

Professional Development Settings: More than Time, Place, Activity

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*It was a dark and stormy night . . . The breeze
wafted gently across the white, silky sand . . .*

Immediately readers begin to imagine the characters and events with this brief description of setting, which is defined in Webster's dictionary as the "actual physical surrounding; time, place, etc., as in a story." Although the physical elements are important in professional development settings, more important are the elements that shape and support continuous learning of the participants. Picture this setting:

At 3:00 in the conference room of West Main Elementary School, the third grade teachers listened intently to one of their colleagues, Mr. Grant, as he explained how he tweaked his second lesson on predicting to make it more effective. In addition to asking his students to state their predictions, he prompted them to explain the reasons for their thinking. When the literacy coach asked him how he knew it was a more effective lesson, he referred to a chart and gave examples of the students' responses that showed a better understanding of the story compared to their responses in the previous lesson.

Like authors who create settings as integral components of engaging narratives, thoughtful literacy coaches and other educators who plan and implement professional development consider elements of settings to engage teachers in continuous learning. Many teacher educators, researchers, administrators, literacy coaches, and K-12 teachers understand that a great deal of continuous professional learning is required to teach effectively. Well-designed professional development settings are essential to promote and support teachers' development of new content knowledge and effective instructional practice. In these types of settings, teachers engage in intellectually deep conversations and close inspections of curriculum, teaching, and student learning issues. Such settings are integral to the everyday life of successful schools.

This brief places *setting* under a lens and considers the different facets of this concept. It also offers a perspective on how literacy coaches, teachers, administrators and professional development providers can think about the design features of professional development settings that center on teacher and student learning. Although the examination of setting may apply to professional development in any discipline, this brief addresses this concept in relation to professional development in literacy education. Literacy coaches face the challenge of constructing professional development that engages teachers in meaningful and continuous learning activity throughout a school year. This brief describes some ways that literacy coaches can construct settings to support and sustain professional development that make a positive difference in teacher practice and student learning.

What Is a Setting Designed for Professional Learning?

The ultimate goal of professional development is to improve student learning, and the pathway to achieving this goal is not a simple matter. The elements of the setting, e.g., place, time, participants, activity, and resources, require careful planning to support ongoing collaboration to achieve this goal. The settings may be designed for groups of teachers or for individualized coaching of one teacher. They occur routinely and adhere to a consistent schedule throughout a school year. In settings designed for learning, the participants understand their responsibilities, the shared goal, and know that they need to support one another in achieving the goal (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988).

Settings designed for learning implies the involvement of a more knowledgeable and skilled person who can assist the learning of another through deliberate and supportive interactions (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Vygotsky, 1978). Tharp and Gallimore (1988) refer to this type of professional as a consultant who "has knowledge of the curriculum of teaching methods, and of the techniques that must be sensitively employed in assisting teachers to assist students" (p. 127-128).

A position statement of the International Reading Association (2004) refers to professionals in this type of role as literacy coaches, professionals who are “appropriately prepared and have the knowledge and skills necessary to be effective in the positions they hold.” Established settings for subject-alike or grade-level groups have teachers with varying levels of knowledge and skill. Typically, one of the teachers takes responsibility for facilitating the work. Although a literacy coach may or may not be present, the setting supports learning through structured, collaborative activity.

Why Do Schools Need Professional Development Settings Designed for Learning?

Improvement of student achievement is the central challenge for educators at every level. This tough, challenging and important work requires sustained and effective professional development. Literacy coaches need to understand how to plan, implement, monitor and sustain professional development, which puts learning at the center. In well-designed settings, participants collaborate in setting goals, engaging in meaningful activity, and assisting one another in achieving them. In well-designed settings, participants reflect on students’ and teachers’ learning through close analysis of evidence, which they use to improve teaching. Coaches and teachers work in iterative cycles of examining data, establishing goals, evaluating, reflecting and revising.

It is not easy to create settings in which progress is sustained and the hard work of the coaches and teachers is validated by increases in student learning. Progress ebbs and flows as coaches and teachers enter new relationships and work together in unfamiliar ways and in unfamiliar roles. The development of professional learning settings requires thoughtful planning by teachers, coaches, administrators and other school personnel, and mutual commitment from all to the learning enterprise.

How Are Settings Designed for Learning?

