Pathways
Pathways
Charting a Course for Professional Learning

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HEINEMANN
Portsmouth, NH
To the children and adults who spend their days in school.
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Chapter 4

A Framework for Professional Learning

If you tell them, they’ll watch your lips move. If you show them, they’ll want to do it themselves.

—Maria Montessori

Guiding Questions

What opportunities can I find to see as well as hear about new effective instructional strategies?
What opportunities can we arrange that provide time to think and reflect about new effective instructional strategies and practice in classrooms as well as the whole school?
How can I explore and try out new ideas in real-life teaching situations?
What do I teach that I love to do?
What do I ask my students to do that I would resist doing myself?
Why would I resist it?
What do I wish I could do better?
What support, such as opportunities to see models and/or opportunities for discussion, would help me stretch beyond this limitation?

Principles of best practice instruction for children (as defined by the teachers embarked on new learning) will be embedded, whether implicitly or explicitly, in an effective instructional framework for adults. For instance, using gradual release of responsibility as a model for instruction and cognitive strategies that support thinking and learning, everyone understands the road they will follow. Teachers have multiple
opportunities to see instructional demonstrations, practice with guidance, and reflect and respond. Optional side trips and rest stops will appear along the way, but the main path remains visible. Teachers know from the beginning that independent practice, or application, is their desired destination.

As a staff developer and as a teacher, I regularly ask myself three guiding questions to determine what I am going to do:

1. How can I show, as well as describe, what I am trying to convey?
2. How can I provide opportunities for everyone to think and reflect about what it means for the individual teacher/learner?
3. How can I support application of learning to real-life situations?

**Modeling**

What I learned from my mentor: . . . model, model, model.

—Carrie Symons’ reflection on learning to be an effective teacher

After providing background content and context; articulating purpose, need, and expectations; and getting to know a little about each other, I provide multiple ways for teachers to see and experience what has been promised: actual pictures and models of what “it” looks like when the teaching and learning goals are achieved.

**Demonstration Lessons and Co-teaching**

**Description:** A tightly focused, purposefully planned session that provides an opportunity for teachers to see a particular instructional strategy, usually in the context of their own classroom or school.

**Purpose:** Demonstration lessons observed by a group of teachers provide common ground for a facilitated discussion on specific instructional strategies and their impact on student learning. Demonstration lessons also play a key introductory role. They quickly establish credibility and trust between
coaches and teachers by showing teachers that the coach is willing to put herself on the line and work with their students in the actual setting.

Most powerfully, demonstrations show what is possible with the same students the teacher works with in his classroom. Ellin Keene, a master of demonstration lessons, advises, “The emphasis that is crucial in the demonstration lessons is the rigor, pushing the students’ thinking, by constantly saying, in effect, ‘What else? What else? What else?’” With that emphasis in her mind, Ellin’s demonstration of children’s capacity to think and learn expands everyone’s view of what students might achieve.

**Structures and Logistics:** Demonstration lessons can range from pure theatre in which one or more teachers watch someone else teach, to a model of total teacher participation. In any case, teachers must be actively engaged as participant observers.

The most effective structure for a demonstration lesson includes the teachers in the planning so they learn about the thinking underlying the instructional activity and behavior. They can also then contribute to building the lesson to fit their students’ knowledge and needs. Planning for demonstration lessons includes a carefully articulated focus for both adult and student learning as well as specific replicable instructional behaviors and strategies that will be shown (see Figure 4–1).

During the demonstration, the purpose is teacher learning through focused observation and discussion. To this end, the demonstrator may pause during a lesson, ask the students to excuse the interruption, and address the observing teachers to help them:

- See the behavior and strategies. *Example:* “What I am doing right now is showing . . .”
- Name what might be noticed in the students’ responses. *Example:* “Do you see how they . . . ?”
- Raise questions to consider for subsequent discussions. *Example:* “What do you think . . . ?”

