

THE SOLUTION IS IN THE ROOM

TEACHER VOICES
POWER CONVERSATION
PROTOCOL

BY DONNA SPANGLER

Professional learning can encompass a wide range of formal or informal activities and interactions: seminars, informal hallway discussions, university courses, workshops, local and national conferences, co-teaching, mentoring, data discussions about student work, book clubs, teacher networks, and inservice days.

While many experiences may lead to professional learning, participation alone isn't enough. We also need to know whether these learning experiences are effective. What structures, processes, and forms of evaluation are useful to consider when designing effective professional learning and evaluation?

For example, consider the term "inservice." It has become a dreaded

word that makes teachers cringe and roll their eyes. That's not because of a lack of interest in increasing their teacher knowledge and skills, making effective changes to instruction, and improving student learning. The problem is that, all too often, professional learning doesn't give teachers the tools and voices to make that time meaningful.

Stakeholders want evidence that professional learning results in meaningful outcomes. Administrators and school boards want assurances that the investments of time and school funds are not going to waste. Teachers want professional learning that nurtures learning communities, injects new knowledge and life into classrooms, and engages students academically, socially, and emotionally in increasingly successful learning experiences.

They also want to feel that professional learning is something they want to *participate in* and not something that is *done to* them. Parents want to see that the time and money being spent results in positive changes for their children.

So what assurances can we make to these various groups to demonstrate that professional learning is working and achieving desired educator and student outcomes? Here are some factors to consider as we evaluate the professional learning occurring in our schools.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHER VOICE

An often-overlooked element in designing effective professional learning is to include teacher voices in creating relevant and timely topics. It is critical for schools to develop plans that



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PRO ACTION CAFÉ:**

- <http://amandafenton.com/core-methods/what-is-the-pro-action-café>
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=2sWHCLWYa8o

Photo by KATELYN HARLEY

Janelle Hromyak, teacher of English language learners, makes her point at a professional learning session called The Solution Is in the Room at Hershey Middle School in Pennsylvania.

foster a learning culture that ensures high-quality teaching for all students, with teacher voices included in the planning, delivery, and evaluation of the professional learning.

Because teachers have daily contact with learners and are in the best position to directly influence student learning, promoting and supporting timely, high-quality, and teacher-driven professional development are crucial to the success of any education reform effort.

Teachers want professional development that is teacher-driven and recognizes teachers as professionals, and this learning must be relevant, interactive, facilitated by someone who understands their experience, sustained over time, and treats teachers like professionals (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2014).

In addition, for real professional learning to take place, adult learners must be both decision-makers and agents of their own learning (Calvert, 2016). Finally, another important component in educator professional learning is treating teacher learning as interactive, social, and based in communities of practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999).

BACKWARD DESIGN

Guskey (2000) asserts that effective professional development must have clear goals along with assessment procedures to document progress. In other words, it is important to begin the professional learning process focused on the end in mind.

Beginning with the end in mind (i.e. what students should know and be able to do) is critical both to a teacher's learning and for lasting impact on student achievement. Starting with clear goals helps keep everyone focused on the task and prevents wasting time, energy, and peripheral agendas.

Beginning with questions about what are the intended student outcomes

and what evidence best reflects these outcomes makes for more effective professional development planning and evaluation.

IMPACT ON TEACHERS' KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

To assess the effectiveness of any professional learning, schools need to measure common features about what research shows increases teacher knowledge and skills, changes instruction in the classroom, and positively impacts student learning.

Desimone (2009) created a core conceptual framework for studying the effects of professional development on teachers and students. No matter what activity is designed, schools must decide how to measure teacher experiences, learning, and instruction. Evaluation questions must determine if the professional learning increased teachers' knowledge and skills, changed their attitudes and beliefs, or both.

Because the goals of effective professional learning are ultimately to change educator practice and improve student learning, evaluation questions need to measure these outcomes. Intended outcomes should be clear from the start and assessed individually in quality evaluation tools like surveys, interviews, and observations.

