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Why Change?

Old ideas and processes must be tossed aside so that new ones can be learned. Often, getting rid of the old idea is just as difficult as learning the new ones.

—Kurt Lewin

"You've been teaching here for five years. . . It is time for review. You're at a key juncture. Because of your superior teaching, I am going to recommend your advancement to Merit Level II. However, before I do that, I want us to review your file and determine how much you have improved over these last five years."

Those were the words of my department chair. When I was first hired to teach English at New Trier East, Mary Ida was a colleague. Now, she was my boss. In the review that followed, we had weekly conversations. The process she used, dictated by our teacher's union contract but colored by her rigor, reviewed the annual observations of my classroom work, my committee work, and other parts of my school life. Mary Ida, being the stickler she was, focused our dialogues on what I was doing to change for the better.

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In the following years, while I had many other “reviews,” none impacted my teaching so deeply as that first review. “Teaching,” she taught me, “is about change. If you are not striving to change the minds and hearts of your students, you are not teaching well. To have any significant impact on what and how students learn, it is essential that you yourself change for the better. If you don’t, they won’t.”

Mary Ida’s thoughts stayed with me in the years that followed. They influenced my own quest to improve my teaching so that my students could improve their learning. “Change is,” as Mary Ida would repeat, “a lifelong quest that begins with each teacher’s inherent drive to teach each student as well as possible.”

DOES DEVELOPMENT ALWAYS MEAN CHANGE?

At first glance, it may seem redundant to talk about professional development and change in the same breath. Is it not obvious that any act labeled “development” is about change? Is it not understood that all teachers participate in professional development so that they can change for the better?

The answer to these questions is “no” and “yes.” First, consider the “no” side. If social studies teachers take a graduate course to better understand the causes of the Revolutionary War, they end their study with a test of knowledge. The final exam finishes the study. The notes are packed away and the course credits recorded in the personnel office. Individuals can then decide if they will use the new knowledge in their classes. They may adjust a specific unit or integrate some new acquired facts in a lesson. Or, they may simply store the knowledge away for another day, take their earned credits or points, and teach the original course syllabus without any change. Is new knowledge acquired? Yes. Transfer to the classroom? No. In the context of professional

development *for change*, there is no *change* when teachers acquire new material, but elect not to transfer it into the courses they teach.

The answer turns to a “yes” on both sides when teachers transform new knowledge and skills gained from a course, workshop, or learning project into classroom lessons or materials. To assist this transformation, teachers’ professional development must require much more than the acquisition of new knowledge. Gathering new knowledge or developing new skills are only the first elements of any learning experience that will contribute to the transfer of what the teachers actually learn in order for their students to understand well what they are learning.

IS INFORMATION ENOUGH?

For centuries, educators have considered learning as a mere information transfer activity. One person with more knowledge passes it on to others with less knowledge. The master carpenter passes his skills to the apprentice. The university scholar fills the minds of his students.

Even today, the medieval “pass-it-on” model dominates most academic disciplines. The professor researcher spends three decades in the Antarctica studying the role of krill in the food chain. He returns to the university once a year to lecture undergraduates in Marine Biology 101. The professor of education surveys the history of education for her graduate students. She passes important names and movements that have impacted American education into their notebooks and exam papers. From all appearances, “the sit and git” model, which psychologist Carl Rogers lampooned almost a half century ago as “process akin to pouring a gallon of water into an empty jug,” thrives on teacher talk.

So deeply ingrained is this “tell us the information” phenomenon that students demand it even in a discipline such as mathematics. “My students get angry when I don’t lecture on the problems that are examples of a concept I am teaching.

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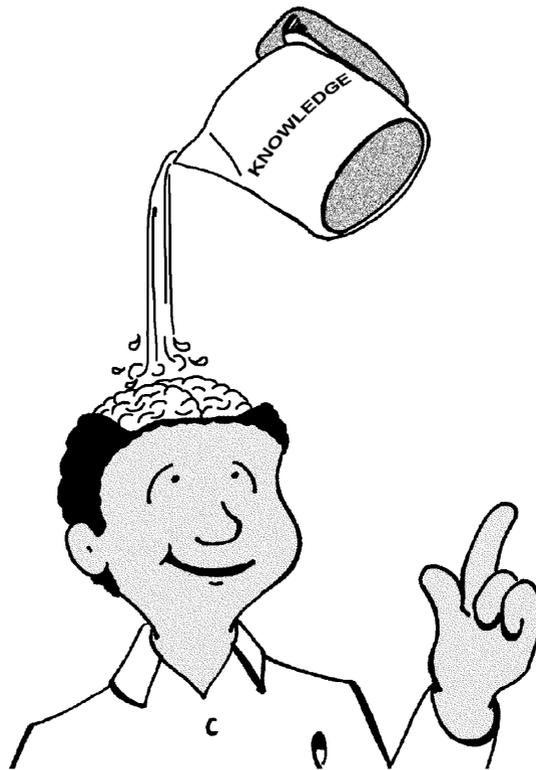
They want to write the solution down step-by-step. Here I am with these doctoral candidates and they still just want the facts," lamented a professor of theoretical mathematics.