*Pathways*
Planning Demonstration Lessons

Instructional Focus:
• For Teacher
• For Student(s)

Instructional Strategy to Be Demonstrated:

Scaffold/Structures/Activities:

Questions to Explore:

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Figure 4–1: Planning Demonstration Lessons
• Suggest a new focal point for the observation. Example: “I’m noticing . . . and I’d be interested in exploring . . . ”

These focusing prompts also provide reference points for note taking and for the debrief conversation after the observation.

Demonstration lessons can vary in terms of teacher participation. Once I have established a working relationship with teachers, I begin co-teaching with them rather than demonstrating while they just watch. At first, I may lead the teaching and welcome teacher contributions to the discussion. Then the teacher and I may model a discussion of our thinking about a text. As the relationship grows, it becomes natural to play off each other in the teaching time, asking questions, challenging opinions, and providing feedback.

Eventually, I plan demonstration lessons as integral parts of ongoing projects or units, with teacher follow-through, rather than isolated demonstrations of discrete aspects of instruction. Along with demonstrations of specific strategies for teaching and learning, the building of knowledge and skills is made visible through demonstrations of lessons in context.

Facilitation: What are often called demonstration lessons are actually a sequence of learning events of which classroom teaching demonstration is one central part. The focused thinking, wondering, and connecting that occurs in discussion around that central part are the pieces that lead to implementation and understanding. Reflection and discussion around actual classroom work are the heart and soul of substantive staff development.

A facilitator for this discussion can help point out what occurred, what students were doing, and the significant details of the demonstrating teacher’s strategies. This arrangement helps to formalize the experience with a purposeful focus. Recognizing limitations inherent in facilitating a debrief of one’s own demonstration lesson, when there are two staff developers working together in a school, one
may teach the lesson while the other facilitates the observation and debrief.

In a debrief session with teachers after the demonstration lesson, the discussion can help participating teachers to:

- Identify what learning occurred for the students. Examples: “Every student was able to look at the page they read in the textbook as it connected to the whole chapter as well as at text structure clues for specific information.” “All students refined their questions to give purpose to their reading.” “They synthesized the information by putting it in their own words with double-column note taking.”
- Explore what worked well and what we might change next time. Examples: “The students appeared confused when they were left to complete the organizer on their own.” “Next time, look at the organizer again with students to make sure the steps and sequencing is clear.” “Clearly state the expectation that the organizer is to help them hold the information for their own use.” “Let students work in groups with teacher support when needed.”
- Commit to plans for follow-up and then prepare for the next demonstration. Examples: “Teacher will continue using the prereading strategies with another kind of nonfiction text following the same steps.” “The next demonstration lesson will help them choose and plan for text structures they will use to report their information.”

See Figure 4–2 for a simple structure to guide the thinking for the debrief of a demonstration.

In an effort to maximize learning, various formats and structures to sequence a demonstration lesson study are useful. A predetermined gradual release of responsibility to the teacher has three cycles:

1. Plan, demonstrate with teacher observing, debrief, plan
2. Co-teach, debrief, plan
3. Demonstrate with staff developer observing teacher, debrief, plan
Debrief of Demonstration Lesson

What learning occurred for the students?

What worked well and what would you do differently next time?

Plans for follow-up and next demonstration lesson.

Reflect on your own learning . . .

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Figure 4–2: Debrief of Demonstration Lesson
Mariah Dickson, director of high school initiatives at PEBC, added further steps to the debrief and follow-up:

1. Plan with teachers
2. Teach the lesson with teachers observing
3. Debrief using a structured conversation to look at student work
4. Plan for follow-up based on what they saw in student work
5. Teacher follows up in classroom
6. Staff developer teaches another demonstration lesson

Demonstration lessons, especially in the beginning, are by nature limited in scope to clearly illustrate a particular focus requested by the classroom teacher. Repeated opportunities for demonstration lessons and debrief sessions provide the building blocks for an increasing body of skills and knowledge for effective instruction.

**Independent Application:** When demonstration lessons are successful and seen as valuable, teachers may want to continue in this first observing phase of the gradual release model where they see someone else teach. They often say how valuable it is to “just watch another person.” Taking that next step to the guided practice phase is crucial to finding one’s own particular way of fully integrating new practice into ongoing classroom practice. A clearly delineated plan supports genuine collaboration (see Figure 4–3).