Questions that measure participants' reactions, like impressions of the presentation, the comfort of the room, and initial satisfaction of the learning, provide little to the ultimate learning outcome goals.

IMPACT ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

This is perhaps the most important stage in evaluating professional learning impact, and yet it can be one of the most challenging. An initial survey isn't enough. To see the impact of that learning, schools need to do sustained follow-up over time — one month,

three months, six months — to see if it has, in fact, affected students' learning.

It takes a significant amount of time and energy for that professional learning to result in Desimone's (2009) last two stages of professional development: changes in instruction and pedagogy and changes in student learning. Until those two things occur, a school really cannot evaluate the effectiveness of its professional learning.

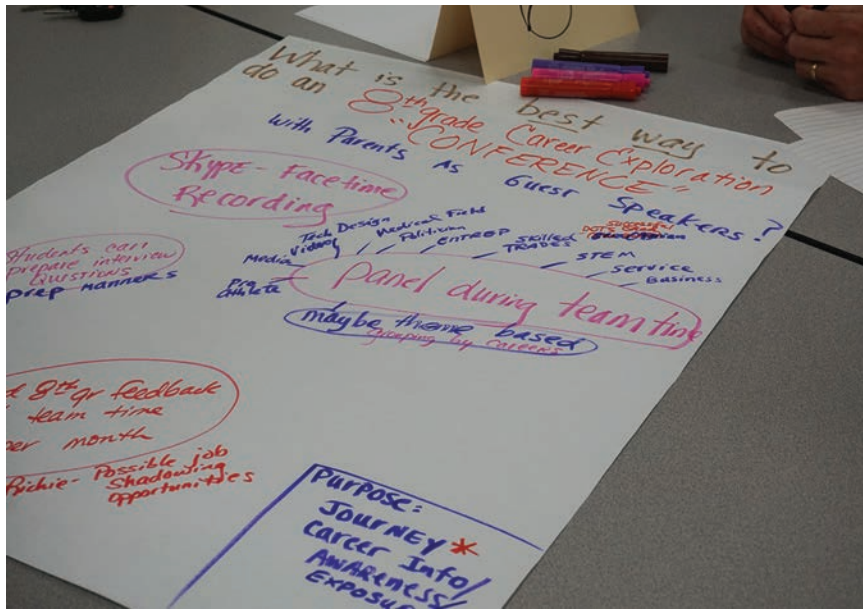
FOCUS ON OUTCOMES AND EVIDENCE

When schools evaluate the effects of professional learning, they should carefully consider the evaluation tool that is most appropriate for inquiry. Surveys, interviews, and observations are the most common ways to collect data.

Because goals in professional learning are to change educator practice and improve student learning, these two items must be the focus of evaluation, and both are important. Changes in educator practice that do not lead to improved student learning aren't effective. Likewise, changes in student learning without clearly defined changes in instruction cannot be attributed to professional learning.

Surveys provide information about events, behavior, and practice and will allow a comparison of teacher experiences across schools, districts, and trend analysis over time. Interviews with teachers often provide detailed insights into challenges and successes that teachers experience and can provide answers to the professional learning questions about what happens next.

Observations allow colleagues, coaches, and administrators to determine if the professional learning is being used in the classroom in a way that is perfunctorily compliant or truly embraced change. It also provides information about what happens next for continued professional learning with that topic.



Photos by KATELYN HARLEY

Table hosts write a question or problem on chart paper, then take notes on participants' feedback.

TEACHER-DRIVEN LEARNING IN PRACTICE

What might structures, processes, and forms of evaluation look like in practice? Let's examine teacher-driven professional learning at Hershey Middle School in Pennsylvania's Derry Township School District that exemplifies teacher voice and shows the importance of evaluation to the learning process.

The school created a professional learning committee because, as Principal Erick Valentin explains, "Professional learning must be personalized to meet the needs of all staff. It is impossible to do this successfully without collaboration with those staff members."

