

Thoughtful Education: Staff Development for the 1990s

For a group of staff developers, working together to create a framework to unite five varied programs reinforced the power of collaboration.

Over the past 20 years, the incredible knowledge explosion in education has yielded an abundance of ideas and programs for improving classroom instruction. But this surfeit of ideas has created a dilemma: how to select among, how to comprehend, and how to synthesize the vast array. As staff developers committed to different movements, we began to search for some idea or plan capable of uniting our varied philosophies.

In discussing this dilemma, we realized there was no need for our individual programs to compete for teachers' attention. "We have more in common than we think" became a sort of motto, and the task of finding common ground became a priority. We were looking for a framework that would unite five powerful movements: Instructional Theory Into Practice (ITIP), thinking skills, cooperative learning, teaching styles and strategies, and reading and writing in the content areas. We hoped the framework, in

turn, could inspire a new structure for our workshops and seminars.

Declaration of Interdependence

Among the diplomats in Geneva, there's an old saying: "The devil's in the details." What the diplomats mean

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is that the contradictions, the confusions, the sources of conflict are in the specifics. The moral: if you want to find common ground, find the big ideas.

So each member of our group identified one big idea—a basic operating principle specific to his or her movement—that all of us could support. At the same time we searched for a structure that would let us see clearly the contributions of each specialty so that we could improve our own individual work with teachers. We decided upon the following questions:

- *Curriculum*: What shall we teach?
- *Methodology*: How shall we teach?
- *Environment*: What kinds of support shall we supply to ensure successful implementation?

The five basic operating principles became our "declaration of interdependence," the foundation of our efforts to develop a unified framework. We discussed each big idea at length, as you can imagine; here are summaries of those conversations.

As staff developers committed to different movements, we began to search for some idea or plan capable of uniting five powerful movements: Instructional Theory Into Practice (ITIP), thinking skills, cooperative learning, teaching styles and strategies, and reading and writing in the content areas.

1. From ITIP: Teaching and learning are decision making. Both teaching and learning are the results of decisions we make in our efforts to construct meaning or to help others do so. Since personally held theories about learning determine these decisions, a teacher's decision making should be based on the best learning theory available. However, research provides new insights into learning, and the theories change. Therefore:

- Our curriculum will be extremely general, emphasizing those ideas with the most durability.

- Our methodology will emphasize decision making based on theory.

- Our support system will encourage dialogue between theory and decision making. (Checklists will be avoided at all costs.)

2. From Thinking Skills: Learning is thoughtful. All of us learn by thinking about content. Both thought and content are necessary for successful learning. Thought without real content is meaningless, and content without thought is unlearnable. Therefore:

- Our curriculum will identify those kinds of thinking most likely to enhance learning (Marzano et al. in press).

- Our methodology will employ thinking in teaching the content we are trying to cover.

- Our support system will encourage teachers to incorporate thinking processes as critical elements in lesson design.

3. From Teaching Styles and Strategies: Learning is tactical—teaching is strategic. In any moment of genuine learning, some kind of thinking process is being directed at content. In classroom learning, this thought takes one of two forms: strategies or tactics.

Teachers use strategies to provide a scaffold that supports the learning of complex tasks until the student can accomplish the task without the scaffold. On the other hand, students employ tactics to control or direct their own learning. The critical factor is whether the teacher or the student has a repertoire of the strategic or tactical resources to address particular learning problems. Therefore:

- Our curriculum will have at its center a set of strategies and tactics that model the principles of learning theory and make use of the forms of thinking most important for successful learning.

- Our methodology will encourage the flexible use of a wide variety of tactics and strategies.

- Our support system will develop an appreciation and understanding of different teaching and learning styles and of the need for developing a repertoire of strategies to address different styles of learners and curriculum objectives.

4. From Cooperative Learning: Learning is collaborative. Researchers from Lev Vygotsky (1962, 1978) to Lauren Resnick (1987) have recognized that learning is the result of the internalization of "interpsychological processes" (Wertsch 1985) in which small groups construct knowledge cooperatively. For many years, learning theory had lost touch with this social dimension of learning. Investigators and program developers like Roger Johnson and David Johnson (1975), Robert Slavin (1977), and Spencer Kagan (1985) have now redirected our attention to this neglected dimension and have provided us with the tools for making decisions about social roles and relationships within learning situations. Therefore:

- Our curriculum will include instruction in the variety of social roles and relationships possible within the classroom (Costa 1985).