At Aspen Creek, two sixth-grade teachers, Lisa Turner and Deanne Davies, agreed to set aside the weeks between Thanksgiving and winter break to work as a team in establishing authentic writer’s workshop structures in their respective classrooms. We met three times to plan with the support of both the district literacy coach and the school literacy specialist. We wanted to create a model that incorporated all mandates, required assessments, and available resources.

With clear goals for student writing, we alternated the role of lead teacher. I modeled new strategies and key aspects for
Planning to Co-Teach

Goal:

Skills:

Content:

Genre/Text/Type of Inquiry:

Purpose:

Instructional Sequence:

Culminating Product:

Assessment:


Figure 4–3: *Planning to Co-Teach*
developing a community of writers in the classroom. Through one-on-one conferences with students, small group discussions on the writing process, and students’ continual sharing of their writing, we tracked skill acquisition and application as well as motivation and engagement, and continually revised our plans.

Deanne and Lisa were able to concentrate on internalizing the essential systems, structures, and understandings so that when they moved on to the next unit of writing instruction, they continued using the same approach—now on their own.

Observations in Other Teachers’ Classrooms

Journal Entry from Sarah Ballard, First Grade

February 27, 2003
Thursday

Today the visitors came again. They are watching us write. And read. They watch my teacher listen to students. They walk around the room. And see how we are doing. They have notebooks. They write in their notebooks.

Yearlong Labs

Description: Facilitated group observations of an exemplary teacher in her own classroom at another school on two or more occasions over a period of time from one week to a year.

Purpose: Labs offer teachers an opportunity to see what an instructional model provides for students over time. They can experience the atmosphere of the classroom and witness progress and struggles firsthand in authentic situations. Ample opportunity is provided to discuss what has been observed and the implications for participants’ own school settings. Teachers can then identify specific aspects of the instructional model that they want to incorporate into their own work. Ideally, teachers attend with at least one colleague so that when they are back in their own schools, there is support to implement and share their learning.
Labs often present a particular instructional focus—a strategy such as for reading comprehension or a structure such as writer’s workshop. The focus may also be in a content area or in a process for exploring content such as research on a topic of the Civil War. In secondary schools, where students spend their day with a whole team of teachers, the lab may take place in each individual classroom during a day or the teacher may demonstrate integration of subject and skill such as literacy in content areas.

Labs also provide possibilities for differentiated learning for participants. Each participant can observe and synthesize at his level of understanding. New teachers usually focus on one aspect such as classroom organization or the steps for a particular strategy. They must have the opportunity to ask all their questions and sift through everything to determine and develop the strategies and structures they will use. Experienced teachers can quickly identify ideas, strategies, and structures to add to their repertoire. Jan Nichols is a highly respected teacher at Douglas Elementary School in Boulder, Colorado, but after a lab in Lavonne Bird’s classroom at Heatherwood Elementary School she completely rearranged her classroom furniture as well as core aspects of her teaching routines. In her final reflection, she wrote, “I have been invited to think about my teaching in a whole new way and with a different perspective. I want children to grow up to be wonderful thinkers and lovers of knowledge and learning. This lab experience has allowed me to gain knowledge and tools to implement this new practice in a meaningful way for my second graders.”

Labs provide a vision of a learning environment and instructional practice to which teachers can strive. Excerpts from a letter that Carrie Symons (who later became a lab teacher herself) wrote to Patrick Allen after her first lab experience in his classroom illustrate the practical breadth and depth of learning that can come from seeing an idea implemented.
January 10, 2001

Dear Patrick,

After the first day of this lab, I walked away exhilarated by the possibilities that await me as a teacher. . . . Here is some of what I observed:

- Critical pedagogical components such as literacy, reading comprehension, writing, critical thinking, problem solving, and community building are neatly woven together in your reader’s and writer’s workshops.
- Your sense of community reveals itself in class discussions, in the way students choose partners with ease, in the way that they listen to one another and make choices to stay focused on what is being learned and taught.
- You have created a space in which it is safe to ask questions and seek answers.
- Your students have stamina for long periods of reading and writing.
- You are the model for your behavioral expectations.

