. For example, grant funders usually need a written evaluation while school board members may want a short oral presentation.

Lastly, a comprehensive plan includes methods for **evaluating the evaluation**. This step involves having everyone reviewing and reflecting on the evaluation process to determine strengths, weaknesses, and necessary changes.

These are extensive processes that are necessary for multiple-year, comprehensive programming not single activities. So, don't throw away your one-page evaluation surveys, they're still useful for those solitary "events."

Learn more about the NSDC standards, www.nsdc.org/standards/index.cfm

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Killion, J. (2002). *Assessing impact: Evaluating staff development.* Oxford, OH: National Staff Development Council.

Using a charrette to improve work

In an educational environment, the charrette can be used to guide a conversation at the start of a new process (for example, during the school improvement planning process) or at a point in the process when the group gets "stuck."

The term "charrette" grew out of the late 1800s' practice of Parisian architecture students who rushed their drawings to the Ecole Des Beaux-Arts on a cart called a charrette. Later, the word came to describe any intense, short-term design project. The architectural community still uses the word to describe an intense effort to solve any architectural problem within a limited time.

A charrette is essentially a protocol, a set of agreed-upon guidelines for having a conversation. Protocols are valuable tools for "building the skills and culture necessary for collaborative work," according to the Learning About Student Work web site (www.lasw.org). Because participants understand the guidelines in advance, groups are able to have trusting, substantive conversations together.

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Charrettes are used to scrutinize and improve work while the work is in progress. It is not intended to be used as an evaluative process at the conclusion of work.

The steps in the charrette have been adapted from a tool published on the Turning Points web site (www.turningpts.org/pdf/CharretteProtocol.pdf) and written by Kathy Juarez of Santa Rosa, Calif.

STEPS

1. A group or an individual from the group requests a charrette when one or more of the following conditions exist:
a. The group is experiencing difficulty with the work;
b. A stopping point has been reached; or
c. Additional minds (thinkers new to the work) could help move it forward.

2. A second group of three to six people is invited to look at the work. A moderator/facilitator is designated from the invited group. The moderator observes the charrette, records information that is being elicited, asks questions, and occasionally summarizes the discussion.

3. The requesting group presents its "work in progress" while the invited group listens. *Time: 5 to 10 minutes.*

4. The requesting group states what it needs or wants from the charrette, thereby accepting responsibility for focusing the discussion. This focus is usually made in the form of a specific request, but it can be as generic as "How can we make this better?" or "What is our next step?"

5. The invited group then discusses while the requesting group listens and takes notes. There are no hard and fast rules here. Occasionally (but not usually), the requesting group joins in the discussion process. The emphasis is on improving the work, which now belongs to the entire group, both the requesting and the invited group. The atmosphere is one of "we're in this together," and the only purpose is "to make a good thing even better."

6. When the requesting group knows it has gotten what it needs from the invited group, it stops the process, briefly summarizes what was gained, thanks the participants and moderator, and returns to the drawing board.

HOW DO I LEARN?

How do I ensure that I continue to refresh my knowledge and understanding?

BY LEA ARNAU

In Philadelphia last December, I calmly strolled into a session at NSDC's annual conference where I was not in charge! If you're a staff developer, you know the relaxed feeling I was experiencing, don't you? My worries that day did not concern technology that might not work, providing food without a food budget, making sure there were enough tables and chairs, etc., etc., etc. Ah, the life of a staff developer. As we work toward the goal that all teachers will experience high-quality professional learning as *part of their daily work*, our role is changing, thank goodness! Still, I wonder if we are so focused on the learning of others that we rarely take time to think about our own learning

When I began thinking about how I learn, I first thought of conversations. I automatically turned to my computer to begin writing, having a conversation with myself along the way. Reflective writing is one of the most powerful ways that I refine my thoughts and order my ideas. Dennis Sparks advises us to write out Teachable Points of View on topics that are important to us and will move our work forward. I know from the writing that Dennis has pushed me to do that saying less is often saying more. Clarifying my thoughts and learning by writing gives me a better understanding and a TPOV that I can share with others, a tool that facilitates powerful conversations.

