

THE LEADING Teacher

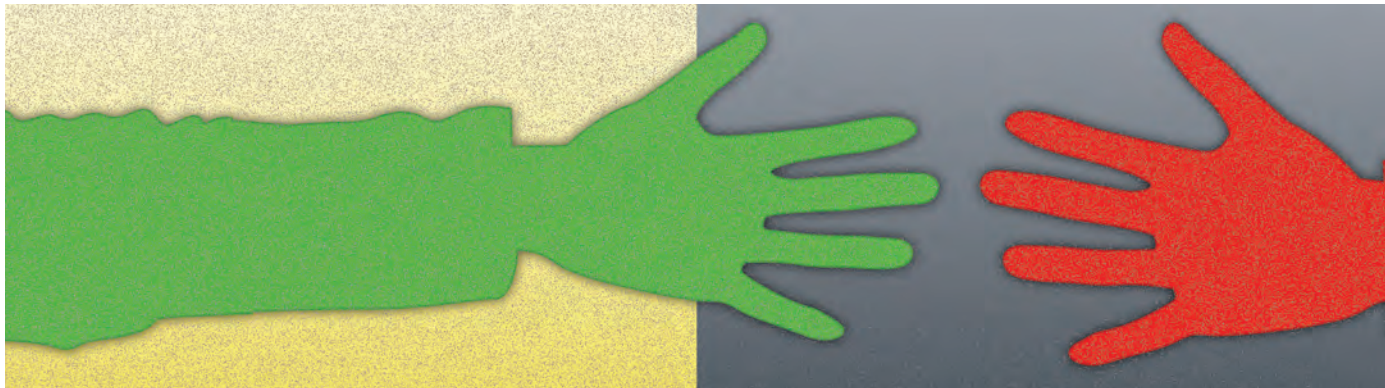
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EVERY EDUCATOR ENGAGES IN EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING EVERY DAY SO EVERY STUDENT ACHIEVES



Meet the teacher

COACHES DIFFERENTIATE
FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNERS

By Anthony Armstrong

In her first year as an instructional coach at Center Ridge Elementary in Centreville, Va., Gail Ritchie overheard a frustrated teacher after a professional development session exclaim to a colleague, “I don’t know why I had to be here. I already went to school to learn to teach math.” Ritchie immediately recognized the significance of this seemingly casual comment. Did the teacher think she already knew everything there was to

know about math, or did she think she already knew everything about the session topic itself? “It was at that moment,” said Ritchie, “that I realized I didn’t know the teacher well enough.”

Ritchie decided to spend the rest of the year getting to know her teachers so she could better meet their learning needs. “Adult learning is much more like children’s learning than we realize,” said Ritchie. “Before you can plan appropriate instruction for adults, you have to know them. You have to know what they’re interested in and what they need. You have to build relationships.

You need to know who they are and what their learning style is. Coaches often make the mistake of being too eager to hit the ground running to support people and don’t take the time to build relationships first.”

While differentiating learning for students is a growing staple in education, many adult learners are often neglected in their learning needs. Because they are adults, it is reasoned, they know how to pay attention and should be able to conduct the due diligence needed to learn new material. To the contrary, the maxim to “meet the learners where they are” applies to adults as well.

Often, when people think of differentiated instruction, they limit their vision to the usual variety of written, auditory, and visual delivery methods, or simply selecting individual courses based on interest, need, or dreaded “areas of weakness” that may have arisen during an evaluation. Instead, differentiation encompasses strategic planning for content, delivery, finished products, timelines, ongoing support, and psychological, emotional, and social needs. Because effective differentiation for learning is a complex and integral part of high-quality professional learning, learning leaders can’t tease it out as a separate component.

Teachers Teaching Teachers (T3) has a new name, The Leading Teacher, to better reflect the leadership roles of teacher leaders.



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“Differentiated professional learning means teachers have to own their learning,” said Lyn Hilt, K-6 principal at Brecknock Elementary in Eastern Lancaster County School District (Pa.). “But it also has to be connected to the district’s and building’s goals for what’s best for the students. In our district, an administration team establishes district-wide goals, the building teams build upon those, and the grade-level teams align with the building and district goals.

