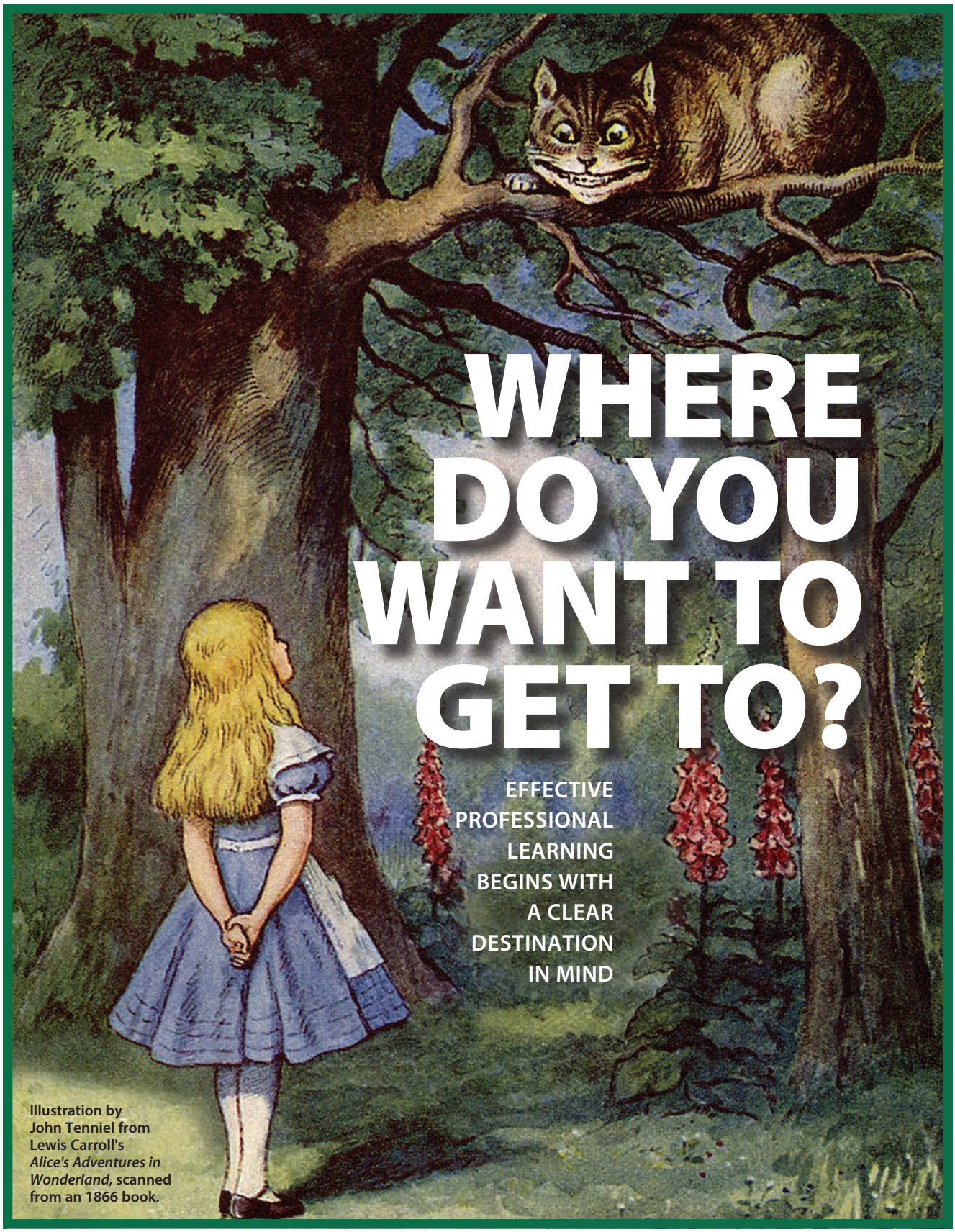

WHERE DO YOU WANT TO GET TO?

EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING BEGINS WITH A CLEAR DESTINATION IN MIND

Illustration by John Tenniel from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland,* scanned from an 1866 book.

BY THOMAS R. GUSKEY

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In Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland,* Alice asks the Cheshire Cat, "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"

"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," the cat tells her.

"I don't much care," Alice says.

"Then it doesn't matter which way you go," the cat replies.

