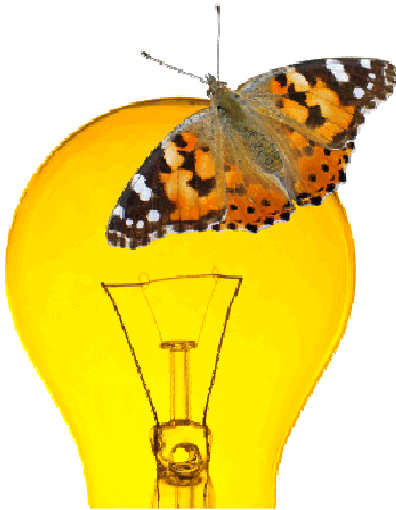


Designing Professional Development for Transfer and Learning

by Christine Huley and Sydnee Dickson



Leaders and teachers in Granite School District are experiencing high quality professional development in a more effective way based on a design that ensures transfer into the context of their work. The NSDC Standard of Design calls for *professional development that improves the learning of all students using learning strategies appropriate to the intended goal* (NSDC, 2001). Unfortunately too many educators are still experiencing professional development that doesn't transfer the learning or impact school culture. Fortunately, we have discovered that changing the focus of professional development from teaching centered to learning centered in the design is making all the difference.

Learning is defined by Jane Vella (2001) as "what occurs within a program. It is the completion of the achievement based objectives, visible end products and projects. Transfer is using this learning: concepts, skills, and attitudes in another setting." (p.36). For Granite educators this learning occurs through dialogue using learning tasks. Teams of teachers and principals come together for a two-day institute where they engage in authentic work based on an adult learning need at their school. The intent of the institute is to provide space, time and tools that will enable school teams to function as leaders of professional development. The framework of design for this institute and all other professional development is based on three fundamental elements; conducting a needs assessment, creating learning tasks, and using a seven step process for overall design.

Needs Assessment

The tools include conducting a needs assessment that outlines the topics for the two day period and asking individuals to respond to the topics of the institute that have most relevance to their context. The topics that provide the framework for design of the institute are:

- Purpose of a Warm-up
- Group Culture: Developing Norms
- How Adults Learn
- Four Learning Tasks
- Principles of Giving and Receiving Feedback
- Learning Needs and Resource Assessment
- Seven Steps of Design
- Design an Adult Learning Experience for Your School/District

Additional questions include "describe a project you are currently involved with that has presented challenges designing appropriate professional development" and "describe how you learn most effectively". These questions help us design the work in way that is focused on the needs of the

learner. If the professional development design addresses real needs, the learning has immediacy. Giving attention to the culture of a set of learners is a form of respect, (Vella, 2001).

Learning Tasks

The next step is using the findings from the needs assessment to determine the most effective path to achieving our intended outcome, which in this case is building capacity among school teams to design and facilitate results-based professional development. The pathway to learning centered professional development is paved with learning tasks. These tasks are based on the work of Jane Vella in ***Taking Learning to Task: Creative Strategies for Teaching Adults*** (Jossey Bass, 2001). So what is a learning task? A learning task is an open question put to learners who have all the resources they need to respond (pg. 45). Learning tasks engage learners in a dialogue about the content.

Effective learning tasks encompass the following four components: (pg. 33)

1. Connects learners with what they already know and their unique context (Inductive Task)
2. Invites them to examine new input (concepts, skills or attitudes)-the content of the course. (Input Task)
3. Gets learners to do something directly with that new content, somehow implementing it (Implementation Task)
4. Integrates this new learning into their setting (Integration Task)

An example of an inductive task that we use in our institute connects educators with the work of student learning. This task is used as a warm-up rather than using a team-builder or ice-breaker. Learners connect immediately to the topics of the day and their perception becomes the substance of the task.

Inductive Learning Task – Our Stories

Think about a professional learning experience that enabled you to transfer your new learning to your classroom or school. What was the situation? What did you learn?
Think of a student who benefited from your new learning. Take two minutes to **write** your story.

Share your story with a partner, one minute each. **Identify** the common characteristics of your stories.

Write your student's first name only on the table tent in front of you. When you **introduce** yourself, stating your name and school, also state the name of your student.

