

Do as I Say... and Do

Scott J. Goldberg

Scott Goldberg uses action research as a creative instrument for staff development – and shares his insights from the process.

A principal of a prominent Yeshiva Day School in the United States approached me following a seminar I gave on DI and said, "it would be ideal for my school if you could come to work with my staff for two hours the day before school starts." When I replied that it might not be ideal, he insisted, "No, you don't understand. My assistant principal and I spoke to my faculty about differentiation all last year so they know about it."

It seems that more and more schools are budgeting for staff development consultants to give workshops through the year, but these few hours of learning provide little impetus for long-term change, create no mechanism for sustained change, and, in the United States at least, are largely scheduled around public holidays. Indeed, a school's capacity to change the most fundamental parts of its work – the contents, processes, products, and environments of instruction – is not ideally realized through two hours or even two days of consulting nor through anyone (even the administration of a school) talking to teachers about DI. Such capacity is dependent on fundamentally changing the way we look at staff development.

I often hear from participants in my workshops that the subject of DI is "theoretical," and thus removed from their work in the classroom. I believe this is a reflection of whether the teacher has seen the method used by others or has tried it himself/herself. That which has been labeled

"theoretical" becomes "practical" to the teacher only after it enters the teacher's own practice. Unfortunately, staff development workshops themselves often frame new methods as "theoretical," by presenting topics such as DI using purely didactic methodology, rather than practicing and modeling the ideas that they advocate, including cooperative learning methods, and active learner participation. One leaves such sessions wondering whether the staff development consultant has ever personally experienced the touted method in practice!

Action Research is "[a] disciplined process of inquiry conducted by and for those taking the action. The primary reason for engaging in action research is to assist the actor in improving or refining his or her actions" (Sagor, 2005).

In contrast, "in schools where teachers are active learners, excitement and curiosity contribute to a rich learning environment for children" (Sagor, 1995: 24). Sparks and Hirsh (1997) also call for a staff development model that is marked by a community of learners that innovate, experiment, reflect, and share. When educational institutions actually engage in these educational practices rather than preach them, there is the potential for transformational development of the individuals involved. As Gregory (2003) argues, staff development has real impact when

it engages people in daily planning, critiquing, and problem solving, and when it provides ongoing practice-based assistance. Powerful staff development depends on the content knowledge, instructional skills, and assessment skills that help teachers regularly monitor student learning.

Schools that are constantly improving have high professional standards that include continuous evaluation of practices around these principles, and collegiality marked by collaboration, questioning and experimenting (Sagor, 1995). Within such schools, the leaders and faculty refuse to adopt a singular approach toward problem-solving and growth. Rather, within the context of institutional core values and a shared view of professional behavior, teams of individuals unite around a common purpose – continuous improvement of student learning – often with different approaches to actualize this ideal.

Herein lies a natural connection between DI and school improvement: a school interested in improving may be most successful in meeting individual student needs by tapping into the individual differences among its faculty in prior knowledge, skill level, cognitive ability, hobbies, learning style, learning rate, interests, strengths, and weaknesses in order to design differentiated staff development. What emerges from this insight is the value of a two-pronged approach to staff development that concurrently focuses on the process of staff development and the content.

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Action Research: DI for Staff Development

The following illustration of a staff development project in DI uses Action Research, a form of research in which practitioners investigate their own practices in order to improve them. In other words, Action Research is “[a] disciplined process of inquiry conducted by and for those taking the action. The primary reason for engaging in Action Research is to assist the actor in improving or refining his or her actions” (Sagor, 2005:1).

Tomlinson (1999:2) states that, “[i]n differentiated classrooms, teachers provide specific ways for each individual to learn as deeply as possible and as quickly as possible, without

As with any learning, teacher learning continues over time through a cyclical process of action and evaluation.

assuming one student’s road map for learning is identical to anyone else’s.” A DI framework matches learner to learning through proactive planning, multiple approaches to content, process, product, and environment, and a blend of whole-class, group and independent learning. Differentiating staff development provides the teacher with the opportunity to be on the receiving end of DI. Action Research complements DI in that it seeks to empower the practitioner to be an active learner in the process of becoming a better teacher.