Research on effective professional development converges on several principles that guide and support professional learning. Evidence-based professional development is content-rich. It provides teachers many opportunities to discuss and link theory and practice. Collaborative problem solving engages teachers in analyzing teaching and learning artifacts

(e.g., lesson plans, student work samples, and video taped lessons) and provides constructive feedback to colleagues (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Goldenberg, 2004; Kucan, 2007; Rosemary, 2005). Although these principles can guide the design of professional development, it is not easy to represent them in the setting. The next section examines more closely some of these principles and explains how they can operate in professional learning settings.

Focus on Learning

In well-designed professional development settings, learning is the purpose of the gathering. The participants develop goals to guide their ongoing work, but not so many goals that they lose focus and find it difficult, if not impossible, to gauge their progress toward meeting them. The activities call for critical thinking. They are challenging, connect directly to instruction, and are clearly aligned with the goals. A knowledgeable coach may assist teachers in solving instructional problems that the teacher may not have the expertise or knowledge to solve independently (Vygotsky, 1978). Effective literacy coaches have the literacy knowledge to scaffold teachers’ analysis of instruction and assist them in making grounded interpretations of data. They have the technical know-how related to evidenced-based reading and writing strategies to assist teachers in making instructional improvements that positively influence student learning. The coach-teacher relationship is central to the problem solving process, and successful coaches demonstrate the interpersonal skills to support teachers through collegial, nonjudgmental interactions. When coaching is working well, the relationship is mutually sustaining and mutually respectful.

School improvement typically centers on achieving student learning goals, but the approaches to teaching improvement are often one-shot workshops, week long summer training institutes, or unstructured and unfocused teacher meetings. These types of professional development are typically sporadic, disconnected, and without classroom application, and, therefore, do not bring about and support the continuous, relevant, and substantive learning required of all teachers in today’s schools.

The following scenario describes a setting in which professional learning is central to the collaboration:

A group of third grade teachers expresses concern about scores on a state proficiency exam. The coach and teachers together examine the third grade results and observe a pattern of low scores on written responses to comprehension questions. In the professional development group setting, which is a grade level team that meets every week for 45 minutes, the coach and the teachers decide to target this common student learning need as the focus of their work for at least the beginning of the school year. During their first several meetings, they set specific learning objectives that describe the performance expectations for improvement and plan their instructional strategy. They agree to a time frame in which they will each teach the lesson in their classrooms.

After the meeting, one of the teachers asks the coach to observe her instruction. Following the observation, the coach and the teacher debrief the instruction and assess the lesson's effectiveness based on the plan (what the teacher intended to do) and her observations of the students' performance. At the next third grade level team meeting, the teacher explains how she implemented the strategy and shares her results with her colleagues. Her colleagues follow suit, each explaining how they taught the lesson and what they observed in the students' performance. This debriefing of the lesson continues with re-examining the original plan and deciding how to modify it to improve student performance.

In the ongoing professional development, the team remains focused on the common need and learning objectives. The coach continues to provide feedback on comprehension instruction, discusses problems of implementation, and helps the teachers assess student learning using both formal and informal assessments. As they continue to analyze student data they gather over time, they are able to continually assess the effectiveness of instruction, using student progress as the gauge.

The scenario illustrates how both the group and one-to-one coaching settings, when continuous and aligned with the goal of improving student comprehension, set in motion a chain of instructional support. A knowledgeable and skilled coach assists the teachers in learning more about comprehension instruction and assessment so they can help students improve their comprehension of text. The students' progress informs the teachers' thinking about their next lesson, which, in turn, informs the literacy coach about her next steps in assisting the teachers. This process continues as they collaborate in achieving

their shared goals. Scenarios such as this are common in schools that establish professional learning settings to achieve student learning goals (Goldenberg, 2004; McDougall, Saunders, & Goldenberg, 2007).

Construct Meaningful Activity

When professional development is designed and implemented according to researched-based principles, it can positively affect teachers' knowledge and practice. This is likely when the setting is planned to support content-rich activity and ample opportunity for substantive conversation connecting theory and practice (Correnti & Rowan, 2007). The professional learning setting should be organized so that the content can be adapted to address various aspects of the instruction and student needs. For example, if a literacy coach led a demonstration, discussion, and lesson planning focused on K-W-L for a third grade teacher, the demonstration would not necessarily reach all teachers participating in the sessions unless the coach took into consideration the grade levels represented in the teacher group and presented alternatives based on specific characteristics of the groups' students. In relation to the scenario described previously, the teachers' knowledge also needs to be considered. For example, what do the teachers know about text structure? What instructional strategies do they know? What do they know about assessing students' comprehension?

