

It is no longer news that the U.S. is becoming a more diverse nation and will someday have a nonwhite majority, with students from many language backgrounds. They will arrive at school with great skill disparities, and the nation's future will depend on how effectively schools and teachers respond.

Professional learning for teachers will need to focus in much more sophisticated ways than are common today on techniques of effectively differentiating classroom instruction. Through creative applications of technology and informed by rigorous research, professional learning communities should set about mastering ways to inspire and enable children from all backgrounds to reach internationally competitive levels of academic proficiency within a highly challenging academic curriculum.

Today, success with the most challenging material seems impossible for too many students because, in too many cases, teachers lack skills and supports to make such success feasible. Even when success seems feasible, too many youngsters are uninspired because instruction is not engaging. Teachers now and tomorrow need better skills for diagnosing academic difficulties. They need tools and pedagogies that scaffold effectively on understandings that children bring from outside the classroom.

To glimpse the scope of the challenge, note that among 56,000 urban and suburban secondary school stu-

dents surveyed recently in the Tripod Project for School Improvement, an effort focused on closing achievement gaps, fewer than 60% of any racial group answered "mostly true" or "totally true" that: "My teacher in this class has several good ways of explaining each topic we cover." On other survey items, fewer than 60% (and sometimes fewer than half) responded "mostly true" or "totally true" that their teachers made lessons interesting, relevant, or enjoyable.

Making success more feasible and lessons more interesting, relevant, and enjoyable will be quite daunting for many schools. Immigrants for whom English is a second language will continue placing new demands on all schools. Growing black and Latino enrollments will continue presenting challenges in schools, especially suburban schools, where teachers are accustomed mainly to white students from middle- and upper-income households. Explanations that worked in the past may leave new students perplexed. Examples that seemed relevant or interesting to students in the past

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THOUGHT LEADER

Ronald F. Ferguson



Become more sophisticated about diversity

may seem irrelevant and even meaningless to students from a more diverse range of backgrounds.

A common response to such disjunctures is to blame the children, citing success in the past (or with a group of current students) as evidence of effectiveness, while attributing lack of success among particular groups or individuals to the deficiencies of those students and their families. There is some truth to these excuses. Nonetheless, future professional learning experiences should equip teachers with knowledge and technology to manage classrooms more effectively and to scaffold instruction in tailored ways for students who arrive with different types and levels of preparation.

As an example of how technology can help, some districts are already training teachers to use electronic devices that store and retrieve information to help with curriculum design, instruction, and formative and summative assessment. Handheld electronic devices the size of a cell phone can be linked to central databases in which student information is

stored and from which it can be quickly retrieved. Trained to use this technology, teachers in Montgomery County, Md., record and track student understanding and craft tailored responses. Other districts have begun adopting the same devices. Professional learning opportunities that equip teachers to use such technology enable them to deliver effectively differentiated, culturally proficient instruction that builds on individual-level diagnostic information, with less need to rely on generalities that may or may not apply in particular instances.

There are other ways as well that technology-assisted interactive learning experiences for teachers should become routine. Teams in professional learning communities working on curricular streamlining, alignment across grades, or ways of understanding students' mistakes should have videographic access to examples of quality instruction from other schools, annotated with details of what colleagues in those schools have experienced when implementing new practices with particular types of students. Teams working in different schools should consult with one another through videoconferencing. With various forms of support, research should be embedded in the work for continuous learning and knowledge production.

For many teachers, this will not be an easy future. Growing demands for effectiveness in the presence of great diversity will be attractive and fulfilling for some, but overwhelming for others. The frequency, intensity, and inevitability of change will cause some to leave the profession. However, for the legions that remain,

FROM THE FIELD

Tom Vander Ark

Engage in e-learning



"THE EDUCATIONAL LANDSCAPE — and professional learning — will change a great deal in the next 10 years and even more in the next 20 years, as technology becomes more and more powerful at an exponential rate. I'm quite sure that we'll see, even by 2010, online learning for both students and teachers that continues to get more and more sophisticated in terms of providing continuous assessment and customizing

content based on need and interest.

"I see far less traditional staff development because the system will work in a very different way. Now, it's almost wholly reliant on the skill of teachers. Over time, success is going to be a function of the teacher, the learning environment, and a set of powerful learning tools.

"The implication for teachers is that they need to become e-learners themselves, first by staying in touch with developments in their field and area of certification, and second by participating in some sort of e-learning activity such as an online learning community or online course. The next step is for teachers and other learning professionals to begin provoking thoughtful conversations about what this all means for their schools and districts. They need to be out in front of this change."

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the next few decades can be exciting and rewarding as together we become more sophisticated about professional learning for effectively differentiated, world-class instruction.

If the future unfolds as it should, 21st-century technology together with determined leadership, effective management, and skilled teaching will help us sustain both our national prosperity and our social tranquility as we become a more multilingual,

multicolored, rainbow nation. Children from every background have vast potential. The challenge for coming decades is to equip teachers with skills and tools for differentiating instruction in ways that enable and inspire children from all backgrounds to become excellent students, skilled parents, productive workers, and, ultimately, fulfilled human beings. ■



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