The committee includes six teachers and one administrator. The committee helps set professional learning goals, assists in planning, delivery, and evaluation of some professional learning, and, provides two-way communication about the district's and teachers' professional learning needs.

Lisa Butler and Renée Owens, two members of the committee, recently attended a conference for Pennsylvania



Renee Owens, from left, Erick Valentin, and Lisa Butler adapted an activity from a professional learning conference to create *The Solution Is in the Room*.

and New Jersey educators where they participated in an activity called Pro Action Café that is designed to stimulate conversation that leads to action. After sharing what they learned with the professional learning committee, the committee adapted the activity for use in a two-hour professional learning session at the school. We called this activity "The Solution Is in the Room."

We started with backward design, knowing that we wanted to address many of the questions, projects, and challenges our teachers were facing. We designed an initial survey to capture teachers' expectations about the learning experience (i.e. impact, what they planned to change in their

classroom, what they learned), then followed up with with interviews.

HOW IT WORKS

This activity is a structured three-round protocol for creative and inspirational conversation where participants are invited to share their questions (around projects, problems, technology, inspiration, ideas, etc.) and get input (deeper questions, knowledge, experience) from colleagues to help move from questions to actions. At the end of the activity, each table host leaves with an actionable plan.

The amount of time for the protocol is flexible, but we recommend two hours for setting up, explaining the process, and reflecting on the activity.

Before the day of the activity, we sent a brief survey to staff asking them to share a question, problem, or challenge they were experiencing in their classroom and if they would be willing to serve as a table host, a role that would allow them to walk away from the session with an action plan for their project or challenge.

Of those who responded, 79% were willing to serve in that capacity — an amazing turnout for a first-time effort. Given that we wanted to limit the people at each table to one table host and four or five participants, we knew we needed at least 12 table hosts. More than double that number volunteered.

We began by showing a brief YouTube video that describes the process and rationale used in a business setting. We then explained the process to the staff with a brief slide show:

- The host will do most of the talking in three conversational rounds explaining the question, project, or challenge.
- As a visitor to the table, your first job is to listen actively.
- Ask thoughtful questions to provide feedback to the host about the learning, the steps,

IDEAS

and any insights or further support needed.

- Finally, the host makes conclusions from the questions — not the visitors, as it is the host’s question, project, or challenge.

QUESTIONS, PROJECTS, AND CHALLENGES

We asked teachers to bring forward their question, project, or challenge. Once we selected table hosts, we supplied them with chart paper and markers to take notes during the three rounds.

On a spreadsheet projected on a screen, we typed the table number, the host teacher’s name, and the question. Some examples include:

- How can I make students take more ownership over their progress?
- How do I promote equity in class discussions?
- How do we promote prosocial behaviors in our students?
- How is a team to help support students in their homework and quality of work?

The next stage of the activity consisted of three conversational rounds. At the start of the first round, we invited the remaining participants to move to a table, reminding them to limit each table to four to five participants.

CONVERSATIONAL ROUNDS

When participants arrived at their first table, they found that the table host had listed his or her question, project, or challenge at the top of the chart paper. The table host shared his or her topic and made notes for himself or herself on the paper as participants asked questions and talked.

The first round’s projected question was: “What is the quest behind the question? [Participants are invited to

challenge the host to find the deeper meaning of his or her question.]” This round lasted about 25 minutes, and participants focused their questions and input around this focus.

When the first round ended, participants got up and walked to another table while the table hosts remained seated. The next question probed a little deeper: “What is missing? What are some challenges? [What is a question not asked yet? What are perspectives or options not yet considered?]” The table host reviewed his or her topic and round one discussion with participants. Then participants asked focused questions and gave input on the second question for 25 minutes.

We then took a brief break. During that time, table hosts consolidated the information talked about at their table.

After the break, we again projected the table group topics and asked participants to move to a table they had not yet visited. The projected question in this round was an opportunity for table hosts to consolidate their learning into an action plan. The projected questions were: “What did I learn? What next steps will I take?”

