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13 TEACHERS TEACHING TEACHERS™

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF TEACHER LEADERS



PEER LEARNING LABS
PUT TEACHER PRACTICE

UNDER *the* MICROSCOPE

By Valerie von Frank

Instructional coaches in Thompson School District (Loveland and Berthoud, Colo.) have an unusual tool in their tool kits. Not quite Japanese lesson study, not quite classroom walk-through, peer learning labs are a professional learning opportunity that has evolved from coaches' and leaders' experiences.

The district began to hire instructional coaches in 2006, putting in place a part-time coach for the early childhood center and each of the 18 elementary schools and a full-time coach for each of the 10 secondary schools. District leaders went to the community for the funding, raising a special millage to support the program.

At the same time, in a partnership with the Public Education and Business Coalition (PEBC), a nonprofit group of business and education leaders committed to strengthening Colorado's public schools, professional learning took a new form. PEBC's staff developer began working with the instructional coach at a targeted school, and PEBC invited four teachers from the school to participate in a lab setting to observe and learn from master teachers using targeted instructional strategies. The labs required time for teachers to travel to Denver, and the district soon recognized that funding for teachers to visit off-site lab classrooms was finite. The instructional coach at that school launched an internal lab project one day a month, modeling the PEBC lab.

Learning for instructional coaches was also ramping up. The district provided Cognitive Coaching training and weekly coaches' meetings for book studies, among other support.

What's inside

NSDC tool

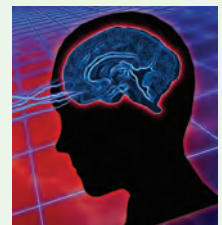
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NSDC's purpose: Every educator engages in effective professional learning every day so every student achieves.

Melding all of these methods, peer learning labs were born. While Japanese lesson study focuses on teachers honing a common lesson and classroom observations involve an observer or team looking for predetermined evidence of specific practices, peer lesson labs involve coaches helping teachers to focus on their own question of practice and then invite colleagues to their classrooms to assist in collecting data to allow the teacher to examine that question.

Examining questions of practice

Colleagues volunteer to attend the lab, the school leader provides substitute teacher time, and the group often debriefs during districtwide early-release Wednesdays, created to provide teachers with professional learning time. Peer learning labs allow teachers the opportunity to directly address a question of practice for their own learning, with support from the instructional coach.

From a seasoned teacher wondering why what he or she has done in the past is not working to improve student reading, to a young teacher figuring out what works with a hard-to-reach youngster, the peer learning lab helps teachers gather data that they can reflect on with peers to seek their own answers.

“It’s very different from bringing a group of teachers in to watch a ‘master teacher,’” said Diane Lauer, Thompson’s director of curriculum and instruction. “We didn’t want these to look, feel, or sound anything like that. These teachers have expertise, but you’re not going in to specifically learn from them because they’re masters at what they do. Participants go in knowing it’s an inquiry lab, and we’re engaging in a question that’s going to enhance the learning for that teacher. Participants observe and collect data.”

Trish Malik, who works part time as an instructional coach and also serves as the district’s coordinator of instructional coaches, said she used the lab as a teacher herself. “It helps bring clarity and helps each of us ramp up our instruction,” Malik said. She said the labs also are essential in her role as coach and coordinator: “Our job as coach is to help mediate teachers’ thinking to help them grow.”

NSDC’S BELIEF

Schools’ most complex problems are best solved by educators collaborating and learning together.

Formulating good questions

Lauer said the labs are an iteration of Cognitive Coaching, which typically includes the planning conversation, the event, and the reflecting conversation. The instructional coaches’ training in Cognitive Coaching was essential for this work, she said. “Cognitive Coach training provides the language and the vision for how to have that coaching cycle and conversation,” Lauer said. “Coaches have the tool kit for how to help frame the questions, to paraphrase. It has been the foundation.”

During a planning conversation with the instructional coach, the teacher formulates an inquiry question — something specific about the teacher’s own instruction that he or she wants to study using data.

The instructional coach helps the teacher formulate the question and determine what data to collect. The coach also may go into the classroom to observe and get background.

“The level of questioning is deepening teachers’ understanding of content,” Lauer said. Questions have ranged from inquiry around instructional strategies to curricular investigations. Some examples:

- As I’m conferring with students for reader’s workshop, are other students able to stay on task?
- What does rigor look like in the classroom?
- How can I make more seamless the students’ articulation to the next grade level?