This telling scene from Carroll's classic story describes how many educators go about professional learning. Just like Alice, they don't know where they want to get to. They are on an adventure, thrilled by new encounters and exploring possibilities with no particular destination in mind. In evaluating their adventure, they simply reflect on the experience and make judgments about how enjoyable or meaningful it was. What learning occurs is an ancillary benefit. Even if valuable, it's typically unplanned and often unanticipated.

Effective professional learning, however, is not an adventure — it's a journey. We engage in professional learning with purpose and intent. Although there may be unexpected encounters along the way, we have a clear destination in mind. Specifically, we want to get better at our profession. That's why we label it "professional" learning.

And we have definite ideas about what "getting better" means. In education, getting better generally means having a more positive influence on the learning of our students and helping more students learn well. In other words, we know where we want to get to. Knowing our destination provides the basis for determining the effectiveness of our efforts.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

Educators often shy away from evaluating professional learning experiences because they believe the process requires knowledge and skills they don't possess. As a result, they either neglect evaluation procedures completely or leave them to "experts" who come in at the end and gather data to determine if anything made a difference. But these ad hoc procedures rarely yield information that helps educators improve the quality or effectiveness of their professional learning experiences.

In truth, evaluation is a relatively simple process that begins by answering three essential questions:

1. What do we want to accomplish?
2. How will we know it if we do?
3. What else might happen, good or bad?

The first question clarifies our destination and goals. Since our primary goal in education is to help all students learn well, the destination in professional learning is almost always improvement in student learning outcomes. These improvements may be increased student achievement in specific subjects or helping students acquire important life skills, such as collaboration, communication, empathy, and personal and social responsibility. If our own professional learning doesn't aid us in helping more students learn better, it can hardly be considered effective.

The second question identifies what evidence we trust to verify that we reached our destination and achieved our goals. Because the evidence most

trusted varies depending on who is asked, we always need to consider multiple sources of data (Guskey, 2007a, 2012). No single source of evidence tells the whole story (Guskey, Roy, & von Frank, 2014).

The third question requires us to look beyond the stated goals and consider possible "unintended consequences." Sometimes important things happen along our journey, both positive and negative, that are not necessarily planned. Improving student learning in one subject, for example, may increase students' self-confidence as learners and lead to improvements in other subjects. Or it may be that the improvements in student learning in one subject came as the result of taking instructional time from other subjects, and achievement in those subjects declined. Looking beyond the intended goals to the broader array of possible outcomes is an important aspect of evaluation and vital in judging effectiveness.

ANALYSIS OF ITEMS ANSWERED INCORRECTLY BY STUDENTS ON A COMMON FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

Formative Assessment 3

Item	Jen	Michael	Chris
1		𝍸	𝍸
2	𝍸	𝍸	𝍸
3	𝍸 𝍸 𝍸 𝍸	𝍸	𝍸
4			
5	𝍸	𝍸	𝍸
6	𝍸	𝍸	𝍸
7	𝍸	𝍸 𝍸 𝍸	𝍸 𝍸 𝍸 𝍸
8			
9	𝍸 𝍸 𝍸 𝍸	𝍸 𝍸 𝍸	𝍸
10	𝍸	𝍸	𝍸
11	𝍸	𝍸	𝍸
12	𝍸 𝍸	𝍸	𝍸 𝍸
13	𝍸 𝍸 𝍸	𝍸 𝍸 𝍸 𝍸	𝍸 𝍸 𝍸
14	𝍸 𝍸	𝍸 𝍸	𝍸 𝍸 𝍸
15	𝍸 𝍸	𝍸 𝍸	𝍸 𝍸

Source: Guskey & Jung, 2013. Copyright 2013 Corwin. Used with permission.

EVALUATION STARTS AT THE BEGINNING

Most importantly, these three essential questions show that evaluation is not something that happens only at the end. Rather, it's where we start. As Covey (2004) reminded us, we must always "begin with the end in mind."

Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning guide educators in making thoughtful decisions about the destination of their professional learning journey. According to the standards, effective professional learning experiences increase "educator effectiveness and results for all students" (Learning Forward, 2011). This central purpose isn't something to be considered only at the end. Instead, it must be where we begin planning all professional learning experiences (Guskey, 2001a, 2001b, 2002a, 2005b, 2007b).

Deciding what goals we want to achieve typically involves careful analysis of current data on student learning along with consideration of the teaching and learning context. Results from large-scale state assessments and nationally normed, standardized exams may be important for accountability purposes and undoubtedly need to be included (Brennan, Kim, Wenz-Gross, & Siperstein, 2001). School administrators generally consider these to be valid indicators of success.