During this 25-minute round, we asked hosts to share their thoughts with the third group. We also asked participants to think about what they had learned and share what their answers would be to those two questions.

At the end of the activity, we allotted 15 minutes for teachers to take an online survey and asked them to submit their names with the survey so that a member of the professional learning committee could follow up with table hosts on their action plans and with participants on any questions.

RESULTS

Evaluation results from the staff were overwhelmingly positive. For

example, 98% said the professional learning was relevant to their work as a teacher, while 91% said it was timely. “It was powerful to hear about other colleagues trying things like different discussion strategies, service projects, and guest speakers,” one teacher responded. “I loved hearing other people’s ideas for solving problems because it also helped me reflect and come up with strategies to make my own teaching stronger.”

The learning was especially effective when teachers saw more experienced colleagues struggling with similar issues. “I have gained new insights on ideas I am incorporating in my room from colleagues I do not spend much time with,” one teacher noted. “Specifically, this year we are helping our kids track their growth to show them they are actually learning something. It was nice to see and discuss how other teachers are doing this in their rooms.”

Other changes teachers said they would take back to their classrooms included having students track their own progress, rethink equity in classroom discussions, and adding new tools for student reflection.

Principal Erick Valentin said the activity was valuable for a number of reasons. “It fostered collaboration between colleagues that do not regularly get to work together,” he said. “It provided lots of ideas for the host teachers to take their projects to the next level. Also, it created an opportunity to spark the curiosity of teacher participants. Finally, it allowed the faculty to practice giving and receiving feedback in a noncritical manner.”

In our school, we have learned the importance of developing formal and informal professional learning to ensure high-quality teaching for all students. Teacher voices must be included in the planning, delivery, and evaluation of professional learning to cultivate an authentic learning culture in a school.

Teachers bring with them untapped talent and expertise that schools must identify, elevate, and share.

The activity illustrated in this article is an example of a structured protocol that accesses teacher voices, engages in immediate problem-solving, and leverages teachers' experiences and expertise. Because teachers have daily contact with learners and are in the best position to directly influence student learning, timely, high-quality, and teacher-driven professional development is crucial to the success of any education reform effort.

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6 skills every observer needs — and how to build them

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to learn what it means to prioritize a narrow but potentially high-leverage area for improvement from among all the strengths and weaknesses in a lesson. They need to learn the kinds of questions that can prompt teachers to analyze what happened in their lesson, and they need to learn how to work with teachers to co-produce solutions.

A straightforward way to promote this kind of feedback is with protocols for post-observation conferences. A good protocol helps evaluators avoid common pitfalls, like starting off with what a teacher did poorly (which reduces receptivity) and overwhelming a teacher with too much information. Along with protocols, observers need guidelines and opportunities to practice identifying areas for improvement, preparing reflective prompts, and coming up with suggested actions steps for teachers.

PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

None of these skills is optional. They build on each other. You can't rate accurately if you can't identify relevant evidence. You can't collect

relevant evidence if you don't know what evidence is. More broadly, you can't coach teachers to improve their practice if you can't accurately identify effective teaching.

Nor is one-shot professional learning sufficient to ensure these skills are developed. Observers need to be assessed and their work in the field monitored to make sure they learned these skills — or, if they haven't, to make sure they get additional professional learning. Observers also need regular follow-up to sharpen and extend their skills.

The good news is that all of what we've described is being done in various places and in ways that fit the needs of local contexts. In Minneapolis, observers take part in face-to-face professional learning in which they practice identifying and rating relevant evidence, then get immediate feedback on their attempts. In the District of Columbia Public Schools, the same is accomplished with a blend of online and group sessions. The Rhode Island Department of Education has disseminated guidelines and tools for reviewing the quality of feedback. What's needed is for such

practices to take hold in more places. Then the true potential of observation will become evident.

*This article is excerpted and adapted from the book, **Better Feedback for Better Teaching: A Practical Guide to Improving Classroom Observations**, published in May 2016 by Jossey-Bass. © Copyright 2016 Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. All rights reserved.*

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