Reconsidering Teacher Professional Development Through Constructivist Principles

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The literature on the professional development of teachers through the decade of the 1990s and into the twenty-first century has highlighted one common theme: substantive professional development opportunities for teachers are sorely lacking. Many have pointed to the scarce resources dedicated to professional development; many have suggested that a focus on standards, curriculum, and student assessment has obscured the relationship between teacher learning and student learning; many have commented that the prevailing culture of schools and schooling poses barriers to teacher engagement in quality professional development. However one chooses to cast the current state of professional development for practicing teachers, it is clear that teachers are under closer public scrutiny than ever before, without any radical changes in support for improving classroom practice. It is in this context that I share a portrait of professional development for teachers that is grounded in constructivist principles. This portrait has evolved from over fifteen years of working with teachers, principals, curriculum directors, and teacher educators in designing professional development experiences that have deepened teachers’ understandings of what and how children learn, and scaffolding those understandings to improved practice.

Constructivism has been discussed from multiple perspectives, including philosophical, psychological, social, and educational. These perspectives, of course, overlap when we shape what we do in the day-to-day realities of teaching and learning. The perspective that I bring to this chapter describing the professional development of teachers is that constructivism is a theory of learning that suggests that individuals make meaning of the world through an ongoing interaction between what they already know and believe and what they experience. In other words, learners actively construct knowledge through interactions in the environment as individuals and as members of groups. It is from this understanding of constructivism that I describe how professional development of teachers can be guided by constructivist principles of learning. It is worth noting here that the literature on constructivism has predominantly addressed students in PK-12 settings. An understanding of how teachers learn is critical to substantive and ongoing improvement of instruction in schools. It is with that premise in mind that I offer the following vignettes and related thoughts on the professional development of teachers through a constructivist lens.
TEACHERS CONSTRUCT THEIR OWN UNDERSTANDING THROUGH EXPERIENCES

The underlying principle of constructivism as a theory of learning is that the learner constructs meaning and deep understanding through experience. One might ask why constructing meaning and deep understanding is important. Teachers have available to them an abundance of ready-made lesson plans and scripted materials to guide them through the instructional day. Unfortunately, these ready-made materials do not support teachers in making those in-the-moment instructional moves that scaffold children to deep understanding and insights. Children come to any instructional setting and learning goal at very different places. Teachers must be able to craft instruction through varied pathways that brings every learner into the instructional conversation. This requires both knowledge of content and of related pedagogy. One way to accomplish this is to provide teachers with experiences that provide them with opportunities to explore the relationships between content knowledge and pedagogy.

Immersion and Distancing

One of the cornerstones of professional development initiatives that I have found to be successful is the notion of providing experiences for teachers through immersion and distancing. This simply means that when designing professional development, cofacilitators and I plan experiences that engage, or immerse, participants in some active learning connected to the goals of the professional development initiative. After that immersion, all the participants, including those facilitating the group, step back from the experience, or distance from it, and reflect on how the experience challenged their beliefs and practices. The reflection can be written in a journal and/or shared orally with group members. It is through the process of connecting the experience to currently held beliefs and practices that often leads to a dissonance, or space of discomfort. If teachers feel safe to experience this dissonance, then the way is open for new understandings about content and pedagogy. Let me share a few examples from my professional development work with teachers.

I cofacilitated groups of teachers in rural Southwest Michigan from 1994 to 1996, the Cadre for Authentic Education, who were interested in bringing constructivist principles to their teaching, particularly in the area of math and science. One of the first challenges we had as facilitators was to help the teachers construct an understanding of constructivist pedagogy. We designed a two-week summer immersion experience in which the teachers engaged in exploring the principles of constructivism in the morning and applied their emerging understandings with groups of children enrolled in a math and science summer camp during the morning of the second week. The schedule for this immersion is presented in Table 38.1.

We followed this two-week immersion with monthly meetings and site visits throughout the subsequent school year. We were committed to a professional development design that acknowledged that deep understanding and shifts in teaching can best be accomplished through ongoing immersion within the local context of teaching.