Now it is up to me to come to terms with what I’ve seen. I have questions. . . . It’s not going to look like your classroom and it shouldn’t. But can mine be as successful as yours? Can I teach it as well as you can?

It takes courage to grow. It takes courage to fail. And it takes time to craft the art of teaching the way you have, Patrick.

Thank you for opening the doors to your classroom. Now I am convinced that teaching is art.

Sincerely,

Carrie Symons

I have heard more than one teacher say, “I want to be a Carole Quinby.” When I ask, “What about Carole Quinby do you like?” they first respond with concrete details of her teaching expertise such as the arrangements in the physical environment. Jahnell Periera, seventh-grade language arts teacher at Prairie Middle School, recalled, “I remember the environment in Carole Quinby’s classroom, the books are everywhere
and easily accessible to the students. I ran out and got books so there will be tons of books for years to come in the language arts classroom. I want to organize them the way Carole did—like a little library so the students learn how to find what they want.”

The specific environment and classroom arrangements as seen in the context of concrete examples of Carole’s practice are made more meaningful when observers are aware that her every action is infused with a deep love and respect for the children’s capacity.

**Structures and Logistics:** A minimum of three to four visits per year, although there have been labs that were offered once a month for a whole year or for two days in a one-week time frame.

The quality of the experience for visiting teachers relies primarily on the demonstrating lab teacher’s skill and capacity. A profile of an effective lab teacher would include certain aspects of experience, understanding, disposition, and ability:

- depth of experience in what is to be demonstrated
- well-developed understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of the instructional approach and strategies
- disposition for continually wondering and striving for further learning
- ability to teach children and also articulate the process to adults

Labs are most successful for participants when the classroom teacher explicitly describes:

- long-term goals
- specific strategies to meet those goals
- general information about the students’ needs and strengths
- ongoing questions, challenges, adjustments, and adaptations
Sometimes observers don't realize all the thought and detailed planning that precede what they saw occur between the teacher and students. In order to make this visible to observers, the facilitator and lab teacher are in close contact before the lab to discuss the instructional focus, what the teacher is planning to do and hoping to accomplish. In some situations, especially with a first-time lab teacher, the facilitator may offer support to the teacher in developing plans for the lessons to be observed. It is crucial that observing teachers take note not only of the teaching but also know the thinking and planning behind it.

When I first worked as a facilitator in Carrie Symons' fifth-grade lab classroom, she and I communicated via email and by phone as well as in person for at least two weeks before the actual lab. She wrote to me with her initial thinking about the students’ needs, and we discussed what we thought would be helpful for the participants to see. Her emails offered a glimpse into the big picture she uses to develop plans that both meet the needs of her students and provide a demonstration of teaching strategies and approaches.

I’ll be heading into synthesis, using *Encounter* by Jane Yolen. I’ll also be using other texts to supplement that have different perspectives of Columbus.

For the social studies content standard—Point of View—I want students to understand that history is simply stories written from a variety of perspectives.

In addition, we’ll be working on writing two-paragraph book reviews for self-selected texts and hitting some necessary Colorado State Assessment Performance skills such as summarizing, pulling out characters, main events. And then include a persuasive paragraph about whether or not the reader liked the book and why. Would they recommend it?

For writing, I was also thinking of using Jane Yolen as a mentor author, looking at her craft. But my overall goal is to have them write a persuasive essay on whether or not Christopher Columbus was a villain or a hero.
So that’s the overall plan. Can you help me figure out what to do when?

Thanks so much,

Carrie

From this initial communication, Carrie and I continued an email, phone, and coffee shop conversation refining the focus and articulating the purpose of what students would learn and observers would see—synthesis and persuasive writing. After we had worked together a few times and she had completed her first year of opening up her classroom for labs and visits, she figured out her own steps for planning and only occasionally asked for further support in clarifying and developing her ideas.

