

Professional Engagement

Professional engagement is an often, under-appreciated aspect of professional learning (or PD), required for educators to grow in their work. Other aspects of professional learning, including mastery of skills, application of theory, and refreshers on fundamental knowledge are all important, but less effective if engagement is compromised.

Engagement, a measure of how invested an educator is in all aspects of their work, is sometimes a derivative of skill building but mostly precedes it. Analogous to a baseball player who isn't happy with the team they are playing for, going for extra batting practice. Sometimes integrity alone will allow the player to maximize their learning but more often they will reach maximum learning saturation too early, without absorbing the full benefit of the skills.

Optimal learning for any type of professional development is a dynamic process that takes many factors into consideration such as their level of resistance (natural byproduct of forces for sameness and change), the way the information is presented, and how much volition the educator has about this new material. To maximize learning, educators also need to address the natural barriers which manifest over time, that interfere with autonomy, creativity, and enjoyment of one's work. If all of this is attended to, engagement will be greater.

Engagement as a byproduct of one's innate motivation or organic commitment to one's work is the foundation of this perspective however there are three planes of resistance we want to consider. Personal impediments will dilute an educator's investment in their work as one plane. Systemic influences can also be barriers, such as relationships with administration and the polarization between unions and school leadership is the second. The final set of barriers, are found in societal influences, such as district, state, and federal mandates.

To help educators successfully navigate these three planes of resistance, we must consider them in and around any training we provide. For instance, challenges with students, parents, and faculty is fairly evident but seldom addressed in formal PD. Internal barriers involving antiquated methods of motivating or disciplining students, a lack of fulfillment arising from the absence of professional challenges, and personal issues that bleed over into work, all need tending to as well.

We seldom have insight into the barriers to engagement, reducing the likelihood we address them before, during, or between learning opportunities. Administrators may assume that teachers are working in field because they want to make a difference and therefore are ready at all times to partake in learning experiences. We do the same with students, expecting them to learn in spite of the issues they face inside and outside of school. Aside from a referral to the guidance counselor, we generally consider it outside our purview to do anything different. But just as a student's learning is impacted by stress in their lives so too is a teacher's teaching by stress in their lives.

The love of teaching versus the act of teaching is an important distinction to consider when appreciating the need for professional engagement. The love of teaching is the intrinsic satisfaction educators' gain from developing young minds. The act of teaching is the process of facilitating learning including the implementation of lesson plans, many of which are generated out of content they are expected to teach.

Professional engagement, further broken down into enrichment, awareness, and experimentation, can become part of any skill building experience or it can be a stand along training. The key is determining where an educator is in their level of readiness and their resistance to new learning. Affording this type of training when the majority of funds go towards preparing for common core and other institutional imperatives, is the big challenge.

If we look however to two large recent studies done on professional development, one by the Gates Foundation and the other by The New Teacher Project (TNTP), we learn that what we are doing is not working. In the last decade, two federally funded experimental studies of sustained, content-focused and job-embedded professional development have found that these interventions did not result in long-lasting, significant changes in teacher practice or student outcomes. Only about 40 percent reported that most of their professional development activities were a good use of their time.

Furthermore, no set of specific development strategies resulted in widespread teacher improvement on its own. The studies did say however that there are still clear next steps school systems can take to more effectively help their teachers. Much of this work involves creating the conditions that foster growth, not finding quick-fix professional development solutions. This supports the premise that professional engagement may not be receiving the attention it deserves.

An important consideration being missed, likely responsible for the study results, is that in order for any professional engagement training to be effective, meaning impactful and sustainable, it needs to be based in part on the paradoxical theory of change. This is a psychological theory (Gestalt) that helps us appreciate a couple of basic premises. The first is that awareness of what is, is necessary to appreciate before trying to make something different.

For example, if a student isn't behaving well and we apply a certain technique or strategy, we may not get a desirable long- term result if we don't know where the behavior is coming from. If a child isn't listening because they are upset about something going on at home, and we simply employ a disciplinary tactic we learn in traditional training, we could see short term change while exacerbating the problem. We tend toward this approach in western society, exemplified by using medications to treat 'symptoms' as opposed to exploring the etiology of issues.

An appreciation of organizational and systemic issue exploration is closely tied into recognition of employees as the most valuable human resource. Keeping in mind that the most successful organizations are ones that can scan their environment, make meaning of data, and then successfully execute changes, will look toward their employees as a consistent barometer for organizational health.

Schools as institutions lag behind for-profit companies when it comes to valuing their faculty, appreciating how their individual needs must be balanced against the organizational ones. Professional investment balanced with personal enrichment is the optimal integration of growth/development needed to keep systems in balance and organizations running smoothly.

In the past, this type of training related to individual health, relationships, and management, has been referred to as 'soft skills', perhaps because it's the lubricant for the main objective of academic learning. Moving forward, we want to remember that this type of work is not immediate and it doesn't fit into existing models that advocate quick hitting solutions. Thus, when a teacher invariably asks, "How is this training going to help me on Monday". The answer may be, "how about something that helps you on Saturday, Sunday, and Monday".

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