Our summer immersion activities followed principles of constructivist pedagogy by including learning through many modalities: reading and discussing books and articles, viewing videos, presentations by experts in the field, and group learning activities. During the second week, the teachers were immersed through pedagogy. Children from the surrounding school districts came during the morning to participate in learning activities that were planned by the teachers on the basis of the content and pedagogy that was being explored.

Each day of the two-week immersion allowed for ample time for distancing through dialogue, reflection, and journaling. The commitment to distancing was a departure from the prevailing professional development. Teachers often experience a “sit and get” scenario for staff development.
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Monday</th>
<th>Tuesday</th>
<th>Wednesday</th>
<th>Thursday</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8:00 a.m.</td>
<td>Overview</td>
<td>Opening (Administrator’s Day #1)</td>
<td>Opening</td>
<td>Opening</td>
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<tr>
<td>9:30 a.m.</td>
<td>Action Learning Activity</td>
<td>Sharon (Cont.)</td>
<td>Reflection: Self-Assessment and Group Assessment</td>
<td>Feedback: Balloon Activity (Assessment Criteria)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Link Activities Forward”</td>
<td>Links Forward</td>
<td>“Identifying Content As it Relates to Core Curriculum”</td>
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<tr>
<td>11:30 a.m.</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
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<td></td>
<td>View Write: 3 areas: Talk—write</td>
<td>Reading: “The Need for School-based Teacher Reflection”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Read—write Talk 5 minutes Write</td>
<td>Reading: “The Need for School-based Teacher Reflection”</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Table 38.1**

Schedule for **Cadre for Authentic Education Two-Week Summer Immersion**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Monday</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1:00 p.m.</td>
<td>Break</td>
<td>Break</td>
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<td>Break</td>
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<tr>
<td>1:15 p.m.</td>
<td>Constructivism: “Bridges and Transition”</td>
<td>“Problem Posing—Problem Solving: Building Common Understanding”</td>
<td>Reflection: Lunar Activity Assessment</td>
<td>Discussion/Planning</td>
<td>Discussion/Planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:15 p.m.</td>
<td>Days Review</td>
<td>Journaling</td>
<td>Journaling</td>
<td>Journaling</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2:30 p.m.–3:00 p.m. Resource “Library” open for inspection (Optional Activity)</td>
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<tr>
<td>8:00 a.m.</td>
<td>Monday Opening</td>
<td>Tuesday Discussion/Reflection/Planning</td>
<td>Wednesday Discussion/Reflection/Planning</td>
<td>Thursday Administrators Day # 2</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students Attend</td>
<td>Student Activities (Menu Choices)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leaders: Judy Sprague</td>
<td>Leaders: Judy Ball</td>
<td>Leaders: Judy Sprague</td>
<td>Leaders: Judy Ball</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lunar-Based Activity</td>
<td>Drew Isola</td>
<td>Judy Ball Drew Isola</td>
<td>Drew Isola</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Science Options Activities</td>
<td>Science Optionactivities</td>
<td>Math/Science Option Activities</td>
<td>Science Optionactivities</td>
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<td>Lunch</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discussion/Reflection/Planning</td>
<td>Discussion/Reflection/Planning</td>
<td>Deb Ball</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Journaling</td>
<td>Journaling</td>
<td>Assessment Issues</td>
<td></td>
<td>Discussion/ Reflection/ Planning/ Evaluation (off site)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2:30 p.m.</td>
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<td>Finalize first 1994–1995 follow-up meeting</td>
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<td>Journaling</td>
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that has little opportunity for lasting impact in the classroom. Immersion and distancing was an element of our design we were committed to and carried into our meetings with the teachers during the school year following the summer experience.

We asked the participants to create tangible artifacts of their active construction of meaning about constructivist pedagogy in the follow-up sessions during the school year. In one of the structured activities, the facilitators asked participants to share a problematic issue of experience with a peer, discuss how that problematic experience might be addressed, and articulate initial thoughts about an action. This engagement in active construction of meaning about constructivist pedagogy was particularly powerful for the teachers because it acknowledged that shifts in pedagogy are not simple. Teaching is a complex activity that is often structured around deeply embedded routines and practices. Our goal was to bring those routines to the surface, examine them, and reconstruct through dialogue with a trusted peer. Selected examples from the teachers are presented in Table 38.2.

