

THE INSTRUCTOR'S BALANCING ACT



**WHAT QUALITIES
ARE CRITICAL
FOR EFFECTIVE
PROFESSIONAL
LEARNING?**

This article is adapted from a blog post on the Learning Forward Exchange. You can read more blog posts or add your own at <http://community.learningforward.org/blogsmain>.

By Jenni Iwanski

I work in a school with a bilingual program. Last week, I attended a workshop for bilingual teachers presented by a phenomenal instructor.

My learning curve is steep. I do not have much personal experience teaching English language learners, and I have only observed in bilingual classrooms.

Much of the workshop was presented in Spanish. At times, the room would erupt in laughter as the instructor also had a great sense of humor — I guess. I don't know Spanish, so I can't say for sure.

But I can tell you this: I was fully engaged the entire time. So how was it that I was so focused as a learner, even though the day's outcomes were clearly well above my current knowledge and skills? And, given that the workshop was designed for bilingual teachers, how was I able to walk away with valuable new information that I could put to use?

Learning happens by design. The workshop leader was purposeful in her work with us that day. Though I struggled to retrieve my limited Spanish vocabulary in order

to participate fully in the learning, I couldn't help admiring a presentation that even a novice learner could benefit from. At the same time, experienced teachers were equally engaged, clearly acquiring new learning.

Because I often lead professional learning myself, the experience was a great opportunity for me to reflect as a learner what made the day successful. The instructor used a variety of facilitation strategies, but the workshop was more



WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Great professional learning can happen in so many ways. Next semester, I'll be designing a course for my district to support teacher leaders in creating effective professional learning. Brainstorm with me! What qualities do you think are critical for supporting the learning of our colleagues?

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than a series of well-orchestrated activities. Her workshop reflected her beliefs about effective adult learning by:

Balancing teaching with learning: The instructor had a lot of information to share about bilingual education. She was an expert on the topic — she had recently published a book — and it was clear that she could speak for hours on the topic. But she didn't.

She masterfully balanced her sharing of new information with opportunities for us to digest and connect it to our own practice. Rarely did 10 minutes pass before we had a chance to turn and talk and process in our groups. There was great potential for a day of information overload. Instead, the new information both educated and inspired me in understanding bilingual instruction.

Accepting all learners: While the instructor encouraged my participation throughout the day, never did she question my level of participation, which was uncharacteristically less than that of my colleagues. While Spanish conversation flowed, I quietly listened.

At times, I attempted short phrases and words in Spanish, coupled with gestures, to enter into the conversation. The instructor knew I was monolingual and encouraged whatever I could contribute. She made me feel as though I belonged.

In the wake of this experience, I wonder what assumptions I make about participants who appear to not fully engage in professional learning. Do I remember that even adults enter into learning at different points? Do I focus on a lack of participation, or do I focus on what participants give? As a learner who felt very much out of place, an instructor who clearly focused on what I could do was critical for my success, even as a novice.

Putting teachers in the role of a student: This instructor is known for her demonstration of instructional techniques. She puts the group into the role of young learners as she steps through her instructional process.

The insight gained from this is remarkable — all of a sudden you begin to understand learning the way your own students might experience it. You become aware of your feelings and the effects of the learning, elevating your commitment for a change. Designing adult learning in ways teachers can better understand the work we ask students to do is incredibly powerful. We don't do this enough.

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CINDY HARRISON

This was a thought-provoking post. You analyzed a great learning experience in a way that will help us all as workshop presenters. I sometimes wonder if I can be as effective as you describe her to be.

I loved the description of ways she accepted you as a learner even though you could not speak the language. I wonder if and how we do that in classrooms with our second language learners. I hope we welcome them with open arms and make them feel included.

The discussion of teaching and learning balance is often a dilemma for us as workshop facilitators. Remembering that all of our adult learners come with lots of knowledge and experience should make us very willing to start with current knowledge and then move to adding to that knowledge. Using a variety of ways to have participants process is a challenge in that it needs to be meaningful and frequent.

Thanks for making me think and reconsider my own practice.

JENNI IWANSKI

Designing professional learning for adults is changing as rapidly as classroom practices are changing. I'm lucky to have had so many examples of meaningful professional learning on which to reflect, too!

CHRIS BRYAN

I think you identified some key characteristics of adult learning. You identified balancing teaching and learning. I think this is such an important thing for us to remember. It reminds me of the idea that the person who does the talking does the learning.

Also, acknowledging that adults bring so many varied experiences and levels of readiness to the professional learning experience is important for us to remember. When we ask our learners to identify a personal learning goal for a session, we help them find a way to make the learning meaningful for themselves. I love that you found a way to make meaning of the session you engaged in by relating it to what you know about effective professional learning.

JENNI IWANSKI

"The person who does the talking does the learning" is such a powerful mantra for us to remember when we design professional learning. Thanks for adding your ideas to my running list of characteristics of effective professional learning.