“When learner motivation, interest, readiness, and background experiences are ignored, the learners themselves are ignored.”

Source: Bowgren & Sever, 2010.

We give teachers a choice in what and how they learn, but the choices are always aligned with the system’s goals.”

Discussions of differentiated learning often start with complex learning theories and conditions for learning. Linda Bowgren and Kathryn Sever (2010), in their book *Differentiated Professional Development in a Professional Learning Community*, aim to help coaches and teacher leaders navigate the multitude of theories and differentiation opportunities by combining several learning theories into an easy-to-follow, three-step system that embeds differentiation into teacher learning. Entitled “I Do, We Do, You Do,” these steps offer a simple framework for exploring opportunities for differentiation.

I DO

In the first step, coaches demonstrate the learning and establish the expectations for learners (Bowgren & Sever, 2010, p. 47). Coaches can explore options for differentiation in this stage as they select content to feature and determine processes for delivery.

When selecting content for learning, Ritchie often segments professional learning sessions customized to attendee levels of expertise. In advance of her learning sessions, she sends session attendees a form to complete that collects information about the teachers’ knowledge, skills, and predispositions to the topic. Ritchie also asks for attendees to note their areas of strength and desired areas of growth. She will later use this information to help her match learners with competent mentors. (See pp. 5-6 for modified versions of Ritchie’s tools.)

“For this year, I also created two ‘beginning of the year’ surveys,” added Ritchie, “based on a survey I saw in Joellen Killion’s book *Assessing Impact* (2008). The information I

DESIGNING FOR ADULTS

“Several factors influence decisions about learning designs, including the goals of the learning, characteristics of the learners, their comfort with the learning process and one another, their familiarity with the content, the magnitude of the expected change, educators’ work environment, and resources available to support learning.”

Source: Learning Forward, 2011.

get back from these will help my co-instructors and me plan the professional learning sessions for math and language arts this year.”

To differentiate the learning process, Ritchie asks her teachers to take a learning styles inventory to help her address specific learning preferences. “Some people want a lot of direction while others prefer some other type of support. Not taking the time to understand the learning needs of teachers can lead to their resenting the coach instead of seeing the coach as a source of support,” she said.

Preparing instruction includes important psychological considerations as well. “When it comes to learning, adults are more fragile than children because of their life experiences with learning and classroom situations,” explained Ritchie. “You have to keep the focus on improving practice to help them step out of their comfort zone. Make positive connections and link the new stuff to something the teachers are already comfortable with.”

WE DO

In the “We do” stage, learners practice what was modeled, with specific feedback from the instructor, in a safe environment free from time constraints. Some teachers in this stage of their learning may want to model the lesson directly with students while others may want the coach to model with students first. Other learners may prefer to collaborate with peers, co-teach, or form teams to conduct action research or data analysis to further their understanding and planning (Bowgren & Sever, 2010, p. 60).

For Hilt, this stage of experiential learning is key. “As adult learners, teachers are already established in learning

DIFFERENTIATED COACHING

As the learner moves through the various stages of learning, opportunities arise to customize the type of coaching the learner receives. Bowgren and Sever offer detailed descriptions of three approaches to coaching that can be adapted to meet the learner’s needs:

- 1. Directive coaching** provides guidance to help a teacher reach a goal.
- 2. Collaborative coaching** unites coaches and teachers as they work together to find solutions.
- 3. Nondirective coaching** is learner directed, with the teacher acting as “an active and equal partner with a coach.”

Source: Bowgren & Sever, 2010.

COVER STORY Meet the teacher

and practice,” said Hilt. “They come to new things with preconceptions, so change can be more difficult. They know what has and has not worked for them. Teachers need experiential learning to try out the new thing, find out if it works for them, see if they need to make changes to better meet the needs of their situation, and see how it will affect students. Going through that cycle is essential for teachers to own their learning.”

Depending on the learners’ needs, opportunities to differentiate the type of coaching arise during this stage. (See sidebar on p. 2 for approaches to coaching in this stage.)