In effective professional learning settings, coaches work with teachers to analyze the aspects of comprehension instruction that are most relevant in specific situations. This takes time, commitment, and substantive discussion of key concepts and how to translate these to instruction.

Engage in Collaborative Problem Solving

Inquiry-based activity that engages teachers in analyzing teaching and learning artifacts supports shifts in teaching that result in improved student performance (Crockett, 2002; Goldenberg, 2004; Rosemary, 2005). Knapp (2004) points out that professional development focused on analyzing students' work is gaining momentum. Furthermore, a growing body of research provides evidence that close analysis of student work yields positive outcomes for teachers (p. 121). Collaborative problem solving helps participants achieve professional learning goals.

Protocols are useful for examining artifacts and understanding relevant aspects of problems. A protocol is a structure for how to accomplish a task. The artifacts may include materials such as lesson plans, student work samples, and video or audio taped lessons. Without protocols, or a strategy for identifying salient features of the artifacts, the task of examining them can be overwhelming or can lead to unfocused or irrelevant conclusions. The protocol sets up the structure for the discussion about the artifacts, helps maintain focus, and delineates the process to systematically unravel the problem. For example, a lesson study protocol provides a structure for identifying student needs, co-planning lessons, and analyzing student work samples to evaluate the effectiveness of instruction. Other types of collaborative problem solving may center on video taped lessons. In this case, a goal might be to improve guided instruction. A protocol can help participants look for examples in a video-taped lesson that features modeling, explaining, and guiding practice. Discussing and analyzing video or audio taped lessons or examining lesson plans and student work also provide opportunities for constructive feedback to colleagues. For example, if a teacher group has agreed on an instructional goal of supporting students' comprehension development through the use of discussion, the group may discuss the amount and quality of student talk in a lesson and provide constructive feedback on how well the instructional goal was met. To summarize, collaborative problem solving is effective when there is adequate time to solve problems, when inquiry processes are structured, and when the focus of the activity is aligned with the shared goal and the intended learning outcomes for students.

Reflect on Learning

Reflection on learning develops metacognition; thinking about one's thinking differentiates the novice from the expert in any profession (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). Applied to teaching, the act of reflecting allows practitioners, both coaches and teachers, to reevaluate the understanding they bring to their everyday practice and to consider alternative views, strategies, and solutions.

The scenario of the third grade team of teachers and literacy coach offers many opportunities for reflection. During planning, reflective practitioners think back on the previous lesson, evaluate what worked well using the evidence to support their

judgment, and decide which changes they need to make in order to boost the learners' understanding. During instruction, reflective practitioners observe learners' interactions with their peers, with the instructional material, and with the task. In the moment, they make shifts if the pace is too fast or too slow, the task too challenging or too easy, or the quality of interactions too high or too low. After instruction, reflective teachers and coaches think through the lesson; they re-examine artifacts of the instruction (e.g., lesson plan, instructional materials, and task) and student performance data to determine aspects that contributed to learner understanding.

Professional learning settings that support the development of reflective practice are structured to allow time for practitioners to engage in collaborative inquiry, which heightens opportunities for reflection. As they work together to question, critique, present alternative views on problems and solutions, they make new sense of uncertain or unfamiliar situations (Schön, 1983). The teaching profession is continually presented with unique situations, which call for reflective practitioners who know how to think and act flexibly in the constantly changing situations of everyday practice.

Conclusion

The professional learning setting described at the beginning of the brief helps to summarize the features of a setting designed for professional learning. The third grade level teacher group could be any subject-alike or grade-level group of teachers with their literacy coach who gather routinely to collaborate on achieving shared goals. These goals relate to improving teaching to improve student learning. A thoughtfully-planned agenda focuses their work. Their learning goals are clearly articulated and understood. They work creatively and productively to assist one another in accomplishing their goals, and gauge their own effectiveness by continually assessing students' progress. Thus, although we do consider time, place, and activity important considerations in designing professional development settings, more important are the specific elements that press for critical thinking: focus on learning; construct meaningful activity, engage in collaborative problem solving, and reflect on learning. These elements support teachers to make substantive changes in instruction that result in all students' success.

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