Listening to colleagues who then respectfully allow me equal time to share my ideas is essential for my learning. If we are to work as communities of learners, conversation about learning, data, performance expectations, etc. will shape the work that we do. Grounding these conversations in research gives me validity and confidence with the decisions I make as a result of my own learning.

Secondly, like many other staff developers, I spend time studying the experts in the field. Aside from reading their research, I listen on several different levels when I see these experts at conferences. I am listening for content, but I am also watching for indicators of high-quality professional learning. This comes as a result of continuously evaluating my skills as a staff developer, staying abreast of current research and employing best practices.

Finally, I learn by growing other leaders. As a mentor and a coach, I reflect on my own practices, learn new ideas from those with whom I work, and stretch myself to be better.

Gordon's Ladder teaches us that to be successful mentors, we must "come down a step" and understand how and why we practice the way we do as expert teachers of teachers. Are you consciously thinking about how you can grow others? This practice keeps me fresh and changes my focus from task completion to high-quality professional learning that is results-driven, standards-based, and job-embedded.

Conversations, research, and growing leaders are three ways in which I continuously learn. Have you had YOUR professional learning today?

SHARE YOUR STORY:
LEA ARNAU

LEA ARNAU is director of professional learning for the Gwinnett County Public Schools in Georgia. She is also president of the Georgia Staff Development Council.

Lea will be receiving a copy of NSDC's best-selling book, *Powerful Designs for Professional Learning* (NSDC, 2005). To learn more about how to Share Your Story, visit **www.nsdc.org/shareyourstory.pdf**.

Lea Arnau asks Glenn Ballard, who works in her district's Broadcast Learning Department, about his professional learning. In Gwinnett County, all employees are required to have 20 hours of professional learning, not just teachers and certified staff.

Talking about instruction helps teachers

CENTER FOR LEADERSHIP IN SCHOOL REFORM FIVE-STEP PROTOCOL

Step 1: The teacher begins by letting the group know what s/he wants students to know and be able to do as a result of the learning experience (content and substance).

Step 2: Colleagues ask clarifying questions.

Step 3: Teacher responds briefly to clarifying questions.

Step 4: Colleagues offer feedback.

Step 5: Teacher comments conclude the session.

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imaginary flavored ink pens. A second project involved examining promotional techniques that advertisers use when targeting different consumer groups. In designing the unit, Long had referred to Kentucky's Core Content standards for Vocational Studies and CLSR's 10 design qualities for Working on the Work. On the first day of the unit, he gave students a rubric that explained the sequence of lessons and grading procedures.

Step 1: The teacher begins by letting the group know what s/he wants students to know and be able to do as a result of the learning experience (content and substance).

Next, the teacher describes what the learning experience will look like. Long said he started by finding out what students already knew about marketing, then expanded their knowledge with new information shared through discussions, readings, and projects. He said students particularly enjoyed a lesson on advertising because they were fascinated to discover the acronyms that companies use when targeting buyers with similar characteristics.

Long shared samples of the students' class presentations. He said students had graded themselves and their peers on one of the projects using an evaluation form he developed. At the end of the unit, Long also asked students to grade his lessons and give him feedback.

Overall, he said, he was pleased with student participation and performance, although he acknowledged that their required written reports were weaker than their visual presentations.

After he finished describing his unit, Long asked, "What did you see in this lesson that maybe I could have done better?"

Step 2: Colleagues ask clarifying questions.

Step 3: Teacher responds briefly to clarifying questions.

When Long was describing his marketing unit, his colleagues had been silent. Now it was their turn to speak.

"He mentioned working out of the textbook, but he didn't really say how that was handled by the students," a science teacher said. "Was it handled in class or out?"

"The book work was done during class," Long said. "We didn't read it word for word. What I do is pick out certain things in a paragraph and focus on what I think is important."

A reading teacher asked Long if he had given students models of the written and visual presentations he expected.

"No, I did not," he said. "I should have."

"Did the kids know how to use PowerPoint™ before?" a math teacher asked. "Had you trained them in PowerPoint™?"

"No," he said. "That's why it was an option (for their visual presentations). If they already knew how to do it, they could use it."

A foreign language teacher wanted to know if students could choose their own groups to work with on projects.

"The first group, working on the pens, I set those up," Long said. "The second group, dealing with the acronyms, they chose which groups they wanted to work with."

