A Community of Learners: Teachers Teaching Teachers

When it comes to professional development, most teachers provide practical workshops and seminars that engage and provide takeaway activities for classroom use, but time and cost are factors as to why educators fail to attend these workshops. Teachers juggling hectic schedules struggling to find a balance between much needed and desired teacher growth, with already overburdened schedules, question the importance of spending time on professional development that they fear might not be worthwhile. Think of a colleague who hasn’t attended a department meeting or professional development for a decade; can you really blame them for being so apathetic in a time of educational crisis? While teacher apathy is a community problem that affects the group dynamic, it is one that can be addressed with professional development opportunities that promote learning as a process of inquiry and that value the experience and point of view of participants. We often overlook the community in front us, the one in which we are a part of, but it is this very community of colleagues that gives us vital support and professional development opportunities. In the present climate, understanding that teachers can learn from one another through professional development communities is crucial if we are to enact positive change: it’s a sensible, worthwhile opportunity that many communities are already practicing.

One valuable professional development experience that reflects the model of teachers teaching teachers is S.I.T.E (Summer Institute for Teaching Excellence). It adopts a collaborative mindset among teachers and provides a place for exploring, learning and working together, but it’s also a thought-provoking and grounding atmosphere for renewal in the midst of high fail rates, budget cuts, disenchanted teachers and often underprepared students. In 2011 Ventura College began the first of a five-year, Title V grant-funded Summer Institute (S.I.T.E), and I had the pleasure of participating in this one-week professional development. As Sharon Beynon, Institute Facilitator, explains, their purpose is “to provide new perspectives in faculty development, to help us connect, grow, and inspire. ... SITE serves as a teaching and learning forum through on-going leadership training, guided workshops, and collegial consultation and brings together experts in teaching and learning along with faculty from a variety of disciplines to generate and share ideas, develop initiatives, and implement new strategies to improve student learning and increase teaching effectiveness and to have fun and get to know each other.” This means hands-on workshops, presentations that mix disciplines like ceramics, anthropology, and writing composition, and interactive technology training sessions on the latest easy to use online programs that enhance classroom learning.

After attending SITE, and being part of SCWriP (South Coast Writing Project) Summer Institute, an interactive month-long writing intensive teacher collaborative workshop, I felt a similarity in the environments created by both SITE and SCWriP where learning and teaching as inquiry were the focus and teachers teaching other teachers was truly embraced. Both SITE and SCWriP provide collaboration long after their summer programs—to keep teachers engaged.

In both these settings teachers say, “Hey, this is what I do in my classroom, and this is how it works; wanna try it? Do you have suggestions for how I can make it even better?” This kind of professional development works! SCWriP and SITE are spaces for playing with ideas, writing towards understanding, and challenging our own assumptions as educators in ways that expand our consciousness and allow us a new, stimulating perspective on our relationships with students and how ideas are made. The best feature of these practices is that teachers become students themselves, which provides the genuine opportunity for us to go through the thinking processes we are asking our students to engage in. This experiential aspect is crucial.

It makes sense, then, that teachers benefit from attending workshops lead by other teachers who are finding ways to address issues faced in their own classrooms, whether it be student participation, genuine reflection, critical thinking, etc.—especially if we as educators promote the importance of learning from one another, rather than being isolated in our own classrooms. I emphasize learning here because I have often seen teachers attend workshops expecting—mostly unknowingly—to have their heads opened and knowledge poured in, much like the banking system of education criticized by Paulo Freire where, in this case, the depositor of knowledge is the speaker. This is the very model we are trying to move away from so we can practice valuing the knowledge and experiences students bring to the classroom. We as participants in education must be willing to take risks with our own learning, to be(come) students ourselves, to revise what we do in the classroom in a critical way that considers the discourse communities our students are a part of. If we want our students to be excited about learning we must promote a culture of inquiry as learners ourselves and foster it through ongoing professional development or teacher collaboration.

When teachers become the leaders of promoting and facilitating workshops that promote self-reflection and awareness for other teachers to consider the paradigms about learning that lie beneath their teaching practices, creative ways to learn and teach are realized. Although a simple drive through activity where handouts are dispersed for our teaching pleasure seems like an operative fix to finding ways to be creative in the classroom, the point of meaningful professional development opportunities like SCWriP and SITE is to offer hands-on spaces where teachers are both students and educators; this way of thinking must exist in the classroom if we are to be resourceful in improving the current state of education.

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