NIMBLE NAVIGATION

A CONSTANT CYCLE OF ASSESSMENT KEEPS LEARNING ON COURSE

By Wendy James and Terry Johanson

The purpose of professional learning is to change what teachers know and can do to better support student learning. Over the last decade, professional learning has changed dramatically in an attempt to be more engaging and productive (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009).

What's missing for many, however, is time or resources to devote to a large-scale evaluation of the professional learning. Districts may track time spent or whether teachers valued the experience (Hirsh, 2013), but this only assesses if the learning was engaging or engaged in, not if it was effective.

According to Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning (2011), professional learning needs to start with student, educator, and system data, and that data should be used to assess forward progress. Internal evaluation of professional learning can be a natu-

SAMPLE FACILITATION GUIDE

CONTENT

Identify the topic.

PROCESS

- Learning activities.
- Processes, including descriptions.
- Questions being posed.
- Movement and grouping information.

ASSESSMENT

What we anticipate hearing or observing: What information is most important to know? Include possible misconceptions.

TIME

Specify a time frame.

MATERIALS

- Handouts.
- Slides.
- Videos.
- Table materials.
- Room materials.

ral part of any facilitation process, providing rich information about the impact on teacher understanding and application. The evaluation can shape learning opportunities to make them more relevant to teachers' needs and more effective.

PLANNING FOR FLEXIBILITY

Just like in a classroom, a professional learning facilitator needs to base planning and instruction on assessment. Adult learners need the learning experience to be as focused as possible on their questions and their teaching circumstances.

Professional learning leaders can plan the learning experience so it is designed to gather data about teachers' needs and respond to that data immediately. The first step is to use a planning framework that encompasses the content, strategies, assessment, and possible timing for each step in a facilitation sequence (Johanson, 2012).

When planning for differentiation, facilitators need to consider participants' various learning preferences, personality types, background knowledge, and needs. Differentiation may occur two ways. One is to ensure that the learning experience includes a variety of strategies and content throughout the day. Another is to provide choice and different opportunities within a specific content area.

However, planning for different learning needs, offering choice, giving time to talk and think, and time to apply learning can only accomplish so much. To be responsive in leading professional learning, we use a constant cycle of formative assessment and immediate changes based on the data we gather.

When we plan any facilitation, whether it's a half-day session or extends over multiple school years, we always plan how to use formative assessment to collect data about what teachers understand, value, or may need next so we can respond. Here are some of our most successful facilitation tools.

■ **Predict possible answers for the major questions you will ask participants.**

These should span responses from learners who have a deep understanding of the content being explored to those who are new to thinking about this idea. When planning, consider possible misconceptions as well as what statements might reveal those misconceptions.

For example, when participants ask, "When do I find time for formative assessment?," a facilitator knows that a participant understands formative assessment as a tool or action rather than stance within a classroom. If this is a predicted misconception, then a facilitator should have materials or processes prepared that can address the learning gap or misconception. All differentiation begins with good planning.

■ **Find out who the professional learners are as soon as possible.**

Formative assessment of adult learners allows facilitators to get a sense of who is in the room. This information can guide facilitators to make appropriate choices throughout the experience and allow professional learning to fit the learning preferences and needs of participants.

We use opening sharing circles when we want to establish community or norms while getting to know our learners. When participants introduce themselves and discuss what their hopes are for the day, we gather information about what we need to do to meet their needs.

When we want to understand how participants are feeling, we might them to describe which of the images on their table is most like their current state. We also use different image cards when we want teachers to describe how they think or feel about an idea in education to someone in the room they have not met.

In addition to helping teachers connect to others, engaging participants in building metaphors gets them active quickly. Another option is to ask participants to work in small groups to generate questions related to the day's topic. Each of these activities is more effective in small groups because more people get to speak, allowing us to see trends across the various tables.

> It is important to know what teachers want to learn and how those goals might fit into the learning outcomes facilitators set. It is also imperative that facilitators know whether learners are meeting those outcomes and what barriers they may be experiencing that might prevent them from implementing new ideas in their classrooms.

■ **Respond to participant goals during professional learning.**

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ers are meeting those outcomes and what barriers they may be experiencing that might prevent them from implementing new ideas in their classrooms. We use three main strategies to help us know where participants are during learning.

1. **Ask participants to revisit their questions throughout the day to determine how satisfied they are that they have an answer.** We often ask participants to represent their understanding visually by filling in an open circle with the percentage of an answer they have so far or writing what they still need to know just before we take a break. We walk around during break to take the pulse of the learning.