**Facilitation**

Before the observation, participants arrive early enough so the following can occur:

1. Participants walk around the room and note the physical environment, arrangements of furniture, wall charts, displays of student work, book and materials organization, etc.
2. At the first meeting, participants share prior experience/background knowledge related to the day’s observation. At subsequent meetings, participants share what they have tried in their classrooms and/or what they have been thinking about or wondering since the last observation.
3. Participants respond to the question When you leave today, what would you like to have learned?
4. Participants articulate current questions or challenges.
5. The teacher describes what he will be doing that day—goals for students’ learning and understanding, background of students and what they have been working on in the classroom; current question or challenges.
6. The teacher provides preliminary answers to questions that participants have posed.
7. The group pauses before students arrive.

**During the Observation**

Teacher-participants observe and take notes on what they see. Taking notes provides an important record of observations and thinking for later discussion and reflection as well as for future reference. To scaffold and record thoughts along with observing, double-entry columns are a useful way to organize notes. Participants record scripted observations in the left column—what happened, what was said—and in the right column they record thinking, questions, reactions, or other thoughts directed toward a particular focus such as connections to one’s own practice, inferred beliefs underlying the teacher’s choice of activity, or a response to the lab teacher’s focus question.

If we are observing for a whole morning, I offer an option of debriefing in the hallway at the midway point as a chance to get everyone’s initial burning thoughts expressed. Individuals are also encouraged to go into the hallway if they have thoughts or questions to address at any point during the observation. Setting clear boundaries to the silent observer role protects the integrity of the classroom and the children’s experience while also respecting each adult learner’s individual learning style.

**After the Observation**

Nearly all teachers report that their most powerful learning occurs during collegial discussion after an observation, with an initial focus on:

- learning that occurred for students;
- explicit strategies the teacher used; and
- how the teacher’s intentions were carried out.

Immediately following the observation, participants take a few minutes to look over their entries, noting what they particularly want to discuss or question as well as ideas related to the focus the facilitator has identified for them.
Since labs include more than one session and participants’ needs change with each subsequent observation, I have developed a sequence that scaffolds thinking to construct increasingly meaningful understanding and new ideas. The following model is designed for four sessions but could be adapted.

When possible, write these headings on a piece of chart paper and record participants’ items of discussion so they can see their thinking.

**Session One:** The purpose is to help participants begin to develop a schema within which to hold the details of the instructional activities they have observed. These discussions are structured so that each person is given a chance to respond (see Figure 4–4).

1. Describe one thing you saw and/or heard.
2. What threads or commonalities do you see through these descriptions?
3. What questions do you have?
4. Ask questions of the lab teacher and listen to her thinking about what occurred.
5. What will you try in your classroom? What will you continue to ponder?

**Session Two:** The purpose is to help participants see beyond methods and activities to the underlying thinking and beliefs that are at the core of making the instruction effective. I use a sequence that Sam Bennett developed (see Figure 4–5 on page 64).

1. Describe briefly one thing you saw or heard.
2. Share a favorite moment.
3. List all teaching strategies used.
4. Choose one strategy to look at in more depth. Discuss why this is more than a “tip or trick,” more than just another activity.
5. Talk about the belief(s) underlying the use of this strategy.
6. What are you thinking about for your own practice? What new idea will you try or explore?
**Observation Debrief I**

Purpose is to help participants begin to develop a schema within which to hold the details of the instructional activities that they have observed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observation</th>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Threads</th>
<th>Application</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>


Figure 4–4: *Record Responses to Debrief Questions on a Chart*
Observation Debrief II

Purpose is to help participants see beyond methods and activities to the underlying thinking and beliefs that are at the core of making the instruction effective.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observation</th>
<th>Favorite Moment</th>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Belief</th>
<th>Application</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>


Figure 4–5: Record Responses to Debrief Questions on a Chart
Session Three: The purpose is to focus on student learning and performance as a source of information to inform instruction.

1. Use a structure or protocol to look at student work, preferably a sample from a lesson that was observed.
2. What will you try in your classroom or school building? What might you share with colleagues?

