THE HIGH COST *of* CONVENIENCE

**SATISFYING SHORT-TERM NEEDS
ERODES LONG-TERM LEARNING**

By Diane P. Zimmerman

Novel ways of thinking often come from the cross-pollination of language from other professions. The term "satisficing" is one such term and is a powerful construct that fuses two concepts, satisfy and suffice, together to explain something new.

In the mid-1950s, social scientist and Nobel laureate in economics Herbert A. Simon defined "satisficing" as a way of describing a particular form of decision making in which humans select the first option that meets a given need but which may not be the most optimal (Simon, 1997).

Unlike its simpler derivatives, satisficing describes the often-paradoxical results that plague decision making. Depending on context, a particular option may be adequate or satisfactory in the moment, while later it is insufficient for full success.

While satisficing is an expedient strategy for everyday decisions such as what to cook for dinner in a given amount of time, it is detrimental to human activities, such as learning, that require sufficient investments of mental energy.

I can think of many times in my role as a professional developer when I observed satisficing but had no label for it. My vague descriptions were either that the participants were going through the motions or that they worked just enough to get by with the minimal requirements. Both stances were counterproductive to deep learning. Consider these examples.

THE EXPEDIENT CHOICE

Often, professionals will satisfice in an effort to protect time. As a principal, I was sometimes surprised to find that when I thought I had consensus, I would learn later that participants had rushed to a "good-enough" solution.

When consensus eventually broke down, participants would explain that they had chosen the first satisfactory option because they were tired of talking about it. The decision satisfied their need for expediency, but it wasn't sufficient for building consensus. This example meets the classic definition of satisficing, in which participants chose a quick fix that is expedient, but later erodes the decision.

JUST TELL ME WHAT TO DO

In just about every change initiative, there are always a few who, usually in exasperation, say, "Just tell me what to do."

Having someone tell us what to do is an easy option and can appear satisfactory, but the complex decisions of excellent teaching and learning are never so simply applied. Lasting change requires deep reflection on practice; shortcuts are doomed to failure.

When a professional does not fully commit to thinking through the change, he will not have sufficient strategies for success. In systems theory, this is called "fixes that fail" in that the solution seems to satisfice, but over the long haul it is eroded by unintended consequences. In an attempt to satisfy the need for compliance, the teacher will find that, in the end, she does not have sufficient depth to adapt to students' needs.

A RESPECTFUL VOID

A few years ago, I taught a group of principals about theory-based leadership. No matter what I did, I could not get deep engagement from these principals. They were polite, stayed for the entire day, but something did not work.

At the end, I asked one principal for feedback. She told me, "Don't feel bad. We treat all consultants the same way. Every time our boss goes to a conference, she brings her latest new idea. We are just sick of it."

Being professionals, these educators did not want to appear rude, so they placated by giving sufficient attention to be polite, but not satisfying the requirements for deep learning. To be honest, most of us will admit to politely, or even not so politely, just sitting passively through workshops, giving sufficient but not satisfactory attention for learning.

For some of us, we do not want the added distraction of one more initiative. For others, it might feel like a distraction from an already chosen decision path.

REVOLVING DOOR LEARNING

Serial change initiatives create a sense of "false clarity" — the idea that one or two workshops make an expert. So often we hear things like, "We did professional learning communities three years ago, writing prompts last year, and now we are on to Common Core."

With so many competing demands, it is easy to fall into the trap of revolving door professional learning. The irony is that we ignore the research on professional development that has demonstrated the need for sustained commitment, coaching, and collaborative learning.

By colluding, we adopt a sense of false clarity about the power of professional learning. Short-term gains, while satisfactory for the moment, are never sufficient for long-term change. What appears satisfactory, counting staff development events for a report, is not sufficient for producing intended outcomes.

GROUP ASPIRATION

Groups, like individuals, have limited cognitive capacity for sustaining complex thoughts. In their work on data-driven dialogue, Wellman and Lipton (2003) write that simplifying a problem can reduce cognitive load and facilitate more rapid decision making. It can also reduce the cognitive aspirations of the group.

Groups vary in their ability to persist and puzzle through when there is no immediate solution. Rushing to decisions can create low aspirations and thus diminishes the effectiveness of group learning.

Wellman and Lipton explain that aspirational levels are learned behaviors that lead to either self-limiting or group-expanding behaviors. One way to slow down decisions and keep groups thinking together is to frame the work around an unanswered question. Questions tend to keep everyone in the conversation a bit longer and, if left unanswered, sustain curiosities.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR EDUCATORS

Satisficing is a critical problem of practice. Satisficing is an act that more often than not interferes with deep, sustained reflection on practice and the concomitant learning. The act of satisficing, in which only one side of Simon's equation is acted on, erodes long-term learning by satisfying short-term needs. On the other side of the equation, it gives a short-term illusion of sufficiency for success. Wellman and Lipton (2003) state, "In the press of time, any action is sought over further reflection" (p. 49).

By applying this concept to education, the question of practice becomes: How can educators help learners take control of their own learning so as to optimize engagement? There is no easy solution. The examples in this article are but a few of the many ways we can become conscious about how we as professionals compromise learning.

By knowing what satisficing looks, sounds, and feels like, educators can intervene in the moment, make adjustments, and help professionals engage in and take control of their own learning. Look for satisficing behaviors, and you will see them everywhere — in classrooms, in your personal life, and in professional learning. Be wary of the quick fixes or the lack of follow-through. Both indicate satisficing and will likely lead to failure.

To raise aspirational levels, we need to apply strategies that open up curiosity, engage in the moment, and seek immediate feedback. We need to be flexible and make adjustments to sustain engagement and the commitment to learning. The distance between teaching and learning needs be shortened.

How much more satisfied those principals would have been, all those years ago, if I had stopped early in the day to check in. What I was delivering was not wrong, but the process I had chosen did not match their needs.

If I had spent sufficient time checking in with them and grounding my work in relation to their current practices, everyone would have been more satisfied, and I might have been invited to engage in a sustained relationship. Our learning would have been both sufficient and satisfactory for long-term success.

REFERENCES

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Diane P. Zimmerman (dpzimmer@gmail.com) is a consultant and co-author of *Cognitive Capital: Investing in Teacher Quality* **(Teachers College Press, 2014) and** *Lemons to Lemonade: Resolving Problems in Meetings, Workshops, and PLCs* **(Corwin, 2013).** ■