2. **Ask participants to synthesize ideas and present to their colleagues.** This helps us know if participants understand well enough to be able to use the ideas later and surfaces topics we haven't addressed well enough. It also raises misconceptions and makes teachers' commitments to action public.

3. **Ask participants to fill in graphic organizers as they are learning.** If the graphic organizers are large enough, we can see at a glance what participants think is the key information and any concerns they may have. Graphic organizers are especially helpful for seeing what participants see as potential applications and how they are connecting to prior knowledge.

■ **Be a professional eavesdropper.**

Small-group conversations, rather than pairs or individual thinking, allow facilitators to be professional eavesdroppers. Listening in on four or five conversations is more manageable and less awkward than listening to 15 pairs. It is also easier to enter a small group and pose a question that extends the conversation.

As groups chronicle their discussion on chart paper or using ledger paper-sized graphic organizers, a facilitator can read the thinking generated by a group more quickly than having individual responses on paper or electronic devices.

■ **Make it safe to surface misunderstandings.**

Many strategies will expose misconceptions if you ask two questions that are opposing or related to similar concepts. For instance, a snowball strategy can be made even more insightful when it uses two opposing, and often misunderstood, ideas.

A traditional snowball asks participants to respond to a concept or question, throw their response, pick up someone else's paper, write, throw, write, and throw. These ideas are then shared in the larger group, but nobody knows who wrote what, making it safe to share your thinking.

One way to use this strategy might be to ask, "What do you know about differentiation?" on one paper, and, on another color of paper, "What do you know about modification?" Participants then respond to both papers throughout the exercise. By comparing answers to these two stems, it is possible to clear up misconceptions in the room in a safe way.

■ **Connect your agenda with your assessment.**

Reflection on learning should occur throughout a learning experience and at the end of the day to alert facilitators to what they might do to adjust the learning to best meet educator needs. We use a feedback form we call an agenda assessment (Johanson, 2012).

An agenda assessment has two purposes: It provides an agenda for participants while simultaneously providing participants opportunities for reflection and feedback. Questions posed should span at least the first three levels of Guskey's (2000) levels of evaluating professional development: participant satisfaction with the learning experience, participant learning, and barriers to implementation.

A facilitator might also ask questions about participant intent to implement, which is Guskey's fourth level of evaluation. If follow-up is possible, then participants and facilitators can gather evidence about implementation and impact on students.

An agenda assessment replaces a traditional exit slip at the end of the day. Rather than asking participants to fill out the entire assessment when the session finishes, a facilitator can pause periodically to provide time for participants to reflect on their learning after each portion of the agenda. Facilitators can skim agenda assessments as they circulate.

■ **Respond to your formative assessment.**

It can be hard to plan regular quick checks into your professional learning, but may be even harder to respond to what you find. A new facilitator can sometimes identify when things aren't working but doesn't always know what to do in that moment. These strategies respond to participant needs as they arise.

1. **Stop and do it a new way.** Sometimes formative assessment tells us the learning experience isn't working. Rather than saying it again more slowly and loudly, select a new facilitation strategy from a different category.

2. **Know what your most critical outcomes are at the start of the session.** We categorize parts of our agenda as critical and nearly a third as "nice to know." It helps us avoid dumping everything we know on participants and helps us choose what to cut when a new need comes up or we need more time. Sometimes facilitators don't respond to learner needs because they feel they'll miss something critical or run out of time.

3. **Anticipate points of difficulty.** Like any good instructional designer, we think ahead about points where different beliefs or approaches may become an issue. If they do, we use mediational questions. Mediational questions are open-ended, plural, and tentative. They imply that there is not one right answer, making it safe for participants to explore multiple viewpoints. For example, rather than asking, "What are you going to do when you return to your school?," a facilitator might ask, "What might be some possible actions you may take when you return to your school?"

Mediational questions allow for rich conversation with a small group, exploring ideas and making connections to existing knowledge and learning needs.

4. **Regroup.** At times, different participants have different needs. We use the same types of different learning centers in our professional learning that any teacher might use a classroom. We describe a series of different types of learning on a variety of topics occurring throughout the room and let the learner pick. Some people might scan QR codes with their phones to participate in a simulation, while others solve authentic problems with a group, and still others quietly read research summaries. At the end, participants give quick summaries about what they learned and how it can be used.

Professional learning can be a rich, relevant experience, but it depends on planning for differentiation and formative assessment. When leaders embed data collection in professional learning processes, those processes become much more effective and satisfying for teachers, and ultimately, more likely to impact student results.

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