Session Four: The purpose is to identify implications for practice and continued exploration—to solidify the application of learning. At the end, the facilitator asks the essential questions that ensure follow-through and application and teachers respond in writing as well as verbally (see Figure 4–6).

In-house labs

Description: Labs offered by teachers to colleagues in their own building. Teachers open their classrooms for formalized observations with a particular instructional focus. This kind of sharing can occur when there is at least a minimal level of trust among faculty members.

Purpose: In some schools, teachers with particular skills provide demonstrations on a regular basis over a period of time and thus help the school community build momentum and independently sustain change. At other schools, when teachers discover something new or after they have attended a lab at another school, they may invite colleagues to see what they are doing and thus spread the benefit of the learning. This is a highly collegial activity that guides teachers to learn from each other, not necessarily to show perfection or expertise, but rather as an invitation to colleagues to join in exploring best practice for the students. In-house labs can build, or build on, a relationship of learning from each other. They can consist of one teacher observing another or a whole group finding the time to observe together.

Structure: Careful and sensitive facilitation and support is especially crucial for teachers offering a demonstration for their own colleagues. It is helpful to follow the same formal
Final Reflection

The purpose of this final reflection is to identify new thinking and changes in practice that have occurred as a result of the lab experience.

What new thinking about teaching will you carry back with you to your classroom?

What will you do differently with your students?

How will you share this new thinking and practice with colleagues?


Figure 4–6: Written and Verbal Responses to These Essential Questions Can Also Serve as An Evaluation of the Learning Experience
structure as for either demonstration lessons or out-of-school labs. To ensure that observing teachers are aware of the planning, watch a demonstration and debrief them as soon after the lesson as is possible. A clear structure that aims feedback at what can be learned rather than evaluating the teacher or the students is most helpful. Or, a colleague or coach might offer to help the lab teacher plan or even to co-teach to minimize exposure to initial judgment as norms for these observations become established.

In-house labs can serve many purposes. Anne Goudvis asks experienced teachers to offer in-house labs as a way to introduce new teachers to particular instructional strategies or approaches. When Anne and I began our first year as staff developers at Aspen Creek, some of the teachers had already worked with PEBC in previous buildings and had been using their learning in the classroom. The administrators arranged for teams of teachers to be released from the classroom and Debbie Deem, the literacy specialist, provided support for the brave volunteer lab teachers in their planning. After each one-hour observation, teams debriefed and planned with Debbie, Anne, and I for how they would use what they had learned in their observations.

At the beginning of the last year with PEBC staff development, teachers at Foster Elementary decided to organize their own demonstration lessons for each other as a way to independently sustain their ongoing growth as professionals. Teachers volunteered to demonstrate in their classrooms, and a schedule was organized that didn’t call for substitute teachers, but took place during planning time and lunch breaks, so everyone could participate. After the first round of observations, they learned that a formalized facilitated debrief with time specifically set aside was critical to getting the most learning out of the experience, both for the demonstrating teacher and for observers.

After two years of intensive conversation and coaching, science teacher Jeff Cazier and language arts teacher Tim
Reyes opened their classrooms at Prairie Middle School to colleagues. They did this, not with the idea that they were experts showing what should be done but rather with a clearly stated offer to show others what they were discovering and accomplishing with their students. Twelve teachers chose to meet during their planning time as well as before and after school in order to observe and talk.

Sam Bennett and I provided formal facilitation for a thirty-minute prebrief before school started, for ninety-minute observations offered in both morning and afternoon classes, and for the forty-five-minute debrief after school. Structures used for regular labs were adapted to the shorter time frame for these in-house labs. The common observations allowed for a collegial discussion about what is most important in teaching the children, and what the participants, as teachers, could do to ensure motivation and possibilities for success.

The willingness of teachers to risk demonstrating for colleagues requires that a coach or partner ensures a level of trust and safety through sensitive facilitation, clear structures, and preparation. The willingness of observing teachers to learn from colleagues also requires a level of trust and a common assumption about the value and benefit of continual and mutual learning. This sets a precedent for collaborative learning and team building that helps sustain an instructional approach within the school communities.

