



## Approach professional learning as a researcher

### As told to Valerie von Frank

**T**aking on the stance of a researcher is probably the most effective strategy a coach can use. Teachers like kids; they like to think about kids. The most engaging professional development we can do is through students, turning the discussion into trying to make sense of student thinking, of where that student can go next. It is a strategy that is, I think, underused, and it has incredible potential.

Engaging teachers in the power of “we” — not “me” and “you,” but “we” together — has incredible power. That one shift alone creates community. It invites the teacher into trying to understand how students think, what is possible. It opens up almost a professional learning community between the teacher and myself. Together we are puzzling about students; we need to get clarity about where we want students to go.

Often the teacher and I have a different idea of what the end in mind should be. We explore that difference as we talk about it together, as we look at student work, as we listen to students and their thinking, as we understand what constitutes high-quality math programs and activities. As we put that together professionally, it helps teachers grow more than me coming in with a checklist to tell the teacher what to do. When you have “just-do-it” math programs, someone coming in from outside and saying

Chris Confer (cbconfer@cox.net) is an educational consultant and former mathematics and instructional coach for the Tucson (Ariz.) Unified School District.

“just do it,” you will get teachers to adjust, teachers to perform up to a certain level, but it will be to a relatively low or average level.

In the stance of a researcher, I use the word “wonder” a lot: “I wonder if all the students had that understanding or if it was just one student?” In conversations, certain patterns occur. We can fall into generalities. It’s helpful to be specific. When a teacher says, “The students don’t bring in their homework,” I say, “Which students?” and “Why aren’t they bringing their homework?” Then we can target the issue. Or we can shift up, to more generality. A teacher might be talking about a specific student, and after a while, it might be helpful to say, “What does that imply about all English language learners?” It helps the teacher pull ideas together and summarize an understanding.

I believe in modified lesson studies and showing teachers what rich thinking and questioning look like with their own students. I also follow an 80/20 rule, trying to spend 80% of the time on the things that benefit students the most. It might sound obvious, but when we look at how we

are allocating time, it is often different from what we would wish. If a teacher is spending time on collecting library books, for example, she may be able to make that into a student math lesson on graphing.

It’s important as a coach to say that I’m working on things also, to set up the situation so *we* are learning together. That collaboration is an honest way to approach our work. The truth is, nobody knows everything. The real truth is that every student is



different; every classroom is different; every situation is different. Just as we want students to think, reason, solve problems, and communicate, teachers need to be free and be supported in thinking, reasoning, solving problems, and communicating. That’s just good learning, how people learn best.

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**Valerie von Frank**  
 (valerievonfrank@aol.com) is an  
 education writer and editor of  
**Learning Forward’s books.** ●