H
ing having been exposed to a powerful writing assessment method as a writing project teacher-consultant, Ms. S wondered whether it would be useful for the junior high where she worked. The rubric had originally been developed to measure growth in writing achievement for research where pre- and post-writing assessments were used. The rubric positioned writing growth as the central issue of assessment. This seemed to address many of the issues the English department faced as it worked with students to improve their writing, but Ms. S was not sure. She approached departmental colleagues, showed them a bit, and shared her enthusiasm. Her colleagues, all of whom were writing project teacher-consultants themselves except one, asked questions, talked to each other, and pursued time to come together to investigate the potential of the rubric.

Before continuing with the story, let me point out how this teacher took control of her own learning to address the needs she found in the teaching of her students at her school. Allow me also to suggest that the collegial writing project work Ms. S had engaged in gave her the confidence to take on leadership within a department where she was not the chair. It was not enough for her to solve her own problem. She saw herself as a member of a department with shared needs and goals. Therefore, she wanted to help others and saw it as her responsibility to share resources. Ms. S. then took on the hard work of building a consensus among teachers that they had a shared problem and a potential solution. She successfully worked to get everyone to agree that investigating a new rubric would be worthwhile.

Back to the story: As the group met and learned about the rubric, they realized they would need more time than could be squeezed from their regularly scheduled department meetings. The department approached the principal. Would he help them find time? Was there any money to buy time so they could work together to learn about the rubric, apply it to papers from their students, and develop anchor papers? Yes, he would help. He knew the district office had money set aside for such projects. The principal approached the district curriculum director. Here the happy story I’ve been writing turns into one all too familiar to teachers. After consultation among the district office staff, the effort was thwarted by an edict that the district would be using a new rubric designed by the state university system for the evaluation of students, and develop anchor papers? Yes, he would help. He knew the department where he was not the chair. It was not enough for her to solve her own problem. She saw herself as a member of a department with shared needs and goals. Therefore, she wanted to help others and saw it as her responsibility to share resources. Ms. S. then took on the hard work of building a consensus among teachers that they had a shared problem and a potential solution. She successfully worked to get everyone to agree that investigating a new rubric would be worthwhile.

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I tell this story to highlight a sharp contrast in approaches to professional development. In Ms. S’s efforts we see a collaborative approach where teachers come together as equals to share knowledge and learn together. In the second approach we see teachers positioned as merely receivers of knowledge other people produce. Teachers are to take orders and follow the decisions of others. This is the very antithesis of professional development—or even learning. This is obedience. This contrast has long existed, but the adoption of common standards and assessments clarifies our collective need to demand high quality professional development.

The adoption of common standards and assessments may be our last best chance to shift the conversation about public education for the betterment of teaching and learning. This is not because new, common standards and assessments are a magic incantation that will somehow correct the litany of failures currently blamed on schools and public education. Rather, this is because the adoption of common standards and assessments offers the opportunity for extensive professional development for teachers. It is these opportunities that can produce real magic, the discourse of teachers needed to reclaim public education. Professional development can overcome the educational crisis rhetoric that currently dominates discussions of public education.

In this article I want to layout what I see as the key and necessary ingredients for professional learning, particularly around CCSS, so that we realize the transformational potential of this moment. I will draw upon what we have learned at the South Coast Writing Project (SCWriP), and other affiliated sites of the National Writing Project. For nearly 40 years writing project sites have supported teachers in examining and transforming their teaching practice. The success of writing project sites depends upon the local application of core principles first developed by Jim Gray and his colleagues at the Bay Area Writing Project (BAWP). What follows is SCWriP’s understanding of these beliefs and how we bring them to life in our professional learning. Further, I wish to suggest that teachers use these principles to evaluate the potential value of any professional learning opportunity.

First, professional learning must place classroom teachers at the center as both the subject and object of the learning. Since classroom teachers are the most trustworthy and credible authorities on what works in classrooms with students they must be the leaders of professional development and the “inservicing” of teachers. Also teachers are the objects of the verbs; it is teachers who should be affected by the professional learning. The point of professional development is not to simply introduce a new standards-aligned textbook or a research-approved best practice, but to support the teacher as he or she develops greater personal professional capacity to meet the needs of students and schools.
Therefore, the best inservice will be those where teachers share their expertise and experience with colleagues in hands-on investigations of practice so that everyone involved learns.