One-Time School Visits

**Description:** A team, or even the whole school faculty, leaves the home building for a one-time visit to another classroom or school where particular elements of instructional practice can be seen and experienced.

**Purpose:** Getting out of the building together often helps groups of teachers think more openly about possibilities. This can help them clarify, expand, and even build a picture of where they are going. The collective experience serves as an anchor for subsequent discussions and reflections about cur-
rent practice and possibilities. While the visits are most often to see exemplary models of instructional practice, visits can be made to see individual teachers or teams of teachers or whole faculties who are involved in a focus that is of interest to another particular school faculty. Through seeing the process in developmental steps as well as seeing the reality of achievement, visitors learn how to meet their goals.

**Structures and Logistics:** The process usually starts with a conversation between the principal, a group of teachers and (whenever applicable) a coach or staff developer to identify what would be most valuable to see at another school. It is crucial to have someone designated as a facilitator for the visit—for the initial contacts and arrangements, observations, and discussion afterward. When the population, grade level, or school context is very different from the visitor’s situation, a facilitator is especially needed to help visitors see the essential elements and strategies that transfer to their situation. A district coach, teacher-leader, or administrator can fulfill this role.

Many schools use district inservice days for these visits and then, in the afternoon, everyone returns to school or meets for lunch to debrief and discuss implications for their school and practice. The rest of the structure is similar to that of a regular lab, with discussion and focus before the observation, a full debrief after, and perhaps more immediate emphasis on the implications for practice and change both in individual classrooms and in the whole school.

School visits help teachers see how all the various pieces eventually come together. After a couple of months of demonstration lessons and faculty inservices at Witt Elementary School, the teachers were struggling to understand where they were going. With an inservice day approaching, a visit to provide a concrete experience seemed like a good idea. A large group of teachers visited classrooms at Foster Elementary School, which is in the same district but in a very different neighborhood. Several teachers, who were familiar with the
history of Foster from years past, were immediately struck that the school was different than they expected.

With a facilitator for each grade-level group, the visitors observed in classrooms. At first, they hurriedly wrote down ideas for creating classroom environments and showing student work, such as charts of children’s thinking and displays of student writing as well as math work, all illuminated by white holiday lights along fifth–sixth-grade teacher Mary Young’s walls.

Walking out of a classroom, sixth-grade teacher Leon Vasquez whispered to me, “Now we know it isn’t just pie in the sky. It can be done.” After listening to teachers at Foster relate their stories of challenges and successes, the Witt teachers knew that their struggles did not mean they were doomed. Comments followed such as, “If they can do it with their students, we can certainly do it with our students.” “I want our school to feel like this.” They discussed what was possible for them individually and in teams, what this vision could do for their students and for the school community as a whole.

When I arrived one morning a week after the visit, Leon ran up to me, “I have a new religion!” he exclaimed. I looked at him warily, expecting he had found a new focus or program that wouldn’t leave time for our work together. “Math notebooks,” he whispered. In the fifth–sixth-grade classroom at Foster, he had seen students using math notebooks to explain their thinking and record their learning. When he brought this idea into his classroom, his students were immediately excited to be in regular dialogue on an individual basis with their teacher. This communication motivated them to work more systematically on their math lessons. Leon was excited because he had ongoing assessment of the students’ understanding to inform his teaching. His excitement spread to other teachers, who also began to effectively use math journals with their students.
Practice: Learning from Experience

“My learning curve is like a rocket, a straight line up.”

—Susan McIver, teacher,
Little Elementary School

Susan McIver, a first-grade teacher, has been a model of the willingness to continually and actively dive into deep waters in order to learn. She has steadily refined and extended her teaching practice as a Title One teacher by working with other classroom teachers in trying new methods by exploring new ways of reading and writing for herself, and most recently, as a lab teacher by presenting in front of others in her own classroom. It is in taking the leap into practice, with background knowledge built from observations, reading, and conversation that the most dramatic shifts and jumps in understanding occur.

For teachers, there are two primary ways to practice new instructional strategies.