But other stakeholders in the professional learning process may consider alternative sources of evidence more valid. Teachers, for example, typically see limitations in large-scale assessment data. These assessments are generally administered only once per year, and results may not be available until several months later. By that time, the school year may have ended and students promoted to another teacher's class. So, while important, many teachers do not find such data particularly useful (Guskey, 2007a).

Teachers tend to put more trust in results from their own assessments of student learning: classroom assessments, observations, assignments, in-class performance, and portfolios of student work. They turn to these sources of data for feedback to determine if the new strategies or practices they are implementing really make a difference.

Classroom assessments provide timely, targeted, and instructionally relevant data that also can be used to plan revisions when needed. Classroom observations and discussions with students often help pinpoint areas of concern. Interviews with teachers, focus

groups, or discussions in professional learning communities (DuFour, 2004) are especially valuable. Since teachers comprise a major stakeholder group in any professional learning endeavor, the inclusion of sources of data they trust and believe is vitally important (Guskey, 2012).

Affective and behavioral indicators of student performance can be relevant as well. These include student surveys designed to measure how much students like school; their perceptions of teachers, fellow students, and themselves; their sense of self-efficacy; and their confidence in new learning situations or positive mindset.

Data from school records on attendance, enrollment patterns, dropout rates, class disruptions, and disciplinary actions are also important. In some areas, parents' or families' perceptions may be an important consideration. This is especially true in initiatives that involve changes in grading practices, report cards, or other aspects of school-to-home and home-to-school communication (Epstein & Associates, 2009; Guskey, 2002b; Guskey & Bailey, 2001, 2010).

Considering the learning progress of students of different backgrounds and ability levels, language experiences, ethnicity, race, and gender can be particularly informative. Looking at differences between classrooms and between schools often yields new understandings of problem areas as well.

AN EXAMPLE

When analyzing data from assessments of student learning to guide professional learning, the most helpful information for guiding improvement rarely comes from comparisons of a school's results with averages from the state, province, or nation.

It comes instead from exploring and analyzing variation in students' responses to individual items or subsections of items on assessments, especially "common" formative assessments. These assessments can vary widely in their form and structure, as can any type of assessment. What makes common formative assessments different is that they are collaboratively developed, scored, and analyzed by teams of teachers rather than by an individual teacher (Ainsworth & Viegut, 2006).

To develop common formative assessments, teacher teams first examine the standards or learning goals for each instructional unit and then collaboratively develop assessments that they believe will capture how well students have mastered those standards or goals. Many teams frame their work using "Tables of Specification" (Guskey, 2005a). Team members administer these collaboratively developed formative assessments in their individual classes at about the same time. They then get together to analyze the results and plan corrective activities when needed.

For many teams, the first step in their analysis is to construct a table like the one illustrated on p. 34. This table shows a tally of how many students in each teacher's class answered each item incorrectly or failed to meet a particular performance criterion.

This simple tally reveals several important findings. Specifically:

A. All students answered items 4 and 8 correctly. Generally, this indicates that the standards to which these items or prompts relate were taught so well by all three teachers that all students were able to demonstrate their mastery. It also may be, however, that these items or prompts were structured in a way that revealed the correct response or made the correct answer obvious. If this is true, then the teachers will need to revise these items or prompts on the assessment.
B. Most students in all three teachers' classes did well on items 1, 2, 5, 6, 10, and 11. This shows that the instructional practices the teachers used in teaching these particular standards worked well for nearly all students and should be continued. Only a few students will need to revisit these standards and continue to work on mastery.
C. Although many students in Jen's class struggled with item 3, most students in Michael's and Chris' classes answered this item correctly. In this case, Michael and Chris might offer Jen advice on how to revise her instructional strategies for this particular standard or goal.
D. For item 7, most of Jen's students did very well, but the majority of students in Michael's and Chris' classes had difficulty. Jen can share how she approached this topic or standard and the strategies she used to engage students to help Michael and Chris develop more effective strategies for teaching this particular standard. Similarly, for item 12, Michael's approach appears to have led to greater success than that of Jen or Chris.
E. Items 13, 14, and 15 address standards that continue to be problems for students in all three teachers' classes. When this occurs, teachers need to seek solutions outside of their individual experiences and expertise. This evidence provides the foundation and incentive for these teachers' own professional learning.