The following is a proposed model of staff development based on my consulting experience in DI and other topics. Parts of this model have been adopted by institutions in the past and in full by several institutions for the

2006-2007 school year. While the impact of its implementation is still being studied, it is expected to bring about dynamic changes in classroom and school-wide practices.

The staff development model is based on site visits by an expert in both process and content. Rather than conducting a few content-based seminars, as would be typical, the expert uses these site visits to introduce the Action Research process in large group seminars/workshops.

The content (DI) is learned in smaller groups based on prior knowledge, age of students in a teacher’s class, subject matter, and/or other factors. The content (in this case DI) is seen as a continuum of practice rather than a black and

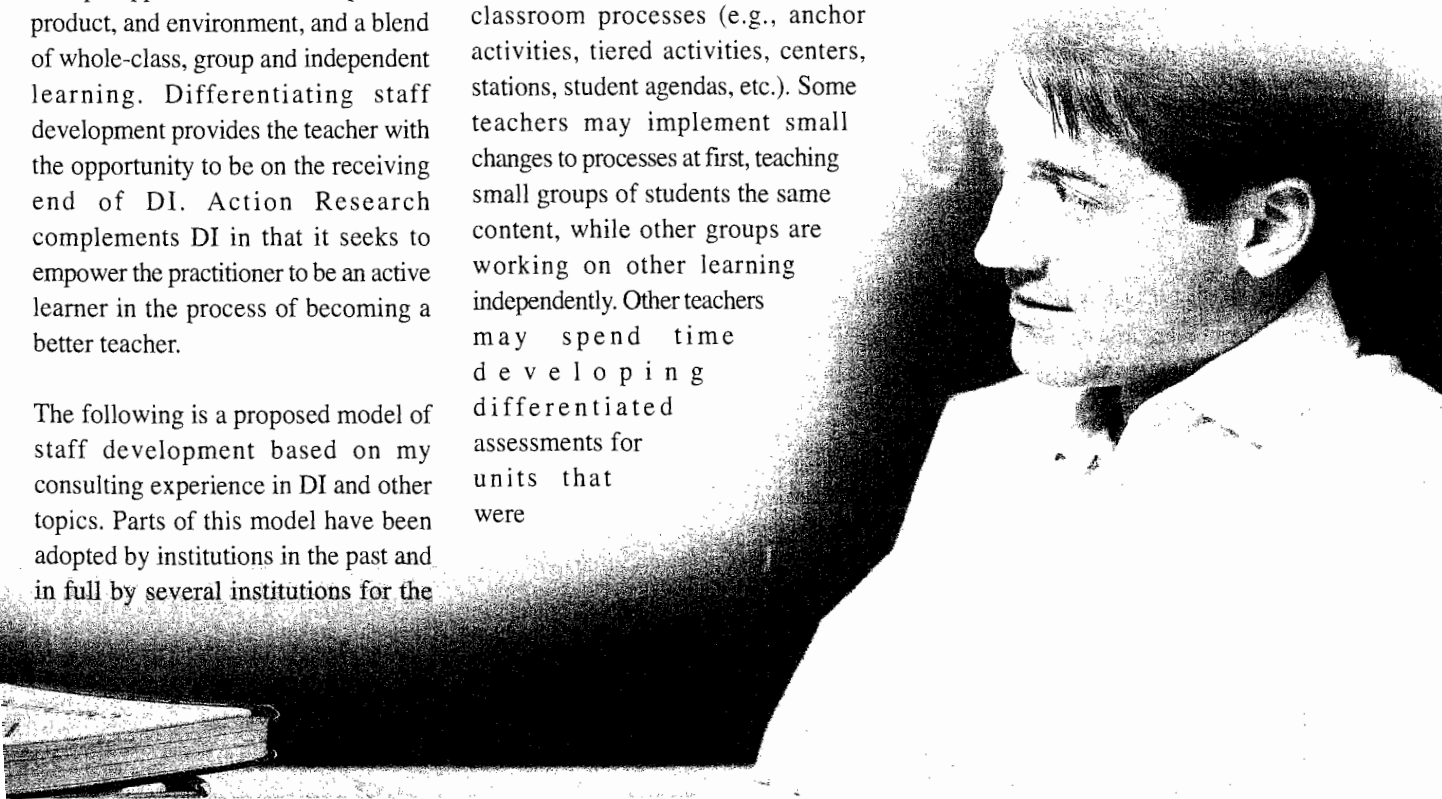
white product.