Notice the task is active, not passive. All participants use their own experience to provide the context for the task. Verbs are highlighted to draw attention to the specific actions the learner is invited to take. Verbs also hold us accountable to the learning. As one teacher participant recently stated, "I learned content about professional development by doing it. I think this helps teachers take ownership of their learning". This is the purpose of learning tasks – *learning by doing*.

Seven Steps of Design

As an educator think about how you prepare for adult or student learning, depending on your role and setting. What elements and steps do you use? The rationale for the NSDC Standard of design states that "Just as successful teaching requires that teachers be adept at using a variety of research-based instructional strategies, so too does successful staff development require that planners select learning strategies that are appropriate to the intended outcome and other situational factors" (NSDC, 2001). In Granite we have found that by using the following seven steps to design learning experiences we are better able to impact individual and school capacity for change. These steps are as follows:

The Seven Steps of Design

Who: Who is coming to this program? What do they do? What experiences have they had related to this topic? Ages? Position? Anything that could have a bearing on the design decisions you make.

Why: Name the situation that calls for this professional development. Think of it in terms of the learners' needs not what you (the leader) need to do.

When: Timeframe (such as 30 minutes), time of day, what part of the day or week.

Where: Location, characteristics of the space, again anything that might make a difference to your design.

What: The content of the program – the knowledge, skills or attitudes. What they need to learn and eventually in what sequence.

What For: (achievement based objectives) What they will do with the WHAT during the learning session.

How: The learning tasks. How the objectives (WHAT FOR) will be accomplished by the learners.

An eighth step should also be considered – SO WHAT – did we achieve the desired impact and how do we know?

The Seven Steps of Professional Development Design template is now used whenever designing an adult learning event (see figure 1). This template includes the NSDC Standards categories of context, process, and content to ensure that these critical elements are included and help the designer connect the seven steps with the standards.

Compare these seven steps with the traditional way that professional development is designed in your setting. What elements are similar and what is missing in your design? In Granite we've begun to focus more intently on the WHO. Rather than assuming we know who we are working with, we focus on the individual and collective needs of the learners in relationship to the objectives of the learning. Feedback from participants consistently includes commentary on how they feel valued and honored as learners.

How do we know this is working?

In order to build capacity throughout our system we redesigned professional development for district and school leaders. Long PowerPoint presentations and lengthy lectures eventually gave way to authentic learning tasks, text rendering, book study, action research, and other powerful designs. Power Point and short lectures are only used as means for presenting new content to be practiced using learning tasks. This is based on the assumption that whoever is doing the talking is doing the learning. School and district leaders are now modeling this type of learning with their staffs. Qualitative data about the impact includes the following:

- Principals who have engaged their teachers in this type of design indicate that classrooms have also become more learning centered. Participants continue to report the transference of the principles to their lesson design in classrooms.
- Teachers are refusing to engage in professional development that isn't result-based. They are more critical consumers of how they spend their time learning new skills. We often hear stories about district and private providers being

“screened” by teachers to ensure that their professional development will meet the needs of their staff.

- Professional development leaders in schools are sharing professional development designs with district staff and colleagues in other schools as they find success in designing and leading school-based professional development.
- Professional learning communities are incorporating norms and other productive facilitation skills to ensure that time together is spent in productive ways.
- Mentors are using the skills they’ve learned to engage in meaningful and focused dialogue with new teachers.

Conclusion

“I first fell in love with the practice of conversation when I experienced for myself the sense of unity, of communion, that is available in this process. Most of what we do in communities and organizations focuses on our individual needs. We attended a conference or meeting for our own purposes, for ‘what I can get out of this’. Conversation is different. Although we each benefit individually from good conversation, we also discover that we were never as separate as we thought. Good conversation connects us at a deeper level. As we share our different human experiences, we rediscover a sense of unity. We remember we are part of a greater whole. And as an added joy, we also discover our collective wisdom. We suddenly see how wise we can be together”. (Margaret Wheatley, 2002 pg.28).

The work of Granite School District principal and teacher teams has been structured around purposeful conversations and dialogue. This dialogue engages the learner in the learning by creating a safe learning centered environment for adults to share their ideas, experiences and create an authentic adult learning experience. It takes courage and openness to experience professional learning that ensures transfer of learning to the school and classroom.

Granite School District Demographics link:

<http://www.graniteschools.org/C4/C1/Handy%20facts/default.aspx?Mode=Edit&PageView=Shared>

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