Teacher as Student

It is through our own experience in reading—using these strategies very consciously at times—that we internalize and are able to teach them. (Keene and Zimmermann 1997)

Patrick Allen, a PEBC staff developer and lab teacher, once related his experience as a swim instructor during his adolescent years when he realized that to teach children how to swim, he couldn’t stay on the side of the pool telling them about it. He had to get in the water with them, and model fearlessness by showing them exactly how to do the strokes most effectively. And he had to know how to do the correct strokes in order to teach them.

Since many teachers did not have positive experiences as students themselves, it is crucial that they have new experiences to reverse their negative feelings lest they unintentionally but implicitly convey those to students. Susan McIver recalls that as a beginning reader, “The teacher told me to
look at the pictures and always, ‘Sound it out! Sound it out!’ I was an average reader, not a struggler, never enjoyed it because it was always so hard, but I forced myself.” In order to teach comprehension strategies to her students, she says, “I had to figure out the strategies for myself and how I used them because I couldn’t teach unless I understood it myself. Now I just go crazy if I don’t have a plan for the next book I’m going to read.” Susan’s new picture of teaching and learning, her passion for books, and for reading and writing, permeate the environment and conversation in her classroom.

Jackie Hockney, a seventh-grade language arts teacher at Base Line Middle School and once-reluctant writer, agreed to write her own short stories as models for her students as part of a writer’s workshop. With inspiration from *The World’s Shortest Stories* (Moss 1998) ideas for complete stories started coming to her at all times of the day. She happily shared her poetic outpourings with her students. Her joy and satisfaction in writing down all her ideas and having a place for her complex imagination bubbled over in her lessons. She modeled every aspect of the writing process, including how to receive feedback without, as one student worried, having her “feelings hurt,” but rather considering the responses of the readers. Her students shared her joy and many of them also began getting ideas at all times of the day. Their interest in and motivation to hone their skills grew as they became excited about what they could express through writing. As teachers, we should be aware of our own struggles with learning, and share our success in overcoming barriers with students.

**Practice in the Classroom**

At some point, it is time to dive in and try new ideas in the classroom—so there is actual change where it counts. Some teachers may prefer to try new practice on their own, while others will ask for the support of co-teaching with someone who has experience—a staff developer, coach, or fellow teacher.
When teachers start trying out new strategies on their own, they identify and develop their individual styles, preferences, and understanding. They can see what questions arise and what is hard for them to do successfully. Ideally, they gain satisfaction of increased impact on student learning.

After co-teaching with Deanne Davies and Lisa Turner in their sixth-grade language arts classes at Aspen Creek K–8, I was anxious to see what they would do independently the following year. Would they move to the phase of independent practice and application?

Lisa took a position as a literacy resource teacher with a clear vision of what she wanted to bring to that role and to the classrooms in which she would be working. Anne Goudvis and I supported her in planning for work with students and with teachers throughout the year. In this role and with the trust and knowledge of each other that had developed the previous year, we helped her introduce concepts and activities.

Deanne began her year with a classroom structure based on elements of writer’s workshop from the previous year’s experience. When she told me about how her first weeks were going, her eyes gleamed with excitement. The students were absorbed in their writing and she was teaching them needed skills to create satisfactory narratives and reports within a context of choice and high standards. She was able to use sequences and structures we had developed together, along with Lisa, Debbie, and Caroline, the year before. Whenever we talked about the challenges she still faced, I would say, “Do you want me to come in?” She would often reply, “I don’t want to take all your time and I think I can do it on my own.” All she still asked was that I be available to discuss ideas and questions. Deanne found a way to continually push the edges of her own practice; she has since become a lab teacher, opening her classroom to visitors from other schools, able to speak eloquently of her purpose, goals, and strategies for guiding students in becoming engaged skillful readers and writers.
When trying new methods and approaches together, teams or the whole faculty can provide each other with both moral and material support while also building their capacity for collaboration. Whenever I see a great teacher, I see a person who loves to do what she is asking or offering the students. Helping teachers find excitement and joy in reading, writing, math, science, or research through learning skills and finding personal meaning means opening the door to their own possibilities for greatness.
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