The examples are clear indication that the teachers were grappling with the day-to-day conflicts of existing structures and expectations and their emerging understanding of constructivist pedagogy. The teachers were questioning not only the external demands such as mandated curriculum and assessment, but also their own struggles as they saw teaching and learning from a different perspective than they had in the past.

It is this struggle, perhaps, that best characterizes constructivist professional development. Teachers must be supported and encouraged through meaningful experiences to question their own beliefs and practices. Current professional development does very little to encourage this examination and reflection. As professional development for teachers continues to be closely scrutinized in this era of accountability, perhaps we will see a commitment from school districts and external professional development providers to learning through experience, *immersion,* and reflecting on how that experience should influence practice, *distancing,* as a necessary element of quality professional development.

**Constructing Metaphorical Representations**

It has frequently been said that teachers teach as they have been taught. Teachers come to the profession with deeply embedded mental models of classroom practice that have been shaped over many years as students in schools that have not changed much over time. As a facilitator of teacher learning, I have found it useful to engage teachers in uncovering their tacit, or embedded, belief systems. Teachers must realize what they believe and how those beliefs shape practice. Furthermore, within any professional development initiative that is directed toward changing practice, those embedded belief systems must be altered if enduring changes are to occur.

One of the ways that I have supported teachers in examining their belief systems is by asking them to think about their beliefs and practice through metaphor. Metaphors, expressed through language or physical artifacts, become a medium through which belief systems are challenged and opened to new ways of thinking about how teaching and learning should be. I will illustrate how I have used metaphors in two very different professional development initiatives.

The first example is taken from the Cadre for Authentic Education initiative described in the previous section. Teachers participated in this initiative as a way of bringing a more constructivist orientation to their pedagogy. As part of the two-week summer immersion experience, the teachers constructed mobiles of learning that represented classroom practice as it currently existed in their classroom and also, in contrast, practice from a constructivist perspective. The physical construction from each group was very different, but each mobile clearly represented teaching and learning from two very different sets of principles about classroom organization, curriculum, and instruction. For example, one group represented the traditional classroom as three primary colors;
Reflections on Constructivist Teaching/Learning: The following is a synthesis of participants’ sharings from the activity on selecting a problematic issue of experience, which emerged directly in relationship to changing the teacher “self” and/or their classroom toward a more constructivist orientation. Included are the original problems or issues (in first person) and the shared peer-assisted solutions. In each problem and solution, the underlined areas indicate what each participant identified as constructivist terms, concepts, or language.

### Problematic Issues or Experience

**The squelched creativity of students is an issue for me.** I play a song “Animals Crackers in My Soup,” and asked the 5 & 6 year-olds to act it out. Most of them stood around until I finally stood up and did it with them. They then copied my actions. How do I get little ones to think creatively on their own and in groups? They seem to do well in play.

I have been working on a unit on the solar system. Students are very interested in this. They have willingly researched the planets and reported on them. They have created their own planets, etc. However, the unit has taken too long. I have been told that I should be on rocks and minerals by now. I have to “cover the whole list of outcomes.”

My administrator is “test driven” and very concerned with keeping everyone happy. There are to be no changes with the way things are—status quo is encouraged. I find it difficult to be defending my constructivist approach on a daily basis only because it causes the administration problems with a few parents. The children are happy and enthusiastic. I might add but no classroom visits are made. It could be me! A personality conflict, perhaps. (In which case there maybe no hope!!)

I had 16 groups (4 classes) of kids doing agency. The agency groups had to develop a complete advertising campaign to try to capture a company account. The scaffolding included the psychological and secondary needs of man, ad techniques, analyzing ma., TV, radio, and billable adds. When they worked, I allowed space for the

### Peer-assisted Solution

**As I watch them at play, I could praise the creative thinking as I perceive it.** Later when we have a group activity, I could have them reflect back to the kind of thinking they were doing during play. By helping them to become aware of and feel good about their own ideas, they will be encouraged to be more creative.

I know the students have internalized the information covered in this unit and the ownership they feel. This attitude is a reflection of the “traditional” approach to education. I must gently help those ignorant of constructivism become familiar with it. I will invite them in to experience the enthusiasm of the students and to interact with them. I will probably limit the time spent on the next unit, if really necessary, but try to allow some constructivist activities as well.