In the last case, improving grade articulation, teams of 6th-grade teachers observed 5th-grade teachers and vice versa. But generally, Lauer said, the observers cut across all content and grade levels, one of the boons of the lab experience.

“We want a cross-fertilization of ideas, people who might not be able to do the lesson but can engage in the question — what is rigor or how does that reading comprehension strategy support the content area,” said Lauer.

“It’s really about the teacher who has the question,” Malik said. “The lab is held to facilitate the teacher’s thinking around that question, not about everyone using the same lesson” as in Japanese lesson study.



From a seasoned teacher wondering why what he or she has done in the past is not working to improve student reading, to a young teacher figuring out what works with a hard-to-reach youngster, the peer learning lab helps teachers gather data that they can reflect on with peers to seek their own answers.

Engaging peers for assistance

Before the observation, the coach ensures that participating teachers share an understanding of the “ground rules” for the observation, such as whether teachers will help struggling students during their time in the room. If needed, the coach also might work with the group on Robert Garmston and Bruce Wellman’s norms for collaboration (2009). The coach shares with the group the inquiry question and the tool for data collection, setting up, for example, a three-column notes tool. The teacher sets the time for the visit, and the group observes.

During the debriefing after the observation, the instructional coach facilitates, helping the teacher analyze the data and helping participants make connections to their own practices.

“When the coach notices a teacher wrestling with a question that could benefit from data collection, the coach could collect the data, but also could invite other teachers to do so,” said Lauer. “This creates more collegial interactions and different results than one-on-one observations by the coach. We have found this is powerful professional development for the teacher to invite other teachers

into the classroom to wrestle with a question around instruction.”

The learning labs are not a district or school requirement in any way. They begin when a teacher is willing to open her classroom and her practice in a deeper way to promote her own learning. Some schools have labs throughout the year; some may have had only a few. Others in the district may not have used the process.

Malik said labs help increase the culture of collaboration within the school, with the idea of deprivatizing practice.

“We’ve really tried to build coaches’ capacity so they have several tools to use,” Malik said. “We try to help coaches envision possible different ways to work with teachers. Peer learning labs are just another strategy.”

Reference

Garmston, R. & Wellman, B. (2009). *The adaptive school: A sourcebook for developing collaborative groups.* (2nd ed.). Norwood, MA: Christopher Gordon. ◆

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— Diane Lauer,
Thompson School
District director of
curriculum and
instruction

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Complete contact information for all staff and board members is available on the web site at www.nsdco.org/about/index.cfm.

Preobservation MAP



This tool is designed to assist a coach in discussing an upcoming lesson observation with a teacher. Together, coach and teacher outline the focus areas for observation, and the notes from the observation become a critical component of debriefing conversations and reflections that follow the observation.

Teacher: _____ Coach: _____

Date of lesson: _____ Time of lesson: _____

Lesson objective: _____

Standard: _____

Number of students in class: _____

Accommodations needed: _____

Assessment method: _____

Instructional strategy planned: _____

Resources needed: _____

Observation focus area: _____

Data to be collected and reported: _____

Data collected method: _____

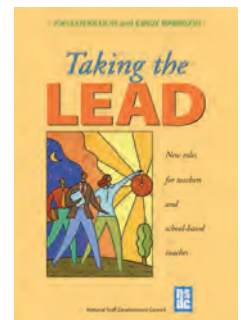
Post-conference date and time: _____

Source: *Taking the Lead: New Roles for Teacher Leaders and School-based Coaches*, by Joellen Killion and Cindy Harrison. Oxford, OH: NSDC, 2006.

Support for coaches

Taking the Lead: New Roles for Teacher Leaders and School-based Coaches (NSDC, 2006) by Joellen Killion and Cindy Harrison is an essential guide to support coaches. Included are descriptions of 10 school-based leader roles and dozens of facilitator tools organized by role.

Available at www.nsdctestore.org, item #B352, \$36 (member price), \$45 (nonmember price).





Jason Heiser is a Classroom for the Future coach at Selinsgrove High School in Selinsgrove, Pa. You can contact him at jheiser@seal-pa.org.

Listening can cultivate growth

Q What did you do to overcome the challenge of resistance?

I always thought I was a good listener, but as I coached, I found out I wasn't. I was sitting with a teacher and he had a question. I anticipated the question and interjected. And he stopped me. At that point, I began wondering if I was not giving people a chance to ask me the questions on their minds. As much as I want to talk and share what I know, I had to learn to listen. There's something in listening that's greater than coming in and showing people. And the second thing is to keep it simple — offer something that the teacher can use the next day.

