

Monday, July 31, 2006

Feature Article

Professional Development: Fast-Track to Empowerment or an Energy-Sapping Seat-Time Rut

By whatever name or disguise, professional development, In-service, staff development or training, this seat-time ritual is ubiquitous in school districts at the start of each and every school year. Every year starts with a required, mandated, placebo-dose of this bad-tasting medicine.

These seat-time endurance extravaganzas are the one time of the year when all but the most comatose of the educational consultancy corps are employed (deployed).

In theory, the funds expended for this ordeal result in targeted change and trackable/ traceable teacher improvements that focus upon directly-measured student outcomes.

So, why are the collective benefits from this "feedlot-style" professional development less than ideal?

Examples?

For example, during the In-service program on individualized or differentiated instruction, the presenter models a one-size-bores-all system that is fully described in the consultant's 368 page book. Of course, after the \$1,200 US consultant fee for delivering the presentation (the consultant is a published author, you know), the campus cannot afford the \$34 US book for each teacher. Fortunately, the the consultant was generous enough to donate a used copy for the campus library.

Fortunately, the copy is always available for checkout, since no teacher has time to slog through this ponderous tome.

In another "Sleeper Cell" presentation, the technology consultant flashes PowerPoint slides for six hours.

Fortunately, the purchase orders have been "cut," and the software that the consultant is "teaching" will be ordered as soon as the new fiscal year begins. The teachers will remember remarkable amounts about the concept behind the software when the software arrives (ninety days after the start of the fiscal year), and they will still remember a lot after the IT Department schedules the software for installation (six weeks into the next semester).

But, entering "back-dated-data" into the software seems too odious, oppressive, repulsive and stressful; so, none of the teachers who were "trained" bothers to use the software. Maybe the software can be salvaged for use next year...but only if funds for the software's maintenance fees are budgeted.

However, there is little sense in my droning on with these endless examples. Everyone has seen, first hand, endless renditions and iterations of these well-known scenarios. Pressing on would be just plain boring, or, would prompt you to think of worse-outcome "horror" stories that you have seen that could easily trump my examples.

Telling it Like it is

So, what describes ("Tells it like it is") this well-known "Curse of the Never Quite Alive" professional development ritual that replicates itself, year after year?

In theory, professional development should fit one of these professional models, even though each model offers issues, concerns and obstacles to be overcome.

Of course, there is only enough money in the professional development budget for one-off training.

Follow up, follow through, action plans, application of any valuable nuggets of knowledge is...

Impractical

Too time consuming

Too low a priority

A waste of time

Wait a minute...

...What teacher has the time?

...What valuable knowledge nuggets?

Low-Impact, Intensive Training A limited professional development budget is responsible for a large percentage of training sessions that start with the following dialogue...

The presenter introduces the topic by saying that the information that he or she is presenting is really a "three-day, week-long, three-week" class. So, the best that he or she will be able to accomplish is to "hit the highlights."

Translation: All that is going to happen is that presenter is going to sling slides and read bullet points.

These initial words, coupled with a quick slide (no pun intended) into the "PowerPoint Daze" results in a rapid transport of the audience into an altered state of awareness. The primary characteristic of this training-trance is a post-hypnotic suggestion that blocks all memory of the contents of the session, or, at least recall is blocked for the remainder of the school year.

I am not sure if any controlled experiments have been conducted to study this phenomena, but my hypothesis is that

less than 1 in 56, 287 teachers who attend one of these workshops will be able to state (at the end of the school year, with 10 degrees of freedom) what the training was about.

But, if so few participants can recall one major point that was presented during the previous day's workshop; shouldn't some Business Office Purse-Protector squawk, and ask what the goals of these professional development training programs are?

I believe that it is OK for expenditure-hawks to raise these questions because, after over one quarter of a century of observing these start-of-school professional development rituals; I ask the same questions, too.

The goals of a genuine staff development program must include:

A way to apply the attitude, skill and knowledge so that these become habits

A way to maintain the attitude, skills and knowledge so that the learning doesn't fade

A way to improve the attitude, skills and knowledge once the foundation is set

Institutional support (and reward) for the improvements in attitude, skill and knowledge that were acquired

Empowerment of staff members so that they can do whatever it takes to implement the learned attitude, skill and knowledge for the benefit of students

And, during the training, professional interaction with the course content should include:

Participation

Collaboration

Practice

Reflection

Action Planning

Follow Up Planning

The litmus test for hiring training consultants is to determine if they can apply, analyze and synthesize the following:

The Basic Characteristics of Adult Learning

The Ability to Model Every Single Thing that they are Teaching

Real-World Experience in Delivering Instruction to Real Students related to the Class they are Teaching

Active Learning

Project-Based Learning

Action Planning

Application Follow Up

Follow Up Tracking

Follow Up Evaluation

The consultant's academic degrees have a correlation of "Zero" with actual benefits to students that develop from these opening of school training programs.

Translation: 1.) Students would probably benefit just as much if staff members ate popcorn and watched movies. 2.)

Students would probably benefit more if their teachers designed and constructed bulletin boards in their classrooms with curriculum-related decorations.

Delivering what Teachers Want Teachers are adults and have no interest in re-experiencing the "whole-body" learning of what it is like to sit in one seat for an entire day. Teachers' backsides are no longer conditioned to this abuse since they graduated (escaped).

But, students backsides are miniscule compared to the size of the terrain that pain has available in its romp across the rump of adults; and teachers do not need to be reminded of the fact that petite rhymes with seat, or that pain rhymes with gain.

Summary Effective use of this mandatory professional development time hinges upon the ability of the presenter to turn the corner from an emphasis on teaching (the consultant's) to an emphasis on learning (the staff participants').

The most important characteristic of any program that stands any chance at all of being useful is a change of focus from disseminating knowledge to that of applying, synthesizing and evaluating performance and change.

However, in the case of most consultant presenters, although talk may not come cheap, it is next to useless...unless, of course, the talk is embedded in active, life-changing, habit changing, able-to-apply something tomorrow, and the next day, and the next action plans that are on target for each teacher's needs.

If anyone encounters a truly useful professional development experience this year, please tell up about it. We will be sure to publicize the experience and celebrate the memorable event with you.

But alas, we expect that useful professional development experiences will be as rare as teachers who like and appreciate the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) for all the benefits that the law brings to children.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Featured Article at 09:00

I totally agree that some professional development has become "energy sapping - seat rut". This week is the week before my school starts here in Cincinnati, I am working at a charter school for the first time and I will be going to an inservice in Michigan.

I know how important PD is but it seems that too many times it is taken away from preparation time for our students and time with our students.

sjm

Anonymous on Aug 13 2006, 07:31