

Leading effective PD: From abstraction to action

Professional development would be more effective if leaders followed some basic guidelines for organization and presentation.



When school leaders tell you their biggest needs, they're bound to mention helping teachers get better at teaching. In any school, continually improving the teacher's craft is how we improve learning conditions for students. In previous articles, I detailed key strategies for one-on-one teacher development. This month, we'll look into a more familiar type of training: the professional development (PD) workshop. PD workshops are an extraordinarily popular method of facilitating teacher development. But why are they so often ineffective? While most educators can point to PD workshops that were inspiring, engaging, or otherwise memorable, far fewer can list PD that had a great positive effect on how they teach. And when participants can't put what they learn into action, PD simply isn't worthwhile.

So, what characteristics of PD actually change teacher action? First, let's see how to avoid some common errors in planning PD. Then we'll discuss how principal Kelly Dowling applied the guiding principles in this article to her PD on how the Common Core affects reading instruction. Let's start with the errors.

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LESSON LEARNED #1: Abstraction never leads to action

Ask me whether your PD is going to change teaching at your school, and the first thing I'll ask you about is your objective. If a PD objective doesn't refer to a concrete action you want teachers to be able to do after the workshop, then the change won't happen — at least not for the entire school. To design great PD objectives, abandon abstraction in favor of action.

This is a strong statement. You might ask: What about topics that can't be translated so easily to action? Diversity, for example. You'd be hard pressed to find an educator who's never had concerns related to diversity in his or her school. But imagine a school leader planning a workshop around this objective: Be aware of the diversity of our school community. What will be the result of this workshop? How will it make your school feel different? Answering that difficult question is the crux of building effective PD. Until you name an outcome, your workshop doesn't have teeth. Do you want teachers treating each other better because of this workshop? Do you want interactions between students and teachers to be stronger? How will this manifest itself in the staff culture? Until you answer those questions, you can't plan PD that matches that outcome.

The abstract goal of establishing greater diversity awareness at

a school is without doubt a worthy one. But, to pursue that goal more effectively, the leader must determine what concrete actions would promote diversity awareness at her specific school and design objectives that match the actions. Here are some suggestions of how to narrow your large abstract goal to a PD objective.

Here are some suggestions for moving from abstraction to action:

- *Abstract:*
Be aware of the diversity of our students and the experiences that they have had.
- *Still too abstract:*
Understand the current political and social challenges of our community and how they affect our students.
- *Actionable:*
Redirect a noncompliant student with one of the three nonbiased strategies presented in the workshop.

Note that aside from being a specific action for teachers to perform, this final PD objective also is observable. When the leader looks in on her teachers' classrooms after the PD, she will be able to see if teachers are using the nonbiased strategies she's taught them. That empowers her to hold teachers accountable for making the change their school needs, and to determine how to further address the issues at hand if teachers aren't following through.



LESSON LEARNED #2: Bite-sized is best

Once you start breaking down your PD topic into actionable objectives, you'll soon realize that there are far too many to teach all at once. In fact, that's the point. A PD session should never have more objectives than you can accomplish in the amount of time allotted. That often means approaching a single abstract goal little by little over the course of several different workshops. That may sound intimidating at first, but, ultimately, it will lead to success rather than anxiety. While it's not possible to achieve an abstract ideal in one fell swoop, it *is* possible to build up to it, step by step, objective by objective. Here are some strategies:

- *Make PD routine* — You can take on large challenges by adding more frequent sessions. Many high-performing schools schedule professional trainings weekly or bi-weekly.
- *Make PD longer* — After a full school day, even the best presenters won't be able to command more than an hour or two of teachers' attention. To work around this, some leaders turn to mini sessions or half-day PD where students are sent home early.
- *Make hard choices* — Because you can't address everything, always select your PD objectives with an eye to what's most urgent and what actions will have the biggest effect.

LESSON LEARNED #3: To commit to change, commit to practice

Baseball coaches don't just give players specific descriptions of how to hold a bat; they hold batting practice. Likewise, after we've identified the concrete changes we want teachers to make, we must provide high-quality practice opportunities for teachers — and build them into

the PD session itself.

Practice for teachers can take many forms, from drafting and revising lesson plans to role-playing teaching tactics. The best practices feature the following:

- *Repetition* — The more “at bats” and opportunities teachers have, the more deeply they can learn a skill.
- *Feedback* — For practice to be effective, combine it with feedback. Having teachers break into groups to practice is an effective way to ensure that this happens.
- *Immediacy* — Finally, as noted above, practice needs to happen during the PD itself. Given the hectic nature of the school day, practice won't realistically happen if leaders tell teachers to go off and practice on their own after a workshop.

Here's how the move from actionable objective to practice can play out:

- *Actionable objective:*
Redirect a noncompliant student with one of the three nonbiased strategies presented in the workshop.
- *Practice (built into workshop):*
Give teachers a series of written classroom scenarios where a student acts up and the teacher responds inappropriately. Have teachers rewrite the teacher's response and then role-play the scenario.


One principal and the Common Core

Let's see how all this applies to middle school Principal Kelly Dowling, whose ultimate goal was that teachers would be Common Core ready. She knew this aspiration was too abstract and broad for a single PD workshop. Being “Common Core ready” isn't an action, and the Common Core has a broad educational spectrum with dozens of pages and hundreds of standards. One session couldn't possibly cover them all.

Dowling narrowed her focus to one Common Core objective: teaching more complex texts. However, even this goal was too broad. Dowling dove deeper into the topic and identified the use of a “ladder” of texts within a specific topic as an effective strategy. The “ladder” concept involved a teacher selecting a set of increasingly complex texts on the same topic, the rationale being that students will evolve faster as readers if they stay within a topic and apply their newly found learning to more complex texts on the same material. According to the Common Core, by “climbing the ladder,” students can build background schema and accelerate their reading improvement considerably.

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But this still wasn't specific enough. Dowling needed to answer an even more specific question: What did she want teachers to be able to do? She drilled the ladder concept down to one specific application: Find three informational texts on the same topic at three subsequently more difficult Lexile levels that could be used to teach the topic in conjunction with the novel students are learning. The PD session would begin with a chance to read three texts on nuclear fissions with progressively higher Lexile levels. Teachers would identify the power in a ladder of texts and then work in grade-level teams to identify three texts that could accompany their novel. Peers then exchanged feedback on the text choices and identified first steps for designing a lesson plan to accompany them.

In this PD planning process, Dowling refined her vision from abstraction to action to practice. In doing so, she took an important step toward realizing her initial aspiration: a team that is ready for the Common Core. 

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