I think I might try a 4-part approach. (1) Invite the principal, other staff to visit and help evaluate often. (2) Find reasons to have parents in the room—often. (3) Once a week give an objective test covering the concepts in the subject that week. (4) Have kids journal often about what I saw, what I learned, how I can use it—then share as much as possible with principal and peers (yours). Finally, I’d call Cadre members to vent! Oh, I’d also send parents frequent (weekly) notes about what we’re doing and why. P.S. Been There!—Rubrics (frequent help too. Share rubrics with principal.)

Upon reflection, I would supply the superintendent and principal with an outline or some statement of goals and objectives and a rubric with respect to assessment techniques—prior to performance. This would indicate to the powers to be that while errors were (will be) made, they were those of the students...
groups to take total ownership. Finally, when they presented, the technical end was poor, they didn’t have the things ready, wasted time locating on the tape, etc. Very bad looking to superintendent and principal. How do I allow ownership, yet have quality control.

I have always struggled with using groups (cooperative learning) in my class. Frequently I will find that many of the groups become dysfunctional because of personality clashes and behavioral problems. I have a hard time with the philosophy that all students need to become accepting enough so that they can “get along” with and work with others no matter what. Many times I can’t blame students for refusing to work with certain students since I wouldn’t want to work with them either given their attitude and behavior.

I think I will begin some teaming and trust building so the students will respect each other. I can think of situations where once I got to know, really know some people whose behaviors and attitudes were offensive to me that I understand why those behaviors and attitudes were covers for self-protection. If I can create situation(s) that allow this bonding to happen then it should carry over in the content groups. I might also work on taking the grading pressure and task pressure off of getting the task done with a good grade. Also, I might take the students aside on a regular basis to talk about why they behave as they do, suggesting some of the possibilities until I find the nerve that triggers the behavior. Once it’s out then maybe we can deal with it. Another way might be to look at the number of tasks in the groups so all are important and necessary.

within the constructivist classroom the teacher was seen as the artist’s hand holding a paintbrush and the student’s hand was laid on the artist/teacher’s hand. Another group used a jigsaw puzzle as the organizing theme. In the traditional classroom, all the pieces were disconnected; in the constructivist classroom, all pieces were interlocking and labeled with the following characteristics: (1) unlimited possibilities, (2) adaptation to the situation and the needs of the learner, (3) the possibility of an unfinished puzzle, and (4) no specific pattern. A third group constructed an umbrella and depicted the characteristics of constructivism along each spoke. Another group portrayed their past and evolving belief systems as a tapestry, which wove the tenets of constructivism into traditional theory and practice. The materials, natural and irregular such as ivy and wheat, were representative of children’s natural curiosity. Cheesecloth was representative of the filtering of new ideas. An electronic cable represented the flow of energy through life. Ivy represented new beginnings. The teachers shared their physical metaphors with each other, and the conversation provided the teachers the opportunity to examine and reflect on beliefs and practice.

A second example of how metaphors can be incorporated into a professional development is taken from an initiative funded by a Michigan Department of Education Goals 2000 professional development grant awarded to a consortium of twenty-five districts in an urban area of Southeast Michigan. The purpose of the initiative, Staff Development 2000, was to examine how study groups can serve as a means for teachers and administrators to continue learning throughout their profession. A second purpose was to examine facilitation as a process within professional development.

As a culminating activity at the end of the eighteen-month initiative, the fifteen teachers and administrators who participated in this initiative gathered for a two-day writing retreat for the
The purpose of capturing what we had learned from our experiences as members and facilitators of a study group. One of the ways we captured our learning was through written metaphors that addressed the question What is a study group? As in the metaphorical representations of constructivist practice, the participants were encouraged to uncover their belief systems about study groups and represent their construction of meaning through metaphors. An example of the metaphors about study groups is below.

A study group is the collection of passengers huddled together on the steerage deck of a ship as it steams into New York harbor at the turn of the century. A diverse collection of folks, each bringing a unique set of talents and experiences, coming together for a common purpose. Motivated and willing to do whatever it takes to achieve a common and highly desired goal.

The participants in this initiative had, for the first time, the opportunity to learn in community with others. The metaphor above illustrates how this participant experienced the journey of learning in and about study groups.