Many times, a teacher would say, "I've been doing this for 20 or 30 years and now the state is telling me what I'm doing is wrong." I had to tell them that no one is telling them they're wrong, just that there might be a better way to engage their

students. It's a lot of talking, of stroking, of giving alternatives. I'd ask, "Would you want to try ... ?" And I'd let the seed sit there rather than trying to plant the whole field at once.

To get through the rough times, I created a personal network. I started with teachers I knew. From there, I started to develop relationships with coaches from a lot of places through Twitter. I found them by clicking on my friends' names to see whom they follow and finding out who was a coach, then I'd follow them and they'd follow me back.

I might post something in a blog or on Twitter if I was down in the dumps and say, "I had this happen. What would you say to this person?" It was amazing the outpouring of support I got from friends and coaches in the same situation who'd say, "Why don't you try this? Here's what I did with a teacher like that and it helped." I built a great rapport with those colleagues and used those ideas. My personal network helped get me through. ♦

LEARN FROM WEDNESDAY WEBINARS

Join NSDC each week from February through June for Wednesday Webinars. Each hour-long webinar focuses on a professional learning issue or NSDC service.

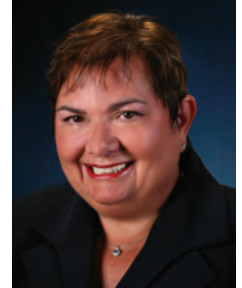
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Click www.nsd.org/elearning/webinars for a complete list of webinar topics and presenters.



▶▶ The series kicks off Feb. 10 at 1 p.m. Eastern with "Stretching Professional Development Dollars," facilitated by NSDC Executive Director Stephanie Hirsh.



Joellen Killion is deputy executive director of National Staff Development Council.

Educator learning keeps evolving

Professional learning expands educators' capacity to serve students, colleagues, and communities. When we explore professional learning, the question arises: What is learning?

This question has been answered differently through the decades, especially when viewed through the lens of practice in the field.

- **1950s, 1960s:** Early on in the field of teacher development, the term *inservice* was used to describe this practice. Such opportunities were designed to inform educators about current trends or introduce new ideas. Inservice usually took place on a day when students were not in school and teachers were. Typically teachers gathered at central office or in school cafeterias or libraries to hear a speaker who made a presentation, frequently in lecture form.


The assumption guiding much inservice education was this: *If experts tell teachers what they need to know, teachers will be able to put the knowledge into practice.*

- **1970s:** During the 1970s, the name *staff development* became more prevalent than *inservice*. Staff development usually took the form of courses or workshops for teachers offered after school with occasional student-free days built into the school-year calendar. Central office staff or principals determined the content for these courses and day-long sessions.

The assumption guiding staff development was this: *If teachers learn what administrators believe they should know, they will be more effective educators.*

- **1980s:** During the 1980s, districts offered catalogs of opportunities for teachers on everything from content-specific instruction and general instruction, to classroom management and wellness. Districts and teachers viewed staff development as a benefit, primarily because district staff

NSDC STANDARD



Learning: Staff development that improves the learning of all students applies knowledge about human learning and change.

development offered teachers convenient and inexpensive ways to earn the credits needed for recertification. Staff development for individual improvement proliferated. Teachers chose staff development based on their personal areas of interest and availability or convenience of the programs. Districts held little or no expectation that teachers would implement their learning. Staff development was largely voluntary.

The assumption guiding staff development during the 1980s was this: *If teachers choose what they want to learn, they will value the opportunity to learn and engage in more learning.*

- **1990s:** The 1990s were the standards decade. States developed content standards for students and teacher performance standards for licensure or certification. Districts integrated these latter standards into teacher performance systems. To respond to the increased need for staff development about standards-based education, districts tailored courses, workshops, and daylong sessions to the

For more information about NSDC's Standards for Staff Development, see www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm

5 levels of learning

As leaders of learning, coaches and teacher leaders plan how to facilitate learning that will change not only what teachers know and can do, but also what they believe, aspire to, and practice consistently and accurately. Learning occurs at multiple levels; not all levels will produce the same degree of impact on practice and student results.