They might, for example, contact

an instructional coach, critical friend, district coordinator, regional service center, or subject-area experts for ideas on alternative instructional strategies. They might contact teachers in other schools who may have found ways to address similar instructional challenges. They might explore research evidence on instructional practices shown to be effective in helping students achieve these particular learning goals.

The primary purpose of this collaborative data analysis is to guide these teachers' professional learning experiences so they can improve the quality of their instruction and help all students learn well. They are beginning at the end, knowing what outcomes they want to achieve and what evidence best reflects those outcomes.

ESSENTIAL STEPS

In essence, this backward planning process simply reverses the five crucial levels of evidence outlined in *Evaluating Professional Development* (Guskey, 2000, 2014a, 2014b). In reverse order, those levels are:

5. Determine impact on student learning outcomes.
4. Implement new practices.
3. Gain organizational support and change.
2. Develop essential knowledge and skills.
1. Plan targeted professional learning experiences.

So with goals clarified and decisions made about what evidence best reflects the achievement of those goals, we are ready to move on to the other essential steps.

Next we must decide what instructional strategies or practices are most likely to produce the student learning outcomes we want and what evidence verifies those effects. We need to ask:

- How do we know these particular strategies and practices will produce the results we hope to achieve?
- How good or reliable is that evidence?
- Was it gathered in contexts similar to ours?
- Is it the kind of evidence we consider most important?

The key to success is recognizing that if we plan well, beginning with a clear idea of the destination, most evaluation issues are self-evident.

In addition, we must identify the essential elements of these strategies and practices and determine how we will know if we are implementing those elements with fidelity.

With the strategies and practices we hope to implement well-defined, we must ensure the organizational supports are in place to implement the strategies and practices well. Many valuable improvement efforts fail miserably, for example, because of a lack of active participation and clear support from school leaders (Guskey, 2004). Others prove ineffective because schools have not provided the resources required for successful implementation, such as time, funding, instructional materials, or necessary technology.

After considering issues of organizational support, we need to determine what specific knowledge and skills educators need to implement the prescribed strategies and practices well. What must educators know and be able to do to successfully implement the new practices and bring about the sought-after improvements in student learning?

This leads us to discussions about what set of experiences will best enable educators to acquire the needed knowledge and skills. Seminars and workshops can be a highly effective means of sharing information and expanding educators' knowledge and skills, especially when paired with collaborative planning, structured opportunities for practice with feedback, and follow-up coaching. Action research projects, organized study groups, collegial exchanges, professional learning communities, online services, and a wide range of other group and individual activities also can be effective.

The key point in these discussions is to ensure the focus remains on "educator effectiveness and results for all students" (Learning Forward, 2011). Because of concerns about professional learning processes, conversations often skip to the content and activities in which participating educators will be involved. We begin debating new ideas, techniques, innovations, programs, and instructional technologies. While these are important issues, we must remember that they are means to an important end that must be determined first. Our journey always begins by deciding our destination.

REACHING OUR DESTINATION

Evaluating the effectiveness of professional learning experiences requires careful and thoughtful planning. The key to success is recognizing that if we plan well, beginning with a clear idea of the destination, most evaluation issues are self-evident. Ninety percent of essential questions in any evaluation are addressed in the planning process, before the journey begins.

It's important to keep in mind that the decisions we make at each stage in the planning process profoundly affect those we make at the next stage. For example, the particular student learning outcomes we want to achieve directly influence the kinds of strategies and practices we need to implement.

Likewise, the strategies and practices we decide to implement have a direct bearing on the kinds of organizational support or change required, and so on.

The context-specific nature of this work complicates matters further. Even if we agree on the student learning outcomes we want to achieve, what works best in one context with a particular community of educators and a particular group of students might not work equally well in another context with different educators and different students.

This is why developing examples of universal best practices in professional learning is so difficult. What works always depends on where, when, and with whom. But if we begin with the end in mind and carefully plan backward, we can take many of those context-specific elements into consideration and make success much more likely. It also gives clearer direction to evaluation efforts.

High-quality professional learning is the foundation on which any improvement effort in education must build. But to be successful in determining the effectiveness of those efforts, we must plan backward. We must begin with the student learning outcomes we want to affect. From there, we can consider what strategies and practices can be implemented to achieve those goals, the organizational support required, the knowledge and skills educators must have, and optimal professional learning experiences that will help educators gain that knowledge and skills. Plan well, and evaluation takes care of itself.

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