Tools for LEARNING SCHOOLS

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

Professional learning as a creative process

A new learning map for differentiation

By Anthony Armstrong

Adlai E. Stevenson High School, which serves around 4,000 students in the northern suburbs of Chicago (Ill.), had been working on a formative assessment initiative for several years, making slow progress. "Sometimes we were going too fast for some teachers and too slow for others," explained District Superintendent Eric Twadell. "We began to realize that we were taking a one-size-fits-all model to professional development and it just wasn't working. We had 300 teachers and 150 curriculum teams and it was a little naïve to think that we could offer one model of professional development to all of those teams and teachers."

Twadell knew he needed to differentiate professional development for his teachers and their teams. So when he brought in Mark Onuscheck as director of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, and Tony Reibel as director of assessment, evaluation, and research, he set out to redefine how his system's leadership looked at professional learning. "We wanted to approach professional learning in a way that we could differentiate and also capture the conversations with our teachers so that we were working with them in a more individualized way," said Twadell.

The team started with reading the book *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention* by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, which looks at improving life experiences by understanding how consciousness works and how it is controlled. "This is research Csikszentmihalyi had been doing at the University of Chicago for over 30

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years, and it's pretty well-established learning theory," said Twadell.

Twadell's team borrowed Csikszentmihalyi's process for creativity and built it into a learning map for developing professional learning for teachers. "We started with the map as the skeleton of what we were doing with our formative assessment initiative. We wanted to walk through that process with our teachers first, and then try it with other initiatives we needed to implement."

Five stages of creativity as a learning map

Preparation

"Become immersed in problematic issues that are interesting and arouse curiosity" (Stevenson).

The five-stage process starts with preparation, which can happen at varying degrees of depth. Educators in this stage are exploring introductory concepts and seeking basic understanding, such as background and vocabulary.

"This stage prepares them for the professional learning that's going to happen. This could be individually or as a team to clarify what the professional learning is exactly and what they need to know," explained Onuscheck. "Some of that might be just the basics, or it could be the theory and ideas behind the new concept to prepare them to take on new decision making."

Incubation

"Let ideas churn below the threshold of consciousness. Unexpected combinations form, leading to domain-changing breakthroughs" (Stevenson).

During the incubation stage, the team is working with manipulating the new information, asking questions, and thinking about how to tailor the new concepts to their own work. For example, when the teams at Stevenson were working on formative assessments, the curriculum teams looked at how to make a common formative assessment for English and how it would be different from an assessment for science or social studies.

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Improving student learning and professional practice requires ongoing systemic and organizational change.

"In the incubation phase, we are thinking about the variability of the conversations that our teams are having," said Onuscheck. "This is a phase where we are generating ideas and thinking differently about the work that we are doing."

Insight

"The 'Aha!' moment when a problem comes together in the scientist's mind to form an insight or resolution. This can be a complex and lengthy process" (Stevenson).

The insight stage tries to capture the moments when ideas surface. It often happens while making connections from old to new practices or addressing any conflicts that may arise. Some decision making by the team must happen during this stage to determine which ideas to develop for the next phase.

"The third phase bubbles out of the incubation phase," said Onuscheck. "This is when the teams light up and have those 'aha' moments and say, 'oh this is what we want to do,' 'this is something we can get behind and believe in,' or 'this is how we would try to build it into our classroom work.' "

Evaluation

"Decide if the insight or resolution is valuable and worth pursuing. Individuals must decide if their ideas make sense, and the hard work of turning the creation into reality begins" (Stevenson).

Once an idea has surfaced, barriers have been broken down and educators can begin experimenting and prototyping. "We implement the new idea or the change so we can spend time evaluating the cause and effect relationships," said Onuscheck. "We then debrief and reflect on whether or not we can make improvements to that effort."

Elaboration

"Translate the insights into its final work. Here, it is the act of creating that drives the process forward, melding hard work and the enjoyment of the creative process" (Stevenson).

After the evaluation process, the last phase is one of continuous improvement, where the team continues to measure results and think of ways to make nuanced changes and improvements.

"At this stage, we also ask ourselves if there is something else that we need to know or learn to become stronger in the work that we are doing for students," said Onuscheck. "The idea behind this entire process is that we are entering into professional conversations that are always leading continuous change."

Twadell notes the process's alignment with the Learning Communities standard. "All of these things are done in collaboration within our professional learning communities framework. When people are working in teams, they get support, mentoring, and guidance from one another. This process just helps us identify what support they need more than anything else."

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DIFFERENTIATION

The opportunity for differentiation within this five-step process begins with the flexible and recursive nature of the stages. "Some people within the teams are moving along and they are ready to go through advanced stages while others may need to go back to early stages and spend more time with preparation or incubation," said Onuscheck. "We found that this process is really effective when working with individual teachers because it gives them a common foundation for their team's decision making and evaluating. There is an equitable commitment and understanding in and among the team members so that their discussions are much more fruitful and effective for student learning."

Reibel's frequent interactions with the teachers allowed him opportunities to use the learning map to differentiate individual teacher learning. "Learning indicators for the map became evident through conversations with teachers. I would place the teacher on the learning map, not telling them directly where they were at, but my questioning strategies would change based on the conversation. While listening to their responses, I could make changes as I led that teacher or team of teachers through the learning map. So the map can help customize the learning on a granular level with the individual teachers or the teams of teachers."

Reibel met weekly with teachers during prep periods or lunch, individually or as teams, and would review the learning map. According to Reibel, teachers preferred short bursts of conversation, often with one teacher representing a group and meeting to review ideas and prototypes of solutions. "On a daily basis, I am working with three or four teachers, groups, or teams," said Reibel. "They always come with a very specific goal in mind, and then that goal indicates where they are at in the learning map, and then we move them through."

According to Twadell, teachers also practice frequent self-reporting to their teams on where they are within the learning map. Questions such as "Where do you think you are?" and "Where do you think your team is?" help orient team members within their learning process and provide an entry point for working through their stages and contributing to the team's overall discussions.

"I do track a lot of the data from everything the teachers and I discuss," said Reibel. "I can actually see the teachers and teams change in front of me as a result of the implementation of this map. Our conversations about student learning and growth are fundamentally different than they were six years ago."

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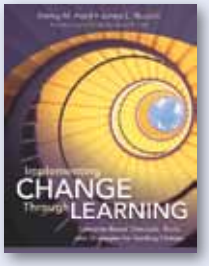
Since using the new learning maps, the leadership team at Stevenson has seen successful results, especially with the progression of teacher learning. "We now have learning maps for all of our different initiatives," said Twadell. "We are using the process for common formative assessments, standards-based grading, and instructional technology. We have seen more progression in teacher learning in the last two years than we had in the past 10. More importantly, though, the data show that our kids are improving not only each year, but also in comparison to the students of teachers who are not working through the same process. So the data are pretty revealing."

"For us, this process is about effective professional development every day," said Twadell. "It's not about professional development on PD day, which comes around once every few months. We are doing this work every day, day in and day out, before class, after class, during the class. It's just becoming the integrated way in which teachers are working with us."

For more on understanding stages of learning and implementation:

"Learning builds the bridge between research and practice"
By Gene E. Hall & Shirley M. Hord
JSD, August 2011
Available at www.learningforward.org/publications/jsd.

Implementing Change Through Learning: Concerns-Based Concepts, Tools, and Strategies for Guiding Change
Shirley Hord & James Roussin
Product Code: B558
Available at https://store.learningforward.org.



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Anthony Armstrong (anthony.armstrong@learningforward.org) is Learning Forward's associate director of publications.