

13 TEACHERS TEACHING TEACHERS™

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF TEACHER LEADERS

Tap the power of peers

By Lois Brown Easton

First-year teacher Francine Gillespie waited in the 3rd-grade office for her colleagues. She had brought student work to share — a science report she'd chosen randomly from her students' reports on the galaxy. She couldn't wait for her colleagues'

feedback and suggestions on the quality of the work and their ideas for her to improve her teaching of this unit.

Two miles away, four teachers stood in Bud Collier's room, jotting notes on clipboards as Bud taught a mathematics lesson they had created together. One watched a particular student; another scanned the room every 60 seconds; a third noted the work of a pair of

Peer-to-peer professional learning takes a variety of powerful forms

students in the back of the room. Later, they would meet for a colloquium. Bud would describe how he had felt teaching the group-created lesson; the others would chime in with the data they had collected.

In the high school across from Bud Collier's middle school, Enrique Chama summarized his research for the social studies staff. He described why he chose to research the effect of higher-level questioning. He had documented that students resist venturing outside their comfort zone with analysis and synthesis questions and shared what he had done to make higher-



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CHARACTERISTICS OF POWERFUL PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Powerful professional learning:

- Begins with what will really help young people learn. It results in application in the classroom.
- Requires collecting, analyzing, and presenting real data. Because it is about what happens in the classroom, it is content-rich. It may never formally end; as classroom situations change, new questions arise leading to new answers and more new questions.
- Honors the staff’s professionalism, expertise, experiences, and skills. Although they may work alone on some aspects of professional learning, such as Chama’s action research project, powerful professional learning is collaborative or has collaborative aspects to it. Faculty are more likely to buy in to professional learning because they understand the need and respond to it by learning and helping each other implement changes.
- Establishes a culture of quality. The conversation in the hallways, faculty lounge, and meetings changes.
- Slows the pace of schooling. Each professional learning activity requires reflection, as well as sharing thoughts and ideas. Many educators organize themselves into professional learning communities to ensure that they have regularly scheduled time to continue their own learning, help others learn, and make sense of what’s going on in school.

order questions a regular feature of class discussions. His data, collected over four months, were impressive, and his colleagues agreed to try variations of his processes in their own classes if he would coach them.

These teachers (their names have been changed) were engaged in peer-to-peer professional learning. Gillespie had brought student work to be examined using a tuning protocol at a grade-level meeting. Her colleagues had taken care of other business online beforehand so they could devote this meeting to professional learning. Anyone from Collier’s vertical learning community could have taught the lesson he taught; the team had worked on it as part of lesson study which brought together district mathematics teachers from 6th through 10th grades. Chama was sharing the results of an action research project with his professional learning community.

Professional learning is the learning that teachers do themselves and with each other. Professional development, although valuable, usually involves outsiders who develop and train people. Professional development is sometimes the best way a faculty can learn something new, and most of us would prefer to be trained in something like lifesaving. The problem is that professional development often is a one-shot situation, and after the speaker or trainer departs or the university course ends, although teachers have the best intentions, they are unable to implement what they learned. They may have no support so that when there are problems, they have no one to turn to. They may find it easier to keep doing what is familiar, despite initial excitement about change.

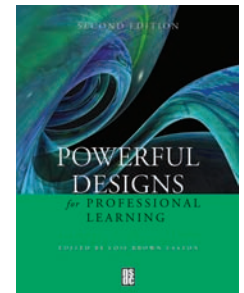
Other professional learning activities

In addition to the professional learning activities Gillespie, Collier, and Chama engaged in, consider these:

- Building assessments or rubrics together;
- Analyzing and revising curriculum;
- Conducting focus groups with students to get student voices;
- Analyzing videotapes of teaching;
- Participating in a book or article study;
- Using any of the protocols described by the National School Reform Faculty;

A simple three-part definition of professional learning communities is:

- A group of educators who meet regularly to engage in professional learning ...
- To enhance their own practice as educators ...
- In order to help all students succeed as learners.



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- Developing and analyzing case studies, or using those available online;
- Analyzing assignments (Standards in Practice);
- Developing portfolios to share;
- Keeping journals and discussing key experiences with each other; or
- Shadowing students (or adults) in one’s own or another school.

These and other strategies are fully described in *Powerful Designs for Professional Learning* (NSDC, 2008).

