



WEIGHING *the* WORKSHOP

ASSESS THE MERITS WITH SIX KEY CRITERIA FOR PLANNING AND EVALUATION

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Every teacher can recall a range of experiences in professional development workshops. Some of these may have provided opportunities in which teachers felt engaged, empowered, and supported as learners, while others felt disconnected from practice. Although we recognize that workshops, particularly those with no follow-up support, are not the ideal learning experience for teachers, we also acknowledge that some form of workshop is still a common approach in professional development in the United States. Therefore, even within a context calling for more comprehensive professional

development, the workshop merits careful examination in terms of the quality of learning it can provide. Designers, facilitators, and evaluators need tools to guide reflection on quality that will lead to the best possible learning experience for teachers.

We developed and used the planning and evaluation framework described here as part of a statewide evaluation of professional development for K-12 teachers in a variety of

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disciplines (Little, Paul, Wilson, Kearney, & Hines, 2008). While we developed this framework as a tool for formative evaluation, we expect that it will be equally useful to planners as a guide for designing workshop-style professional development.

FRAMEWORK

As we prepared to evaluate professional development that incorporated workshops, we continually returned to key principles such as those stated in the recent NSDC report on the status of professional learning. “Effective professional development is intensive, ongoing, and connected to practice; focuses on the teaching and learning

of specific academic content; is connected to other school initiatives; and builds strong working relationships among teachers” (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009, p. 5). While we acknowledge the importance of more comprehensive professional development including sustained learning opportunities, we examined how workshops and similar experiences as a part of that system must be designed to reflect certain quality indicators.

Our team of current and former classroom teachers and professional development facilitators drew upon their own workshop experiences, as well as the literature on professional development and adult learning, to identify key criteria for high-quality learning within workshops. The criteria fell into six key categories: *coherence, climate, instructional strategies, participant engagement, logistical considerations for participant learning, and assessment and feedback.*

1. COHERENCE

Birman, Desimone, Porter, and Garet (2000) identified coherence as a critical component of professional development that promotes changes in teacher knowledge and classroom practice. In their definition, coherence refers to how professional development connects to teachers’ classroom practice and professional goals, as well as the standards that guide curriculum and instruction in schools. The following criteria reflect coherence within a high-quality learning experience:

- Designers build professional development around **substantive and connected content** that is appropriate to and representative of the relevant discipline and participant teaching assignments. The emphasis is on ensuring that the content itself is relevant to teachers and of high quality.
- The learning experience offers specific and explicit **connections to standards**. Not only do facilitators



INGREDIENTS
for professional
learning
highlighted
in this article:

- Plan learning experiences thoughtfully.
- Measure impact of professional learning.
- Connect learning to the classroom.
- Differentiate adult learning.

make connections to standards in planning a high-quality learning experience, they also devote specific attention to having teachers explore or review those connections within the experience.

- Facilitators highlight specific **connections to assessment** through a focus on assessment strategies linked to content and the use of assessment data in instructional decision making.
- **Classroom-applicable activities** are integrated into professional development. This criterion does not mean that the learning experience must be “make-and-take” nor that it must provide activities that teachers will be able to use immediately without careful consideration of how to integrate them. However, high-quality professional development provides specific applications and/or opportunities for teachers to construct their own classroom connections to the content they are learning.
- High-quality professional development maintains a **focus on K-12 students**. This criterion seems like

common sense, but keeping this focus at the forefront of planning helps to center professional development around the learning implications for classrooms and the ultimate purpose for teacher professional learning.

2. CLIMATE

The climate for learning is an important consideration for adult participants, just as it is for K-12 students. The climate of professional development sets a tone for learning, encouraging participant engagement and also communicating the importance of climate for promoting student engagement. Key considerations for climate include understanding participants as adult learners as well as creating a general environment of respect and purposeful activity.

- **Participants are treated as professionals** in both explicit and implicit ways. Facilitators demonstrate respect for the professional knowledge and experiences that participants bring. Facilitators also communicate professional respect through a physical environment that is comfortable for adults and includes easy access to important amenities.
- High-quality learning experiences promote an **interactive climate** in which participants feel welcome to share ideas, ask questions, and express their opinions and experiences as related to the classroom context.
- There is an **interchange of questions and answers** among facilitators and participants. Facilitators invite questions and are responsive in the answers and resources that they recommend. Facilitators also ask questions to prompt discussion, and they encourage interchange among participants, so that an overall professional conversation occurs among the educators present.
- There is **time for discussion and reflection**, including specific time allotted for participants to consider how what they are learning

applies to their own setting. Such reflection time might be guided by structured questions or left more open to participant response.

3. INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

The rationale for the Quality Teaching standard from NSDC's Standards for Staff Development (2001) highlights that to the extent possible, participants in professional development should experience instruction the way that they are intended to use it. Moreover, the Design and Learning standards discuss careful planning of learning experiences for teachers and the integration of theories and research on how adults learn as well as how children learn. These standards inform the criteria for planning and evaluating the strategies and activities used within a professional learning context.