In summary, having the opportunity to construct meaning through immersion and distancing and through metaphorical representations of past, present, and evolving belief systems is an important element of professional development grounded in constructivist principles. The second element of constructivist professional development I would like to describe is the importance of learning in community.

TEACHERS LEARN IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

The recent literature on the professional development of teachers has emphasized the importance of community as a context for learning. From a constructivist perspective, theoretical bases for this assumption can be found in the notions of assisted performance, situated cognition, and communities of practice, as well as many others. Building and sustaining a community of practice as a context for professional development has been one of the most important guiding principles that has influenced my work with teachers.

In a community of practice, teachers come together for a specific purpose that is defined by the community. The specific purpose is typically related to critically examining pedagogy. Communities of practice are characterized by three aspects: (1) mutual engagement, (2) engagement negotiated by members of the community, and (3) development of shared repertoire.

Teachers participate in mutual engagement, or activity, that supports learning. The activity becomes the context in which teachers socially construct emerging understanding about teaching and learning. The activity may include reading books and articles, observing the members of the community teach, and examining student artifacts. The mutual engagement can occur at grade levels, in a building, across an entire district, or beyond district boundaries.

The second aspect of community of practice is that the engagement is negotiated by the members of the community. This is particularly noteworthy given the reality in most districts that teachers participate in district-level mandated professional development that is often disconnected from their practice and needs. In a community of practice, the teachers decide the focus of their learning and how they will structure the engagement to support that learning.

Finally, teachers as members of a community of practice develop a shared repertoire. Teachers engage in conversations about their practice, and each other’s practice. They talk about students as also being members of communities of practice. Teachers and students are engaged in the mutually supportive activity recognizable by a shared repertoire.

Teachers have made it very clear to me that learning with others is the most powerful aspect of any given professional development experience, regardless of the content. It is amazing to me that the literature on professional development is so clear on this point, yet policies and practice have not taken this seriously. Teachers for the most part still teach in isolation, with little
opportunity for learning from others. There is hope, however, that this is changing. Before I turn to the future, I would like to describe a few ways in which I, and others with whom I have worked, have structured professional development to support the development of authentic communities of practice.

**Initial Immersion Experiences**

It is critically important to begin any professional development experience with an event that communicates to the participants that they will be engaged as members of a community. If the professional development experience has a clearly demarcated beginning and an end, such as a funded project, then initial and culminating events are appropriate. If the experience is ongoing, such as teachers forming a school community, then the events must be ongoing and authentic.

I have started and ended many grant-funded initiatives with a two-day retreat in a location some distance from where the participants live. A retreat provides the opportunity for intensive immersion and distancing activities, as well as time for conversation and relationship building over meals. From a constructivist perspective, retreat activities must be designed to engage the participants in constructing their initial understanding of the focus of the initiative in the company of and with the assistance of others.

One example of a retreat that was designed from a constructivist perspective was the beginning event for Staff Development 2000, the initiative described above focusing on the exploration of study groups and facilitation. We were fortunate in that the group in this initiative was rather small. Twelve persons joined the group: one principal, two technology coordinators, two staff development coordinators, and seven teachers. My co-facilitators and I wanted to model for the participants ways of facilitation that respected the processes of learning as well as the product. We also wanted to emphasize the importance of trust among group members in a learning community.

Our first activity as an evolving community of learners was a meal, a cornerstone of all community activity. In addition to common mealtime, the retreat activities included generating questions about study groups and facilitation and allowing the participants to address these questions from knowledge and previous experience. Acknowledging where learners are is a foundational principle of a constructivist theory of learning. Posing questions and processing current thinking about those questions provided a starting place for our construction of meaning about study groups and facilitation.

Another powerful activity during the retreat was the Rope Activity, which was designed to build trust and community among the Staff Development 2000 participants. During this activity, the participants were placed in two groups, each with a designated leader. All participants were required to wear blindfolds. Once all had been given blindfolds, the group leaders were taken to another room. The group members were told that they could not speak during the activity, they must hold on with at least one hand to a rope, and they must remain blindfolded throughout the entire activity. The group leaders were also given instructions. They, too, were blindfolded and remained silent throughout. Their task was to guide their respective group members into forming a square while holding onto a rope.