Some teachers may wish to concentrate on differentiating content (curriculum), while others will choose to focus on classroom processes (e.g., anchor activities, tiered activities, centers, stations, student agendas, etc.). Some teachers may implement small changes to processes at first, teaching small groups of students the same content, while other groups are working on other learning independently. Other teachers may spend time developing differentiated assessments for units that were



themselves differentiated for content. Entry points for content learning are established not by the expert consulting but by the student in the model: the teacher him/herself.

As part of the initiative, each teacher takes on an Action Research project to study such issues as what actions he/she is taking based on the learning or how his/her actions are affecting student learning. That is, the learning cannot remain “theoretical,” as the emphasis is placed on doing and learning from the doing, rather than doing it as a flashy presentation suggests it ought to be done.



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Site visits (scheduled approximately once a month or more if possible) include classroom observations, during which the consultant/expert observes each participating teacher several times throughout the year and provides specific feedback for each teacher on implementation of the content of study. Individual meetings with teachers are times to share feedback, answer questions, and set goals. In addition, small group meetings with teachers are scheduled for the teachers to share learning with each other. Separate administration meetings (individually and as a small group) are scheduled to learn how to support the projects of participating teachers and to model the process. Parent orientations to the initiative are also scheduled to introduce the parent body to the concepts of differentiation and action research.

In addition to the consultant's site visit observations, the capacity to sustain the learning and the resulting changes is built through onsite observations by administrators. Each participating teacher opens his/her classroom for observation by an administrator in the school at least one time per month.

Merging action research and DI respects faculty knowledge and skill, yet holds everyone accountable for growing and learning.

Further, peer observations are incorporated into the model. All feedback is shared with the teacher and with the consultant so that learning may be maximized.

Opportunities for sharing, collaboration, and celebrating each others' work are scheduled. Staff development days (or other scheduled times) are used for teachers to share what they have learned through the project with their peers. The structure of these meetings may include short presentations by teachers in front of the entire group, a "science-

fair" type setup during which non-participating teachers walk through a gallery of poster-board displays of participating teacher projects, or the like. The "science-fair" type design is utilized at least one time during the year to showcase the projects to the larger community, including parents. Small group meetings (by department or grade) may be scheduled to reflect a less formal presentation structure with informal presentations.

As with differentiated classrooms, multiple resources are used in efficient and effective ways. In addition to all of the learning outlined above, an online discussion board is established for teachers and administrators that allows questions to be asked and answered, as well as teacher materials and/or readings to be posted. The consultant participates in this discussion board, to remain connected to the latest teacher learning, as he/she is made privy to feedback from internal observations. However, the consultant largely remains a guide on the side throughout the project, except when needed for direct instruction and the like, as dictated by the needs of the individual participants.

The process outlined above represents a year of learning for a school community. (For a sample schedule for such a project, see the JEL website, www.lookstein.org/journal.htm). It includes three initial site visits to

launch the program and visits scheduled approximately once a month for continued learning, as discussed above.

In a longitudinal study of effective professional development, Boyle, Lamprianou, and Boyle (2005) note that short-term (one to two day professional development) is still common. However, amongst longer-term staff development, observation of

Action research...seeks to empower the practitioner to be an active learner

colleagues and sharing practice were found to be the most common activity, with coaching and research inquiry the most effective. An integrated approach to staff development that incorporates each of these elements will build in some form of reflective practice for participants (for example Action Research projects) and differentiate the learning for each participant such that each may grow individually, the institution may advance as a whole, and student learning may be maximized. No doubt, schools that adopt such a staff development model will become more efficient and effective through the process and their students will be the beneficiaries.

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