- Participants in high-quality learning engage in **substantive activities** that are grounded in quality content, organized around significant learning objectives for teachers and, by extension, their students, and planned so that they engage teachers in critical thinking about their own practice.

- High-quality professional development uses **appropriately varied delivery formats**, integrating strategies that are relevant to the content and to the participants. This criterion also emphasizes the importance of using high-quality materials that support content acquisition and delivery.

- Facilitators **model instructional strategies** for teacher participants. These learning experiences also provide an effective balance of strategies between those that put teachers in the role of their students and those that address teachers directly as adult learners.

- **Questioning** provides the groundwork for active communication between the facilitator and participants. Facilitators model questioning strategies relevant to the content

and encourage discussion of question preparation and delivery. They use well-designed questions to guide discussions and small-group activities.

- High-quality learning reflects **attention to varying participant readiness and experience levels**. Flexible activities with multiple entry points, respectful discussion, and responsive grouping patterns are among the strategies that facilitators may use to provide a differentiated response to the range of participant readiness levels.

- High-quality learning uses **varying groupings that are appropriate to the tasks**. This criterion reflects an overall focus on purposeful organization of activities to promote optimal learning and emphasizes giving teachers options for how and with whom they work.

4. PARTICIPANT ENGAGEMENT

Planning for effective professional development includes careful consideration of how and in what grouping context participants will work. Evaluation of these experiences, therefore, can include observation of how participants are involved in activities and the degree to which their engagement is evident.

This theme and its criteria are perhaps more relevant for evaluation than for planning, but are included here to emphasize the focus on the teacher as engaged learner.

- **Participant engagement in large-group settings** includes attention to how and to what degree participants are involved with learning when a whole group is together, as in a whole-group content delivery context or whole-group discussions.

- **Participant engagement in small-group settings** reflects attention to how teachers are invited to work with one another on tasks and discussions, and how on-task learning is fostered by the facilitator and by participants themselves.

5. LOGISTICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR PARTICIPANT LEARNING

Planning for professional development requires attention to many organizational and management details. These, too, form part of the overall plan for and assessment of quality.

- High-quality learning experiences make **effective use of time**, with purposeful yet flexible organization to maintain focus on intended outcomes and to respond to participant needs. Breaks are strategically provided at regular intervals, are of sufficient length, and end on time, and the overall learning experience adheres to a schedule that respects participant time.

- The **materials and resources supplied to participants** are organized and provided in adequate supply. Resources include sufficient detail and documentation to allow participants to recall key understandings at a later time.

- If appropriate, participants are provided with **access and time to use technology** that is integrated within the learning opportunity. Facilitators maintain an appropriate participant-to-technology ratio and recognize and respect individual readiness levels.

6. ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK

Just as classroom instruction must be grounded in quality assessment that allows educators to monitor student learning and make instructional decisions based on data, high-quality professional development is also grounded in assessment and incorporates assessment within the overall process.

- Decision making about professional development is guided by overarching goals and by **evidence of learning needs among teachers**. Such evidence may be drawn from student assessment data, teachers' documented goals for growth, district teacher evaluation data, and other sources.

- During implementation, **ongo-**

ing assessment should be incorporated through formal and informal methods. Facilitators use a variety of strategies to check for understanding and to adjust the pace and content of instruction according to teachers' demonstrated needs.

- Participants have multiple **opportunities to demonstrate learning**. In order to conduct ongoing assessment, facilitators must encourage teachers to communicate what they are learning; moreover, opportunities to demonstrate and share learning help to promote engagement and active connections between the professional development content and classroom practice.

- As participants demonstrate their learning, facilitators provide **respectful and appropriate feedback** to help participants evaluate their own progress toward the stated learning objectives and individual professional goals.

- High-quality professional development is not a one-shot session but includes some version of **follow-up**, whether a formal follow-up with the same facilitator or a structured ongoing conversation. Although often the workshop-oriented structure does not

include this element, it is perhaps the most critical element for improving the likelihood that changes in classroom practice will result.

APPLICATIONS OF THE FRAMEWORK

We see several possibilities for using these criteria as a framework for planning and evaluating professional development. In our experience as evaluators charged with making formative recommendations to professional learning designers, we identified sample performance indicators for each criterion and looked for evidence of these as we observed the learning in action. We then used our observation notes to highlight areas of strength and raise questions and concerns for facilitators, encouraging them to use our observations in planning their ongoing work with participants. We also see that these criteria might be used as a planning tool, much as students might refer to an assessment rubric as they engage in the development of a product. After articulating professional learning goals and objectives, planners might then use the criteria to ensure that all aspects of creating high-quality learning have

been considered in their design. Furthermore, the criteria can guide ongoing evaluation as a school, district, or other learning organization strives to build high-quality learning for teachers that ultimately promote high-quality learning for students.

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