Levels of learning	Definition	Example
1 KNOWLEDGE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information • Facts • Theories • Principles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theories of reading development
2 ATTITUDE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beliefs • Values 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Belief that all students can learn to read • Professional efficacy
3 SKILL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capabilities • What one knows how to do 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diagnose student reading needs • Design instruction to meet those needs • Assess student reading performance
4 ASPIRATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desires • Motivation • Drive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Persistence in practice • Eagerness to find strategies and methods that work with all learners, even those who are underperforming
5 BEHAVIOR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actions • What one does on a regular basis with accuracy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creates a print-rich environment in the classroom • Designs a 90-minute literacy block that incorporates the core areas of reading and follows the guidelines established by the adopted reading program with fidelity • Assesses regularly and uses data to design instruction

Adapted from: *Assessing impact: Evaluating staff development*, by Joellen Killion. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2002.

standards movement, focusing on implementing standards-based instruction and assessment. More staff development, now sometimes called professional development, concentrated on certificated or licensed staff because of the significant changes required in a standards-based education.

Technology, gifted education, diversity, and cooperative learning were other frequent topics of professional development in the 1990s. Most professional development focused on standards-based education, however, because this movement required significant changes in teaching practice.

The assumption guiding staff or professional development in the 1990s was this: *If teachers learn how standards-based classrooms differ from non-standards-based classrooms and gain some specific strategies, they will transform their classrooms into standards-based learning environments and students will be more successful.*

standards-based classrooms and gain some specific strategies, they will transform their classrooms into standards-based learning environments and students will be more successful.

• **2000s:** As the first decade of the new century dawned, staff development gave way to professional development. Educators began to understand the connection between teacher learning, teacher practice, and student learning. It became clearer to district and school administrators that professional learning could no longer be voluntary and individually driven if the goal was to improve an entire school or district. Teachers' choices in professional development became more narrow, and resources for professional development began

to focus more on what students needed. The language shifted from professional development to professional learning to emphasize the importance of moving from knowledge and skill acquisition to transformation in practice and attitudes. The change in terminology emphasizes the outcome of the development process and changes in both teaching practice and student learning.

The assumption guiding professional learning is this: *Professional learning results in changes in teacher practice and student learning.*

Integrating five levels of learning

When planning professional learning, it is crucial that coaches and teacher leaders are clear about the level of learning outcome desired and select the most appropriate learning designs to accomplish the desired results. Appropriateness of a learning design is assessed by its alignment with the learning outcome, the conditions for learning, including time and resources, the degree of change required, and the learning needs and preferences of learners.

NSDC's standards stress the importance of considering student achievement as the result of professional learning.

Knowing about effective reading instruction or knowing how to design effective reading instruction, for example, has little value unless a teacher actually uses the knowledge and skill in classroom practice; desires to refine the practices so that they are effective; and believes that he or she makes a difference in how well students learn.

Professional learning that improves the learning of all students integrates all five levels of learning (see chart on p. 7). Learning that improves student achievement goes beyond knowing about or knowing how to.

- Informational learning, changing what one knows, is unlikely to change what one does.
- Procedural learning, what one can do, is more likely to change one's behavior, yet it does not guarantee that teachers will choose to implement the new skills.
- Transformational learning changes knowledge, attitude, skill, aspiration, and behavior and has a greater likelihood of producing results for students than either informational or procedural learning.

Informational and procedural learning are more common in formal professional learning such as workshops or courses. Transformational learning can occur in formal professional learning when it is sustained over time and carefully planned and facilitated using appropriate learning designs. Transformational learning occurs more naturally in collaborative teams in which teachers acquire information, share skills and strategies, and examine the effects of their practices by reflecting on their own work and student results.

This examination occurs in dialogue with their peers, where they can tap the expertise within the community and transfer what they know to practice. Team dialogue gives members opportunities to analyze their assumptions and beliefs and how they influence behaviors.

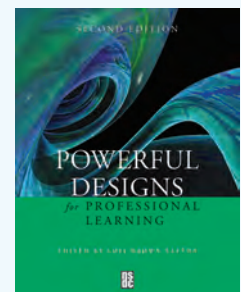
Professional learning that improves schools and student learning is transformational, moving well beyond informational and procedural learning. Transformational learning strengthens practice and consistent and accurate practice of new evidence-based professional learning increases student results. Targeting other levels of learning outcomes alone will diminish the impact on teaching practices and student learning. ◆

Professional learning that improves schools and student learning is **transformational**, moving well beyond **informational** and **procedural** learning.

LEARNING DESIGNS

To explore a wide range of professional learning designs appropriate for different learning levels, investigate *Powerful Designs for Professional Learning*, 2nd ed., edited by Lois Brown Easton. *Powerful Designs* explores more than 20 professional learning strategies in depth and explains for what purposes and contexts the designs are most appropriate. Learn about case discussions, mentoring, journaling, classroom walk-throughs, curriculum design, and data analysis, to name just a few of the designs.

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