- Our methodology will reflect and model this variety.

- Our support system will create opportunities for small-group and large-group interaction during implementation.

5. From Reading and Writing in the Content Areas: Teaching and learning are artful. Teachers, like writers, are artists trying to "wrestle indeterminate situations" into problems they can solve with the resources at their disposal (McDonald 1989). Also like writers, teachers produce "designs for learning"—ways of mobilizing language as well as numbers, pictures, and objects—in order to change the thoughts and feelings of their readers or students. To perform

this feat, teachers need to select and define problems, design plans to resolve these problems, and stay in "reflective conversation with the emerging situation" (Schon 1987, 1989). The definition of problems, the establishment of a learning design (lesson/unit plan), and responsiveness to the emerging situation are all expressions of teachers' understanding of themselves, their students, and their curriculums.

Staff developers sometimes disregard the extent to which a teacher's designs for learning are expressions of his or her own style and vision for classroom life. But a lack of concern for style and vision (Hanson 1987) leads to erosion of motivation in both learning and teaching. Therefore:

- Our curriculum will plant all instruction firmly within a problem-solving context.
- Our methodology will reflect the design-like nature of teaching and encourage reflection on the advantages and disadvantages of various designs.
- Our support system will encourage both reflection about our own teaching designs (metacognition) and a wide variety of choices for defining problems and designing solutions.

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Our next step was to explore further the questions of what we should teach, how we should teach it, and what support would ensure its successful implementation.

What Shall We Teach?

What do we want to teach in an effective staff development program? In thoughtful education, we want teachers to "wrestle indeterminate situations" into problems they can solve. Therefore, we should organize our curriculums around the kinds of problems that teachers are likely to encounter. Teachers hope, for example, to enhance their students' motivation, help them to remember the difference between a Romantic and a Modern, show them how to interpret a historical document, use the idea of a volcano to make sense of the French Revolution. Given such a range of needs, we have organized our curriculums around four categories of learning dilemmas:

- *Retention: Making Memories*
- *Motivation and Cooperation: Making Choices*
- *Meaning and Comprehension: Making Sense*
- *Transfer and Application: Making Use.*

Within each learning dilemma, we analyzed how our own specialties fit. Wolfe presents current research on the topic, and Silver extracts a set of basic principles. Marzano models tactics, and Strong and Brock model effective teaching strategies, with one concentrating on the actual strategies and the other demonstrating how to vary strategies in order to enhance patterns of accountability, interdependence, and levels of controversy within the strategy.

This analysis led immediately to some fascinating discoveries: many of Marzano's tactics could easily be converted into strategies, and Silver and Strong's strategies were tactics in disguise. Marzano had no explicit tactics for cooperation, but Johnson and Johnson had a slew of them. De Bono's (1986) CORT program contained a host of tactics for Making Sense and Making Use but not much to

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develop memory. (A similar pattern emerged when we examined various strategies for reading and writing across the curriculum.) We discovered later that we could use the framework to produce tightly focused units that highlighted specific learning dilemmas; for example, we developed a unit on presenting concepts.

How Shall We Teach?

If we really want to foster teachers' growth, we need to change more than the content of staff development. We need to change the methods of teaching that content. Perhaps nothing has been so destructive to staff development as the label *training*—it's an inappropriate metaphor for working with practicing professionals with 5 to 35 years' experience. Teachers know much that staff developers don't, and our attempts to get them to use our ideas "correctly" is condescending. But how can we create a collegial, give-and-take atmosphere in a workshop and still cover our content?

Perkins (1985) describes his view of knowledge as design-like, a "structure adopted to a purpose." He believes we can teach concepts, procedures, events, techniques, and pieces of knowledge if we ask and answer four questions about each piece of knowl-

edge under discussion:

1. What is its purpose?
2. What is its structure?
3. What are model cases of it?
4. What arguments explain or evaluate it?

Fortunately, since we had already organized our curriculum around teachers' purposes, we could simply adopt Perkins' approach to the presentation of tactics and strategies. Thus, we would present the structure of a particular strategy or tactic and then show several model cases, being careful to vary context and grade. Then we would discuss arguments for and against the strategy, often simply sitting down with the teachers and asking, "What do you think?"

