

Teacher-Centered Professional Development

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Chapter 1. Professional Development Today

"Let's face it: Professional development, as we have known it for years now, has yielded little or no positive effects on student learning." Thus complain the many weary professionals who flinch at the mere mention of the word "workshop." In the collective imagination, the term "professional development day" conjures only images of coffee breaks, consultants in elegant outfits, and schools barren of kids.

Of course, professional development was never intended to trigger such pessimistic reactions. Even critics of the professional development movement admit that all forms of teacher development, whether effective or not, have at their core the noble intention of improving student learning. We might disagree with the implementation processes available, but not with their purpose. Indeed, when correctly implemented, they actually yield the results intended. In this era of high-stakes testing and increased accountability, it is necessary to reposition professional development so that the collective efforts of teachers, students, and administrators result in enhanced learning for all members of the teaching community.

Current professional development practices are generally constricted by the following stumbling blocks:

1. **Top-down decision making.** Traditionally, professional development arrangements are made by administrators and consultants rather than teachers. By muffling the teachers' voices and placing priority on administrative needs, these programs become a burden to professionals instead of a welcome solution to classroom problems.
2. **The idea that teachers need to be "fixed."** Too often, professional development is guided by the erroneous idea that if students don't learn, it's because their teachers don't know how to teach. Myriad approaches to teaching have surfaced over the past fifteen years or so, all claiming to be the ultimate solution for teaching problems. However, when we listen in awe at the stories of classroom teachers—stories of passion and commitment, strife and success, dedication and love—it's easy to wonder what kind of fixing these teachers might need.
3. **Lack of ownership of the professional development process and its results.** Given that their voices are not generally heeded during professional development, teachers rightly question their investment in programs that were built behind their backs yet are aimed at changing the way they do things.
4. **The technocratic nature of professional development content.** More often than not, teachers in professional development programs are taught techniques that they are expected to replicate in the classroom. Most of these methods, however effective, are standardized for communication purposes and serve the needs of teachers and learners in specific contexts. In attempting to transfer these practices into their classrooms, teachers need to invest considerably more effort than the professional development planners originally anticipated.
5. **Universal application of classroom practices regardless of subject, student age, or level of cognitive development.** It is not uncommon to hear of school districts that run the same professional development programs for all

grade levels. While certain teaching practices and learning principles might be suitable across the board, a one-size-fits-all approach, though economical, has been proven totally ineffective.

6. **Lack of variety in the delivery modes of professional development.** Once a decision is made to invest in professional development, the cheapest format is often chosen for the purpose—usually a lecture, workshop, or seminar. It is ironic that so much has been written about the importance of differentiated instruction in the classroom; when it comes to instruction for teachers, undifferentiated approaches usually prevail.
7. **Inaccessibility of professional development opportunities.** Professional development opportunities seldom reach teachers when they are really needed. When teachers do not help plan and deliver professional development programs, their needs can go unmet. This may help explain why only a small percentage of teachers seems able to transfer the content covered in a workshop to the classrooms.
8. **Little or no support in transferring professional development ideas to the classroom.** Transferring new ideas to the classroom is perhaps one of the most difficult tasks a teacher faces. A lot of effort is put into helping preservice teachers bridge the gap between theory and practice; we may wonder why the same support systems are not available to in-service teachers as well.
9. **Standardized approaches to professional development that disregard the varied needs and experiences of teachers.** Researchers have pointed out that teachers go through certain developmental stages as they progress in their careers, each of which triggers specific needs and crises that they must address (Fessler & Christensen, 1992; Furlong & Maynard, 1995; Huberman, 1989). The standardized nature of traditional professional development programs assumes that all teachers should perform at the same level, regardless of their particular experience and needs.
10. **Lack of systematic evaluation of professional development.** Given the complex nature of teacher competence, assessing development often seems impossible. As a result, many professional development programs are not evaluated, nor are their results communicated to other communities. Teachers would be right to take offense at this. A learning organization should yield knowledge that enriches not only the immediate community, but the profession as a whole. It is a disservice to the teaching community when we fail to probe the effectiveness of established programs and overlook their results.
11. **Little or no acknowledgment of the learning characteristics of teachers among professional development planners.** Most professional development models for teachers ignore the fact that teachers possess unique learning characteristics that must be accounted for if the programs are to be successful. Though the characteristics of adult learners have been the focus of research for over a century now (Brookfield, 1986; Vella, 1994), they are too often overlooked.

My vision of professional development is grounded in faith in teachers, the institutions they work for, and the power of the broader community of educators around the country and the globe. Effective professional development should be understood as a job-embedded commitment that teachers make in order to further the purposes of the profession while addressing their own particular needs. It should follow the principles that guide the learning practices of experienced adults, in teaching communities that foster cooperation and shared expertise. Teacher success stories are living theories of educational quality and should be shared with the wider educational community for the benefit of all involved.