How to get started

Professional learning starts in many schools by forming professional learning communities. However, unless teachers engage in professional learning, professional learning communities risk becoming just business as usual, rather than a time for professional learning. Beware the statement, “Oh, we do professional learning communities” in a school that may merely have renamed faculty, grade-level, or department meetings. A simple three-part definition of professional learning communities is:

- A group of educators who meet regularly to engage in professional learning ...
- To enhance their own practice as educators ...
- In order to help all students succeed as learners.

To be a true professional learning community, all three parts must be in place. Professional learning is not a business-as-usual agenda full of items to be decided or announcements to be made. Some characteristics of professional learning communities are variable, however, such as:

• **WHAT THE GROUP CALLS ITSELF**

The earliest form of a professional learning community was probably a Critical Friends Group. A group can call itself a professional learning community if it is really engaged in all three parts of the definition.

• **THE NUMBER OF PEOPLE IN THE GROUP**

Sometimes two or three close colleagues form a professional learning community. Sometimes a whole faculty participates in a sin-

gle professional learning community. There’s no perfect number, except as participants consider “air time.” In a group of 10 or more, meeting for an hour or so, participants may become frustrated because they do not have time to talk. At the other end of the range, a group of three to four may lack diversity. Go for eight to 10 members and adjust as necessary by adding more groups.

• **HOW LONG THE GROUP MEETS**

Some professional learning strategies can be accomplished in 30 minutes; some take a few hours or more. Some require weekly meetings; some require monthly meetings. Some are better done when school is in session; others are better done after school or during breaks (with the teachers receiving compensation). The meeting time can vary according to what members want; however, professional learning communities should be scheduled ahead of time so that they have a regular place on the calendar.

The best way to get started is to start. Find someone who would also like to engage in professional learning. Decide when and where to meet. Informally share what you’re learning. (“Joe and I looked at student portfolios the other day.”) Be sure to share information with the school administrator and ask for time to share formally during a faculty meeting. Gradually invite other teachers to join you or start their own groups.

The impetus to start professional learning communities and engage in professional learning can come from teachers themselves or be launched by administrators, preferably with the help of a design team composed of those teachers most interested in participating. Professional learning communities, like most collaborative efforts, are unlikely to survive an executive mandate: “You, you, and you — be a professional learning community.” It’s OK to start small with two or three people sharing their professional practice, their students’ work, and the questions, dilemmas, and problems that inevitably arise.

Professional learning can be contagious. When teachers talk about what they are learning, they infect others around them, who (because learning is natural) may then spread learning to their colleagues.

START WITH YOURSELF

- ✓ Ask colleagues to help you examine a piece of student work or an aspect of your professional practice; have a peer serve as facilitator and timer for the process.
- ✓ Take an article to a faculty meeting and ask if other faculty members want to form an ad hoc discussion group.
- ✓ Ask colleagues for help writing an assignment.
- ✓ Develop a case study about a student who is bewildering you and ask others to study it with you.

Don't let excuses delay professional learning. If you wait until the school culture is perfect and collegial trust is rampant, you will never begin. Professional learning activities themselves often foster trust, and team-building exercises don't mean much unless they happen when people work on real problems using a professional learning strategy such as a tuning protocol.

Start with yourself. Ask colleagues to help you examine a piece of student work or an aspect of your professional practice; have a peer serve as facilitator and timer for the process. Or bring an article to a faculty meeting and ask if other faculty members want to form an ad hoc discussion group. Ask colleagues for help writing an assignment. Develop a case study about a student who is bewildering you and ask others to study it with you.

Conclusion

What Gillespie, Collier, and Chama do in the classroom is better because they have peer support — their students reap the benefits of their

teachers' professional learning. Gillespie, Collier, and Chama also affect the work of colleagues who hear about what they are doing and want to know more. As their colleagues begin their own journeys into professional learning, they begin to affect the learning of their students. Soon the school as a whole is improving. As more schools sponsor professional learning and the mechanism by which teachers learn (the professional learning community or whatever the learning group may call itself), they turn to the districts for support. Districts become professional learning communities, too. Peer-to-peer professional learning, then, is a powerful way to make change in a system that otherwise seems to resist change.

References

Easton, L.B. (Ed.). (2008). *Powerful designs for professional learning*, 2nd Ed. Oxford, OH: NSDC.

Ginsberg, M. (2004). Context, in Easton, L.B., (Ed.), *Powerful Designs for Professional Learning*. Oxford, OH: NSDC. ♦

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