In spite of what Marzano and colleagues' (2001) meta-analysis of "what works" in the classroom and what adult learning researchers say, the pour it in syndrome also thrives in professional development workshops, and in graduate courses as well. The main difference? It looks as if the number of days required to earn the credits is the only variable that distinguishes graduate course work from professional development workshops.

Wherever the professional development of teachers follows the centuries-old model of direct information transmission from "expert" to "novice," the most significant change is the amount of information in the individual's brain. Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers, in their landmark study conducted in 1983, noted that less than 10 percent of the information transmitted via lecture alone had any impact on true learning in the classroom. They went so far as to report that the addition of a demonstration had no more effect than the lecture alone. Change still happened in the smallest percentages. However, when teachers were engaged by coaches, especially their peers, in carefully structured investigations—based on peer observation, feedback, and revision of lesson plans that *used* the original information—almost 90 percent of the participants made significant changes in how and what they taught. Thus, in the Joyce and Shower's study, a change in practice happens when other factors are added that facilitate the transmission of passive information into instructional action.

MOVING TOWARD PURPOSEFUL CHANGE

How does a significant change *process* play out in professional development? In its simplest and often most powerful form, change works best as a collegial effort that focuses the learners on how they will actually improve their instructions by transferring static information into action. This change does



"That's about enough for today."

not rely on the assumption that information is enough. It anticipates that change occurs via a purposeful, collaborative process that begins with the sharing of new information, new ideas, new skills or new beliefs, but continues on.

Consider, for example, six high school teachers who were faced with two dilemmas: obtaining their recertification and using new knowledge. First, it was time for their recertification requirement to end. All needed at least three credits. Second, they all taught American history. In the districts' new U.S. history syllabus, they were required to cover the Vietnam War, yet none had ever completed course work that included

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this conflict. After meeting with the assistant principal, who was also in charge of professional development, the teachers presented a plan based on the teacher-contract for a 45-hour course titled "The Vietnam War: Causes and Results."

The assistant principal rejected their proposal. He turned down the syllabus because it called for forty-five hours of seatwork. He suggested the teachers use the 75-hour prospectus that the union had recently agreed to as an alternative approach to recertification. He explained what it would entail: two research papers by each of the six; each paper had to cover a different aspect of the war and had to come from different resources, one of which could be the course's professor. Each paper would earn the equivalent of fifteen hours of seat time. After analyzing and discussing each other's work, they would create a one-week syllabus for their American history classes.

All would teach the syllabus and all would observe at least two of their peers in action. Following the observations, they would share what they had seen and heard and discuss what each might do differently. Next, all would write papers summarizing what they had learned and how they felt the students would gain. Finally, they would share these papers.

These teachers were asked to experience professional development as both a change process and a result. Not only would they acquire new information and deepen their understanding of the causes of war, they would analyze the information to see how it best fit into their courses, plan their course modifications, and assess the impact of the changes on themselves and their students. Thus, they experienced a learning process that required them to use what they learned. Although not using "pure" Joyce and Showers, these six teachers made valid transfer of the elements needed to move from a course that emphasized information gathering to a professional development model that helped them put the information into classroom practice and transform their teaching efforts. And, they earned their hours!

INTENTIONAL TRANSFER IS A MUST

Professional development is a significant change process when the transfer of learning from abstract information to classroom practice is intentional. Such a change does not occur simply because teachers acquire new information, no matter what the means is by which they gather it. The change occurs when teachers have the support systems that carry them through the phases of learning in which they make sense of that information and then integrate their new understandings into classroom lessons.

SUMMARY POINTS

1. Professional development guides teachers through a change process that should culminate in a transfer of learning. Neither the change nor the transfer will be easy.
2. Transfer of learning requires a support system provided to best ensure that new ideas become new actions.
3. During the transfer process, teachers' learning experiences pass through three phases: information gathering, making sense of new concepts, and integrating new understandings into classroom practice.