YOU DO

In the “You do” stage, learners “take responsibility for which of the demonstrated strategies they will attempt to add to their teaching repertoires and when they would do so” (Bowgren & Sever, 2010, p. 81). In this stage, teachers are empowered with their individual learning.

For Hilt, the recipe for responsible empowerment is a combination of autonomy, the ability to reach mastery of their knowledge and skills, and continuous support. She built collaborative time into the schedule and began encouraging her teachers to seek out further growth and learning on their own. “I try to inspire and empower our teachers,” said Hilt. “They all have something to share, so I create as many opportunities for them to share as possible.”

When one of Hilt’s teachers returned from a conference with a book on The Daily Five, a literacy technique, Hilt immediately looked for ways to support her learning. After confirming the teacher was open to sharing what she had learned, Hilt notified other teachers, bought The Daily Five books and materials, and a popular study group was born. Hilt plans to follow up with support and to facilitate sharing.

Learning Forward BELIEF

Every student learns when every educator engages in effective professional learning.

Despite the seemingly orderly nature of the “I do, we do, you do” steps, care must be taken to allow enough time for each learner to move through the learning process at his or her own pace. While teachers may start their learning together in the “I do” demonstration stage at the same time, they usually reach the “You do” stage of taking more responsibility for their learning at different times and in different stages of learning (Bowgren & Sever, 2010, p. 82).

Using the three-step framework, it is clear to see that the tenets of strong differentiation — clear goals, structured peer interactions, reflection, modification for continuous improvement, empowerment and support — closely mirror the qualities and practices of professional learning communities. This similarity is not lost on Ritchie. “The best way I

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

TEAM TOOLS

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www.learningforward.org/news/teamtools



ARTICLES

4 practices serve as pillars for adult learning
JSD, Fall, 2008

Ellie Drago-Severson presents a learning-oriented model to support adult development, from study of how 25 U.S. principals supported teacher growth and positive school climates.

www.learningforward.org/news/articleDetails.cfm?articleID=1735

BOOKS

Assessing Impact

Corwin Press and NSDC, 2008

Joellen Killion provides guidance and practical resources through an eight-step framework to evaluate professional development.

www.learningforwardstore.org

Powerful Designs for Professional Learning
NSDC, 2008

This popular book includes information about numerous types of professional learning, including differentiated coaching, how to determine the appropriate professional learning approach, and more than 270 pages of supporting handouts on CD.

www.learningforwardstore.org

WEBSITES

Teacher leader standards

Use these Teacher Leader Model Standards from The Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium as you consider the best ways to develop and support teacher leaders.

www.teacherleaderstandards.org

The MSP knowledge management and dissemination project

This website presents findings from the Math and Science Partnership (MSP) program, based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation, that provide guidance for “deepening teacher content knowledge” and “developing and supporting teacher leaders.”

www.mspkmd.net

have found to differentiate professional learning is through our collaborative learning teams — what other districts call PLCs,” said Ritchie. “What each team does well or struggles with is different, and since they are tightly focused, each week I know exactly what they’ll need from me for the next meeting.”

Seeing the difference

The benefits of differentiating professional learning extend well beyond learning a new concept or achieving system goals. According to Bowgren and Sever (2010), properly differentiated learning can positively affect beliefs, habits, and culture; and can strengthen the link between job-embedded learning and student success.

“I am seeing stronger instruction happening,” said Hilt of her results. “Our teachers are more collaborative. They do their lesson planning together on Google docs, and are growing as a collaborative community of learners. I see them reaching out to professional learning networks, and they are more willing to reach out to me as an administrator.”

For Ritchie, she no longer hears the “What am I doing here?” question from her teachers. “I know my teachers well enough,” said Ritchie, “that planning for their needs is almost unconscious. I know what they like and don’t like. This is what I love about being a coach. I can sit down with teachers and figure out what we want to do, when we want

to do it, and when we can get together afterwards to see how it went and if we need to tweak it. Having that learning adventure together is one of the most rewarding things about coaching.”

References

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Killion, J. (2008). *Assessing impact: Evaluating staff development* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press & NSDC.

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