After the groups had accomplished their task of forming a square, everyone removed their blindfolds and shared their thoughts about the experience. Many talked about how they had been uneasy since they could not see and could not talk. Some felt that it was a trick and that others were able to remove their blindfolds. Some were worried they would lose their balance. But, despite the individual feelings of distrust, unease, and discomfort, all responded that the touch of the group leader and the connection to group members through the rope sustained them during the moments of darkness and silence. Many of the participants used the words *trust* and *teamwork* to express the elements of the process. This activity, as well as the entire retreat, was powerful as an initial immersion experience to form community for the SD 2000 participants.
Sustained Engagement of Community Over Time

From a constructivist perspective, the initial forging of community is critical to professional development experiences that will have lasting power for teachers. These initial experiences, however, are useless if they are not followed by sustained engagement. The prevailing professional development venue is a brief, often less than one day, workshop that is unlikely to have any impact on practice. These short workshops are based on a transmission model of learning that suggests if you just give information and tell people what to do, then they will have learned it and applied it as well. As we know, this is not the case for children as learners, nor is it the case for adults as learners. Deep understanding requires deep and sustained engagement. Teachers must have time to grapple with existing belief systems and explore how shifting belief systems translate to practice. Cadre for Authentic Education and Staff Development 2000 both extended over eighteen months and some teachers from both of these initiatives continued to meet beyond the funded initiative. They held regular meetings, either during the day (Cadre) or in the evening (SD 2000) over a school year. In both of these instances, as the year and the initiatives unfolded, the participants identified themselves by a name for their group. The Cadre for Authentic Education group came to call themselves simply “Cadre,” the Staff Development 2000 group came to call themselves the “Thursday Night Group” because our meetings throughout the year were held on Thursday nights.

The point I would like to emphasize here is that in both of these instances, educators from different school districts and highly varied experiences forged a learning community over time. These communities were safe places to take a risk, as all learning involves somewhat of a risk. The Cadre participants attempted new ways of teaching that reflected constructivist principles, and they had the opportunity to share their attempts and what they were learning about constructivist pedagogy during facilitated monthly meetings. They continued to explore pedagogy through reading, videos, and team teaching.

The Thursday Night Group also found the engagement over time to be an essential aspect of their professional development. This group began forging their community during a retreat in August and met twice a month following that retreat. During these monthly meetings they explored study groups as a medium for professional learning with the knowledge that they would be facilitating a study group of their own for the final months of the school year. During the culminating retreat at the end of the initiative, one of the participants commented: “I, well, I guess I really feel, that for the most part, there, there’s something that happened between us all. That we don’t want to lose in some way.”

In summary, community is an important feature of professional development from a constructivist perspective. I have found that it is critical to the success of professional development to provide opportunities for the development of communities of practice, including an intensive initial experience and sustained engagement over time. I now turn to the last principle from a constructivist perspective that I have incorporated into professional development design, providing for intentional assistance.

TEACHERS LEARN THROUGH ASSISTED PERFORMANCE

We all learn with the help of others. Young children take their first steps holding onto the hands of another. Cultures across the world provide examples of how members of society are apprenticed into roles. Novices study with accomplished members of professions. These examples demonstrate that humans learn by watching, doing, and receiving feedback. It is sad to note, however, that mechanisms for providing assistance to practicing teachers are weak, at best, and often nonexistent. Yet we know from the literature that competent assistance in the context of authentic tasks provides powerful opportunities to improve teaching.
One promising development in this arena is emerging in schools across the United States. That is, many schools are identifying accomplished teachers and designating a portion of their time, often full day, to coach teachers in improving pedagogy. In some cases, this practice focuses on entry-year teachers as part of statewide mentoring programs for novice teachers. In other cases, districts have placed literacy and mathematics coaches in buildings to support improved pedagogy in literacy and mathematics.