Second, the best professional development not only claims teachers’ knowledge as a valid expertise, but also obligates teachers to challenge, validate, and enhance the knowledge developed in, through, and for practice. This requires inquiry into one’s own practice and the work of others, including educational researchers and theorists. Whether looking to generalize features from one successful lesson or to make concrete ideas from theory, teachers engaged in high quality professional development will make a contribution to their own learning, that of others in the group, and potentially the profession.

Third, real professional development is not a stand alone or short-term event, but rather an ongoing practice of reflection and inquiry that promotes this generation and distribution of knowledge of, for, and through teaching. Professional development is learning, and like all learning should be extended and amplified by its sharing with other practitioners. It is this sharing that in fact sustains the reflection and inquiry. The best PD offers all of those involved a chance to share successful adaptations and puzzling questions after the initial PD event. These long-term, sustained pathways for sharing new ideas, lessons, and knowledge facilitate communication in all directions, not just from the nominal leaders to those being “inserviced.” Whether with face-to-face meetings or computer-mediated social networking, real professional development extends beyond the hours of the inservice. At its best, professional development is best understood as professional learning and has the potential to transform not only the teaching, but also the teacher.

Fourth, high quality professional development treats all teachers K–university as belonging to a single, interdependent, collegial community with shared professional challenges. The best PD fosters collaborative efforts across grade levels and content specialization to meet these shared challenges. Real inquiries into practice, such as examining student work or the sharing of lessons, rather than icebreaker activities and power point lectures, must therefore make up the bulk of high quality PD. The majority of time should see teachers talking as colleagues engaged in inquiry. Such collaborative efforts in turn foster mutual respect among the teachers based on the professional expertise displayed during this inquiry-oriented work.

Fifth, teachers of teachers must teach. It is the grounding in the daily and personal experience of teaching that supplies authority. Inservice leaders must know first-hand the struggles and satisfactions of teaching. Professional development leaders retain authority when they treat the activity of teaching in all its complexity and allow teachers to do the same. PD that claims simple solutions to the complex interactions among teachers, students, and subject matter has misunderstood and incorrectly framed the problems facing teachers in classrooms. The result must be suspicion on the teachers’ part as to the worth of what is being offered.

These five principles share a common philosophical understanding of the professionalism of teaching and professional development that places “teachers at the center.” The importance of this bedrock idea led Jim Gray to use the phrase as the title of his book on the history of the Bay Area and National Writing Projects. However, it is not only the philosophical unity of these principles that recommends them. Just as importantly, they create the most effective path for professional learning.

These principles support teachers both as individuals and as a collective power to address the needs of students and schools. When teachers engage in the real work of teaching in a supportive, collegial environment, they are able to apply professional judgment to unique and dynamic situations. This does involve the taking of risks. However, we can have confidence in our choices from the vetting these ideas have had in the process of sharing them in collegial environments. A teacher engaged in a collegial community is not a lone wolf operating outside of the margins of the teacher’s guide, but a member of a profession using the resources, the collective wisdom, of all teachers. As a teacher, I am not left to follow hunches about what might work (or mandates imposed from above). Instead, I know what will work because it has been tried and refined in the crucibles of practice and dialogue. I gain the confidence to change my practice from what others think of my work. A teacher engaged in professional learning with colleagues draws power from the collected experiences of all teachers.

The adoption of new standards and assessments make the need for expanded professional learning opportunities obvious. However, we must seek out real professional learning and not be satisfied with “inservice” where others tell us what we need to know and do. Teachers must claim this moment as a chance for us to look closely at our practice, collaborate with others, and engage in the very difficult work of improvement. We need to support each other as we adapt, revise, customize, tweak, tune, differentiate, and further modify our teaching to meet the needs of the students in front of us. This kind of professional learning needs to become the common core of our profession.

About the Author:

Tim Dewar is the director of the South Coast Writing Project at University of California, Santa Barbara, where he also teaches undergrads, credential candidates, and graduate students, drawing upon his experience as a secondary English language arts teacher, research, and, most importantly, the expertise of writing project teachers.