

Who Owns Professional Development?

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It's 4:00 on a sunny Tuesday afternoon in August. I'm heading out of work and my phone rings. I dig my phone out of my bag and answer the call from my younger sister. She proceeds to complain about day two of district in-service for her new English teaching job. Ever the optimistic and encouraging older sister, I say it can't really be that bad. But, in truth, the two straight days of district-imposed trainings that she describes really do sound bad. Or, if not outright "bad," definitely not good. I consider the contrast between her excitement about her new job on Sunday and her mood now.

After hanging up the phone I pause to think about professional development at High Tech Middle. What makes our way of supporting teachers different, and what types of things do we do to help teachers grow as educators? I think it has something to do with encouraging teachers to take ownership of their professional development by providing spaces for authentic conversation. Although the examples below are by no means exhaustive and may not work for every teacher in every setting, at HTM we've found them to be very successful in supporting constructive and collaborative teaching and learning.

Project Tuning

It's 10:30 on a Saturday morning. HTM teachers and teachers from other local middle schools gather in an 8th grade classroom for Saturday Collegial Conversations. There are six teachers in this collegial conversations group. One is a facilitator, one has brought a project description to share, and the other four are participants. The project description outlines a project that the teacher, Bryan, has designed for his class. The purpose of this meeting is for Bryan to get feedback as he works to re-create and improve the project for his students.

The group gathers around a table and after introductions, the facilitator reviews the protocol. The air is relaxed and friendly. Bryan shares the details of his battery-operated "toy" project and poses his question for the group: How do I make sure that kids within a group are contributing equally to the project? The group asks Bryan probing and clarifying questions to get a better sense of the project and of his thoughts and actions. They ask him, How are you assessing students during the project process? Is there a rubric for the final product? Are students participating in peer critique? Once questions are completed, Bryan steps back from the group and listens as group members discuss the project, focusing on the question he has posed. After 15 minutes, Bryan rejoins the group and reflects on the conversation and ideas sparked by listening in on the conversation. For example, one of Bryan's colleagues had drawn the distinction between things being equitable and things being equal. This point encouraged Bryan to think of his project assessment through a new lens.

This process is valuable not only for the presenting teacher, but also for all teachers in the group. Having a chance to hash out project issues with colleagues inevitably makes a teacher think about improving his or her own practice and projects. All parties take something useful away from the conversation regardless of the subject they teach.

Looking at Student Work

We use a similar protocol to discuss student work as a faculty, in study groups, and in Saturday Collegial Conversations. The goal of the “project tuning” described above is to look at a teacher’s plan for a project as a starting point for improving aspects of the project. The goal of “looking at student work” is to examine student work samples as a window into what we are doing well as teachers and what we can improve. The quality of student work tells volumes about the quality of teaching and project structure.

In this configuration, the presenting teacher brings a variety of student products from one project to share. This time, it’s 1:30pm on a Wednesday and all 16 High Tech Middle (HTM) teachers are gathered in a math/science classroom. Ryan is getting ready to share work samples from his 8th grade Alternative Energy Project. He describes the project process and then teachers silently walk the room for 10 minutes, examining the 10 products that Ryan brought to share. After this examination, the teachers ask Ryan questions: What expectations did you communicate to the students? How many drafts did they complete? How long did students have to complete the work? What was the audience? Ryan answers the questions and then steps back from the group. The group discusses Ryan’s project and the students’ products. Teachers also comment on their projects and implications for their own work. Finally, Ryan has a chance to rejoin the group and comment on the conversation and his next steps.

Again, this process is useful for all teachers, not just teachers of math and science who might complete a similar project. After this conversation, DeAnna, the HTM drama teacher, expressed that she saw direct connections to her own desire to have students complete high quality meaningful work. Deanna left the conversation with new strategies for improving student work from draft to draft. In this case, examples from an 8th grade math/science class informed the teaching of teachers from many disciplines, including 6th and 7th grade drama.

Collegial Coaching

It’s 8:00 Friday morning and two teachers are meeting to discuss a class observation they conducted on Thursday afternoon. The teachers were paired up as collegial coaching partners. The teachers had already completed a training on effective ways to give feedback from an observation. The training emphasized the importance of giving feedback that is kind, specific, and helpful—and specifically the benefit of focusing on one or two things from the observation, rather than bombarding the teacher with a laundry list of what was done well and things to improve. These two teachers had also completed a pre-observation meeting where each teacher shared background on her class and information on what she would like her partner to look for.

During this debrief conversation the teachers discussed management of middle school students during project work time. The recurring question was: How do I keep kids on task during work time when I'm working with one or two individuals and need to be able to direct my focus there? The teachers discussed the importance of having specific daily work goals and weekly check-ins. Both teachers benefited from the conversation and used it to inform their practice.

The benefit of collegial coaching is twofold—there is a benefit to being observed and to observing. I think and learn most about teaching when I'm watching someone else's practice (not when I am in the act of teaching myself). Putting teachers in the role of observer gives them an opportunity to learn from observation. Being observed gives them the opportunity to receive useful feedback from their peers.

Video Observations

It's second period on a Thursday and Andrea, the art teacher I'm meeting with, is on prep. We're preparing to watch a 5-minute video clip of her teaching that I took four days before during her 3rd period class. After the observation, we talked briefly about how the class had gone and I gave the footage to Andrea so she could watch the class and pick a segment of video for the two of us to watch together and discuss. After the class, Andrea was frustrated with her students' behavior during clean-up, and the amount of time that clean-up takes away from student work time. I encouraged Andrea to choose a section of the video that showed this part of class.

As we sat down to watch the footage together, Andrea framed the clip we were about to watch. It was the last five minutes of class, at the end of which she should be dismissing kids to lunch. But instead, she's still harping on them to clean up and most of them are doing anything but. About five kids are doing what they're supposed to be doing: sweeping the floor, wiping down tables, and washing brushes. The other kids are painting each other's arms, play fighting, or just hanging out and chatting. We both notice that even though the majority of kids aren't helping clean up, the class gets clean. And we start talking about the fact that maybe having fewer kids present for clean-up would actually be more efficient. So, Andrea decides to have a rotating clean-up crew.

Being able to step away from the class setting and observe the students on video allowed Andrea and me to notice details that we would have missed had we been observing live. Using video as a tool allowed both of us to be observers and to discuss the class from this perspective. Incidentally, Andrea also found the footage useful to share with her class to show them firsthand what was happening during clean-up and what needed to change.

Final Thoughts

It's 8am on a Monday. Mike and Leily, two 7th grade teaching partners, are sitting in their shared office. I need to check in with Leily about school visits she is planning for colleagues to middle schools in the Bay Area, so I knock and enter their office. I wait as they finish a conversation about how to structure student presentations of work for our all-school

exhibition coming up in March. As I listen, I think to myself how valuable it is that our teachers see each other as resources for continuous improvement, and how important our culture of collaboration is.

All the professional development activities detailed above rely on collaboration, trust, and collegiality. Everyone's door is always open and teachers actively work to support each other and continually share ideas. Like any real, sustained learning, the results of these professional development activities and support systems for teachers cannot be expressed through a passing score on a test or a number correct or incorrect. But, the results are visible through more in-depth projects, more effective instruction, and a higher quality of student work.

To learn more about Saturday Collegial Conversations and other professional development activities in HTH schools, visit www.hightechhigh.org. For an excellent resource for protocols to facilitate teacher conversations, visit the National School Reform Faculty website at www.nsrffharmony.org