

The Five Ws of Quality Professional Development

EdWeek, By Linda Yaron, May 9, 2017

Years ago, a visitor sat in on one of my school's professional development meetings, where we discussed how to spend some discretionary funds. In a robust discussion about the needs of students and what program might best serve them, some teachers argued it was best to spend the money on necessary supplies and resources, while others advocated to invest in more comprehensive supports.

Afterwards, the visitor remarked that the meeting hadn't really been professional development. It was a thoughtful, necessary discussion, but he was right; it wasn't PD. I would define PD as learning experiences to cultivate skills, knowledge, or dispositions that deepen a teaching practice. While our discussion was critical to clarifying school priorities and aligning resources to meet students' needs, it did not directly support our teaching practice and, therefore, was not true PD.

Throughout my career, I've been fortunate to both create and participate in PD that has fundamentally changed my teaching practice and made me a better teacher. I've also experienced PD that had little or even negative impact.

These drastically different experiences have left me thinking more deeply about how we can create meaningful and purposeful opportunities for educators to enhance their classroom practice. What conditions are necessary for such PD to occur—and to occur sustainably—and to what extent can best practices in PD be replicated across schools and districts?

We all know what quality PD isn't:

- dissemination of information that could have been emailed
- one-time "drive-bys" of disconnected workshops
- retelling what's already known
- bringing people together for the sake of meeting
- disconnected from classroom realities
- delivered in a "death by PowerPoint" manner

This kind of PD is detrimental because it devalues the time of professionals who already have full plates.

Furthermore, as teachers see initiative after initiative pass through without any real impact, they start to question why they should invest now.

And yet, it's completely possible to develop and deliver quality PD for teachers, and it's as straightforward as putting intentionality behind these 5 Ws:

1. *Who* is included in the planning, execution, and follow-up? From my experience, an instructional leadership team with multiple stakeholders and teacher voice can both keep a close pulse on the realities of the classroom and build staff ownership in a PD plan that aligns with school needs.
2. *What* learning experiences will occur (workshops, coaching, classroom observations/videos, school visits, research, etc.), and what dialogues might be helpful for introducing and reflecting on the experience? What supports might teachers need for classroom implementation? I've found that planning the PD learning experience as a systemic process allows time to implement, rework, revise, and adapt practices so that the PD works for teachers, rather than teachers working for the PD.
3. *When* will larger and smaller goals be achieved, and when will assessments, surveys, or reflections be used to measure success? Implementation takes time, and it requires a collective growth mindset. Sharing challenges, celebrating successes, and making implementation visible are all just as important to the process as the PD events themselves.
4. *Where* are the best spaces to encourage collaboration among PD participants or facilitate other learning goals? If PD involves collaboration, then is it necessary to be intentional about developing a location and configuration to facilitate that goal? Does PD involve the whole staff or take place in small, purposeful groups organized around the same grade level, subject, or focus area? Does it occur on campus or off

campus (for example, at a community lecture or university discussion)? Location is important for setting the tone of the experience.

5. *Why* are participants engaged in this particular PD? How can participants build ownership and trust in the process so everyone knows what they are doing and why they are doing it? Schools with the most successful PD engage staff members in reflecting on these questions throughout the process, and they hold space for the spectrum of feelings that emerge.

PD should represent the height of teaching. At its best, it is purposeful, relevant, differentiated, and brings people together to fulfill a vision of what schools and districts can be. This kind of PD has the power to meaningfully enhance teaching and learning practices and transform the culture of a school or district. Transformative PD can be implemented in any school or district when organizers use the Five Ws to frame the planning process and keep these guiding principles in mind:

Quality PD happens with, not to, teachers. It embraces teacher leadership around the challenges and solutions that impact school communities. Instead of being disseminated from the top down, it values the professional expertise of teachers and allows them to be a part of creating and sustaining a PD support plan that nourishes individuals and cultivates their wisdom to teach and learn together.

Quality PD connects to a broader vision of where and how the school and district can grow over time. It is part of an ongoing continuum that includes instructional goals, instruction, and assessment. Follow-up in a continuous feedback loop is sustained and calibrated over time to align with changing needs and circumstances. This practice can help shift school culture to effectively cultivate skills, knowledge, and dispositions in a way that stewards a broader shared vision.

Quality PD creates space and time for authentic collaboration. This can lead to dialogue about best practices, strategies, assessment, curriculum design, interdisciplinary projects, and greater connectivity among staff. PD is a vehicle, not an end in itself, in the same way that collaboration for collaboration's sake is not the goal. Rather, collaboration has the capacity to transform the school culture through educators building relationships with each other and strategically working together to meet the needs of students.

Lastly, **quality PD isn't something passively received, but rather it is interacted with and created through purposeful engagement.** It is differentiated across needs and transferable to every teacher's classroom in answering the question in his or her mind: How will this help me teach and my students learn?

Some of my most memorable PD experiences are of colleagues sharing strategies, helping each other fine-tune lessons, and examining student work to inform instructional next steps. In an open and trusting environment, we supported each other's practice to arrive at something greater than could have been achieved in isolation. When PD at school sites can foster spaces of dialogue about problems of practice and best practices, the profession can grow from the inside out, with support from the top, one conversation at a time.

Linda Yaron is a National Board-certified educator in Los Angeles. She writes a blog for developing a thriving culture of teaching and learning called [The Foundations of Teaching](#). Linda is also a member of the [Center for Teaching Quality Collaboratory](#).

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