Because we presented a wide variety of techniques, and because there was no "one correct way of doing things," the teachers were eager to critique the various options we had presented. Almost as soon as a critique began, they also began to revise the idea and create designs of their own; for example, one teacher squinted up and said, "You know, this would work a lot better if you would just . . ."

In time, we realized there was really a fifth design question: How would you change the design to make it work better for you? The unexpected appearance of the fifth question reminded us that we were not only collaborating with each other but with teachers and that this form of collaboration contains rich benefits for everyone who participates, researchers as well as teachers.

Now we had our curriculum and our methodology. The workshops were complete, but, as teachers never fail to remind us, workshops are not reality. What kind of environment would lead to successful implementation and real use of the lessons that we had designed?

What Support Shall We Supply?

Asking teachers to deliver lessons during workshops can be helpful but is ultimately unreal. On the other hand, trying out new ideas with students during the school year "overloads the

To be thoughtful is to concern ourselves with others, recognize the limitations of our own perspective, and to seek a common ground that lets us unite, yet still allows us to be different.

learner [teacher] with practical constraints" (Schon 1983). Then, too, a particular tactic or strategy may not fit within a teacher's schedule for the week. Forcing a learning design where it doesn't belong teaches little and may destroy the teacher's natural "conversation with the learning situation."

Creating virtual contexts. We began to identify what J.P. McDonald (1989) described as real teaching in "virtual contexts." We found three methods of creating "virtual contexts," that is, of moderating teachers' exposure to reality while they are learning new techniques—tent schools, unit plans, and helping visits.

Tent schools differ from ordinary summer schools in that they are not remedial. Instead, they provide enrichment for students and a laboratory where teachers can practice tactics and strategies. By teaching more playful content, teachers establish the "virtual context" that we're looking for. Journal writing, team planning, cognitive coaching, videotaping, and reflective seminars—all play a role in helping teachers use the new tactics and strategies.

Unit plans represent the "no kids at all" method of trying out strategies and tactics. After a series of workshops, teachers take a week to develop

units that embody the new techniques they wish to try out. Here, the reality comes from the need to develop an actual unit to teach. The virtuality comes from the temporary absence of students.

In helping visits, a consultant and a teacher meet to plan a lesson they will deliver jointly that day. They don't try to produce a picture-perfect version of a particular strategy or tactic but to produce an ordinary lesson that does what the teacher would ordinarily do that day, embracing one or more tactics or strategies in the design. This lesson that fits easily into the teacher's vision of his or her classroom life becomes a model case that can later be explored in terms of structure, purpose, arguments, and possible variations.

Working this way, the consultant is using what Donald Schon (1983) calls the "follow me" method of coaching, but with the level of difficulty carefully adjusted. The consultant must not dramatically exceed teachers' own levels of performance or violate their styles. The goal is to make the model interesting, different, and achievable, but nothing out of the ordinary. The virtuality of this technique stems from the presence of a teaching partner.

Sustaining structures. How do we maintain our momentum and sustain teachers' effort to become more thoughtful practitioners? Carl Glickman (1981), noting that successful teachers are thoughtful ones, contends that "the ability to think about what they [teachers] do should be the aim of staff development." A thoughtful environment, therefore, must provide teachers an opportunity to apply what they have learned in a thoughtful manner; it must encourage adult cooperation, personal reflection, feedback, and ongoing dialogue.

But teachers are often isolated from each other; they encounter few, if any, adult audiences (Costa and Garmston 1985). Such isolation prevents them from receiving valuable feedback from other teachers who might assist them in solving shared problems. "Learning clubs" (support groups) and "cognitive coaching" (collegial dialogues) provide comfortable settings for teach-

ers to interact. Clubs and coaching provide teachers with an adult audience, a group of peers with whom to discuss problems, generate workable alternatives, and discuss hopes. Both activities support and sustain success in implementation efforts.

Why Thoughtful Education?

Perhaps we need to learn from these teachers. Too often program developers and researchers are driven by a paradigm that forces them to compete to look for the flaws in each other's work rather than the virtues. But by working together, we have strengthened our individual programs, provided new insights to each other, and generated some level of emotional support.

The framework we have created is only part of the message we have to deliver. The real message is our collaboration. Perhaps the time has come for those of us who create models, programs, and strategies to work together rather than against each other. If we can foster this spirit of collaboration, we can begin to create a new paradigm, one that truly deserves the name *thoughtful education*. □

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