I am currently involved in a State of Ohio professional development initiative, the Literacy Specialist Project, which began in 2000. Faculty from several universities across Ohio work with groups of literacy specialists, or coaches, who, in turn, work with groups of teachers in their buildings or districts. In my work with the coaches I have been very interested in supporting and examining how coaches provide assistance to teachers. One of the ways we have been able to capture and analyze this process is through taped conversations between teachers and coaches in which they systematically analyze a transcript of a lesson that the teacher had previously taught. The coach-teacher dyads analyze the instruction for evidence of instructional features as well as evidence of how the teacher scaffolds the children toward the instructional goal. An excerpt of one such conversation follows. Susan is the coach; Connie is the teacher. They were analyzing a transcript of a lesson Connie had taught in which the instructional focus was on retelling a story.

Susan: I got the sense that they didn’t know exactly how to go about retelling a story with puppets. Since I wasn’t there, I got the sense that they were doing things with the puppets so they were thinking and therefore engaged at the thinking level with the story, but not at the level you wanted them to be where they actually going to talk ... the purpose of this lesson to engage them in dialogue.

Connie: Exactly, exactly.

Susan: What do you think? Do you have any ideas about how that might?

Connie: I know that my next story, and I already know what I want to do, will be done differently. As I read it to them, I will engage them in the responses of the little red hen, and so when they say “not I” said the cat, “not I” said the dog, we will already begin rehearsing it before we do the retelling.

Susan: So you’re going to use a more predictable book?

Connie: Yes.

Susan: I think that will probably be a good start with them. The other thing I was wondering about is perhaps you might want to consider reading them the story the session before and what do you think about actually modeling the retelling with the stick puppets so they could actually see what a retelling looks like.

In this brief excerpt, we can see that the coach opened with specific feedback and followed with suggestions to the teacher related to what she might do in future lessons to support the children in being more successful in retelling a story.

Transcript analysis is one way in which coaches assist teachers in improving their teaching. Coaches also go into classrooms to model practice, assist teachers in planning lessons incorporating the desired practice, and observe teachers during instruction. This time and labor-intensive professional development is powerful because it is situated in the context of practice. Teachers receive feedback in the moment and can make adjustments in their instruction immediately. The teacher has multiple opportunities to make sense out of the interaction with the coach in nonthreatening and supportive ways.

So, to summarize these thoughts on professional development from a constructivist perspective, I would suggest that the teachers as learners must be central to the design of professional development. We must first acknowledge teachers are learners, and provide ample and meaningful experiences through which they can construct their own understanding of the content of the professional development. Second, building communities of practice is critical for teachers to continue to learn throughout their professional career. Participants in every professional development effort I have facilitated emphasize the importance of learning with others. Finally,
opportunity to situate the learning in practice through expert assistance is fundamental. Other professions have recognized this goal and have embedded those opportunities within the career cycle. Why should teachers, who in many respects represent the future in what our children will become, be denied that same opportunity? We know how to create these experiences. The challenge is to structure schools so that they can be.

TERMS FOR READERS

**Assisted Performance**—What a learner, child or adult, can accomplish with the support of more capable others; of the environment; and of objects, or tools, in the environment. That point at which the learner can successfully accomplish a task, whether it be physical or cognitive, is identified at the zone of proximal development. Assisted performance, then, is teaching within the zone of proximal development.

**Community of Practice**—Persons who come together for a specific purpose that is defined by mutual engagement. The mutual engagement is what defines the community. For a group of teachers who have come together for professional development, the mutual engagement is learning and professional growth. The second aspect of community of practice is joint engagement negotiated among the members. The third aspect of community of practice is the development of a shared repertoire. (see Wenger (1998) for further descriptions)

**Constructivism**—A theory of learning that draws from philosophical, psychological, and social origins that posits that persons create (construct) their own understandings of the world through an interaction between what they know and believe and with what they come into contact. Some theorists have emphasized the individual interacting with the environment as the source for knowledge construction. Other theorists have emphasized the importance of those encounters occurring in social settings. The fundamental point of agreement, however, is that the learner is engaged in the active construction of knowledge.

**Distancing**—Reflecting on an experience for the purpose of making connections to one’s context and practice. From a constructivist perspective, distancing from an experience provides the opportunity to actively construct knowledge and shape beliefs through that experience.

**Immersion**—Deep and substantive engagement in some activity or experience that is connected to a learning goal. Immersion can take many forms: reading a text, viewing a video, teaching a lesson, or constructing a physical representation of classroom practice are but a few examples.

FURTHER READING