"What was the level of engagement?" the same teacher asked.

"The level of engagement was pretty good," Long said, reflecting back. "The first group project, I would have one or two fall off in each group, and I'd have to get them refocused. Some of the groups just loved it, and one group everybody was involved and splitting up work.

"In the acronyms project, there was a high level of engagement. They really enjoyed looking through magazines for examples of how advertisers target those groups."

Other teachers asked how Long had handled absences — he said he caught students up individually — and how he graded student work throughout the unit — he said he factored in the quality of their projects, class participation, and performance on a few short-answer tests.

Step 4: Colleagues offer feedback.

- What about this learning experience will engage students?
- What specific design qualities are embedded in this experience?
- What about this learning experience will result in students learning what you want them to learn?

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find new ways to engage students

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"Our task now is to really pretend that Darin is not even in the room," Hohmann said, directing teachers to identify the most engaging aspects of Long's marketing unit while he kept quiet.

In the 10-minute discussion that followed, punctuated by laughter and camaraderie, the teachers praised Long for giving students choices about what they learned, who they learned with, and how they presented their knowledge. They admired the way he let students evaluate their peers and how he specified the objectives of the unit.

"I thought it was very interesting that he structured the groups so the kids got to pick one and he put them in one," a science teacher said. "Kids like to pick their own groups, but you don't necessarily want them to do that all the time."

"He took concepts that could have been boring and mundane and had kids experience those rather than just memorize them," reflected a foreign language teacher.

"By having kids manipulate the concepts, they can become better consumers."

Another foreign language teacher said Long's unit had protected students from adverse consequences for initial failure, one of the CLSR design qualities, "because they worked on it primarily in class with peers. As a student, that always made me feel more secure because it wasn't just *my* idea going down on paper."

Long's colleagues recommended ways to strengthen the unit, including varying in-class reading strategies to make sure students comprehend textbook passages, linking the persuasive advertising lesson to state standards for persuasive writing, and providing models of excellent products. In addition, they suggested that Long work with his English department colleagues to develop a persuasive essay that students could include in writing portfolios required by the state.

Step 5: Teacher comments conclude the session.

After listening, Long got a chance to respond. He said he was pleased with the inquiry process, wishing only that he could have benefited from the insights *before* he taught the lesson.

"I loved the idea of using models of excellent work," he said. "That's a great idea. I should have done that to give them something else to go off. And the core content, using other disciplines, sometimes we get tunnel vision and just worry about our" own subjects. "I could have made that next big jump" to a well-developed interdisciplinary lesson.

That kind of thinking is what Iroquois Principal Brian Shumate hopes to stimulate among other faculty members as teachers participate in collegial conversations that they will lead themselves. Iroquois has been working with CLSR for about 18 months, trying to transform a perennially low-performing urban school into one where students and teachers thrive.

"Teachers often feel put upon to do something new," said Assistant Principal Connie McFarland. CLSR's framework for improving teaching and learning "isn't like that. If these kids feel engaged, all of the other baggage that they bring to school falls away."

To improve instruction and strengthen students' connections to school, Iroquois will reorganize during the 2003-04 school year into three academies. After 9th grade, students can choose different academic concentrations, such as performing arts or business, and take core and elective courses within the related academies. Teachers also can choose to work in the learning communities that best suit their instructional styles and interests.

"Now that we have the academy structure in place, I can really see how" the CLSR design qualities can make school better for students and teachers, Shumate said.

"It's more of a mindset that you get into it. It's not a prescriptive way. It's more, 'Have I thought about these things when I do these activities?' And when you learn to speak the language and you live it, like the guy who presented his lesson this morning." Working on the work becomes not the plan for improving instruction, but the way school was meant to be. ■

THE SCHLECHTY CENTER FOR LEADERSHIP IN SCHOOL REFORM encourages the use of protocols, a structured process for disciplined conversation about student work or the work designed for students. This article, published in 2003 on the Schlechty Center's web site, offers us a window into what such collegial conversations sound like in schools and how they can impact instruction.

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The members-only area of the NSDC web site has been redesigned and expanded, thanks to an exciting partnership with Microsoft Partners in Learning.

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NSDC thanks the Microsoft Partners in Learning Program for its support in building this site for members.

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