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Beginning a Professional Development Journey

The first word, “ah” blossoms into all others.

—Kuhai

EVOCATION 1

In his *New York Times* review of Steven Pinker’s book *The Stuff of Thought: Languages as a Window Into Human Nature*, William Saletan (2007) summarizes one of Pinker’s key points. He writes that “. . . creativity and reality-testing has taken us far beyond other animals and can take us farther. The next step is to dump our most natural and mistaken metaphor—education as a filling of empty minds—and recognize that we learn by extrapolating, testing, modifying, and recombining mental models of the world” (p. 14). In this book, we seek to create opportunities for you to experience firsthand a framework for thinking, teaching, and learning along with numerous sample-supporting strategies. Our aim is for you then to test these experiences in your own classroom, modify and extrapolate as you build, and rebuild mental models of teacher-learning practices.

Note: Why we begin with the word *evocation* will become clear as you work through the first few chapters. Once you understand how we are using evocation here, you will agree that it would be impossible for us not to use it right from the very beginning.

In this first chapter, we will share our philosophy of professional development; we hope as well to join you in a co-equal and collaborative partnership aimed at prolonging the ongoing global conversation among educators about how best to serve our children's educational needs in the 21st century. Whether you are an inservice, preservice, or other educator, we take as given your commitment to ongoing professional development as part of our shared journey toward instructional excellence. This chapter will offer a description of a professional development model and outline what will be required of you to take full advantage of the process. You will be encouraged to keep a journal of your learning experiences, as it is an extremely important part of the learning process and is one means by which you will observe the building and rebuilding of your own mental models of teaching and professional practices.

Throughout this Professional Development Sequence (PDS) you will be asked to engage in a variety of writing-for-thinking tasks. Each will be explained, and in most instances, you will write in your journal. The writings have two purposes, as does much of what you will do throughout the text. The first purpose is to engage in writing as part of a firsthand learning experience. The second is to provide a tool for stepping back to observe yourself as a learner. In doing this, try to gauge in some way how the writing tasks facilitate your own learning. Attempt to operate at both levels throughout the text, as you will be asked in the final chapter on writing whether and how your writing experiences impacted your learning.

OUTCOME EXPECTATIONS

At the end of this chapter, you should

- be aware of the underlying assumptions of the authors regarding professional development,
- understand the professional development model proposed here and what your role is in the learning process,
- have a writing journal in hand with some early entries,
- be aware of the link to critical thinking underscoring the model proposed here, and
- be engaged fully as a partner in this professional development and change process.

EVOCATION 2

Throughout the text, you will be guided to engage in specific activities. These activities are indicated by the lighthouse image in the margin. The first activity follows and asks you to first think about a topic related to thinking and learning, then asks you to share your thoughts. This pattern will be repeated throughout the text.

Let's begin by thinking about your view of the ideal classroom. It is best to do this with your eyes closed, so read on to understand the type of image you are seeking to envision, then close your eyes and bring your image to the fore. When you begin to create your image, do so in a way that



enables you to create a detailed vision. Think for a moment about how your ideal classroom looks: the sunlight through the windows, the desk or table arrangement, colors, and sounds. Picture the resources available around the room. Now, imagine how you and your students interact, the kinds of interactions you have with students, and the interactions among students. Imagine how your instruction unfolds and how your students respond. There may be other elements to your vision. Think about this until you have a clear image, clear enough for you to describe the setting along with the interactions and the teaching-learning process under way. You need take only a minute or so. Now, close your eyes and imagine until your image is clear.

RULES FOR FREEWRITING

Freewriting is a brainstorming procedure. When freewriting, begin with a fresh sheet of paper and an open mind, and follow these few basic rules.

1. Set a time limit, five or seven minutes, let's say, and write the entire time. Do not stop writing. If ideas stop flowing momentarily, doodle or write something like, "I can't think what to say right now," or "I'm stuck for now." Soon enough new ideas will come.
2. Write whatever comes to mind. Do not edit as you write. Ideas that come to mind should find their way to the paper.
3. Do not worry about spelling or punctuation. The writing must be legible, interpretable; that's all.

When your image is clear, if you are with other teachers, turn and share your vision with a partner. If you are alone, take a moment to capture your vision on paper with a quick freewrite. When you are finished, hold those images in your mind's eye, as we will return to them from time to time as you progress through this professional development journey you have joined. You may want to write your thoughts as your initial entry in your own professional development journal. We encourage keeping such a journal as it serves to chronicle changes in your thinking and your practice over time.

THE CHANGE PROCESS

Learning itself is a change process, so it is not so surprising that our profession is constantly entertaining ideas of change and growth. It is important to monitor these various changes to be certain they are in the best interest of our students. The final test of any educational change idea is always how it plays out in the classroom. How students react, their learning progress, and the satisfaction teachers have in their work and with their classroom environment are the final determinants of successful instructional change. For this PDS, we have been listening to teachers' reactions and collecting their comments for many years.

Linda, one of our colleagues, is a sixth-grade teacher. We listened to her comments during one of the monthly meetings of teachers participating in a districtwide professional development opportunity. "What most surprised me was how much my sixth graders think about things," Linda said to her fellow teachers

gathered around the table in a small discussion group. "It was a total surprise so many would have strong opinions on anything, but there we were discussing topics I never dreamed we could speak about, and my kids were taking stands on issues. I am really surprised! When I left our last meeting, I took my skepticism with me, thinking there was no way my kids were going to be 'engaged' in dialogue about important topics. Now, I am here to tell my kids were great; they were thoughtful, and they notice more than we think about their world. They have great ideas. I think we just think their opinions do not matter or that they don't have any when they really do!" Matilda, sitting to her left, smiled, silently nodding her agreement.

Like so many great teachers, Linda has been teaching for years and knows her craft well, yet she eagerly volunteered to participate in the district professional development experience. Her motivation? Simply to continue to develop her teaching skills and remain informed. Linda is not about to abandon wholesale what she believes about teaching and what she knows works well and is best for her students. She is also not about to miss an opportunity to serve them better and grow professionally in the process. She always arrived at meetings full of news of the work going on in her classroom. She openly shared the good with the not so good. This day she acknowledged her discovery that sixth-grade students are critical thinkers with ideas and opinions to share. Her students, she discovered, have strong views, hold to ideas, ideals, and beliefs, and willingly offer to others. Matilda teaches second grade. Her motivation is much the same as Linda, but Matilda is quiet. To understand her, you must look for subtle signs: a head nod, a smile, a slightly furrowed brow, or raised eyebrow. When she nodded toward Linda, it was Matilda shouting that her experience with her second graders was similar.

Patrick Shannon (1989, 2007) cautioned about the "de-skilling" of teachers. His concern was that "bureaucratically" developed instructional text, such as basal readers, reduced classroom teachers' role to a mere clerical function. He noted that the political and organizational response to concerns about student performance on standardized tests resulted primarily in reductions in teacher responsibility and choice along with the imposition of routines in order to standardize instruction. By controlling input (teaching), it was thought output (student test performance) would somehow be dependable and predictable. By relying on "expert authors" to develop what amount to routinized instructional texts, outputs would include increased performance on standardized measures. This simplistic formula has yet to live up to its promise, yet in many districts, the illusion that there exists a single simple "remedy" for low student achievement drives instructional design (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). Our teacher, Linda, as you could probably predict, was not about to become a clerk. She knew, as almost all good teachers do, that student performance is primarily a function of teacher instructional practices, classroom interactions, and teacher decision making.

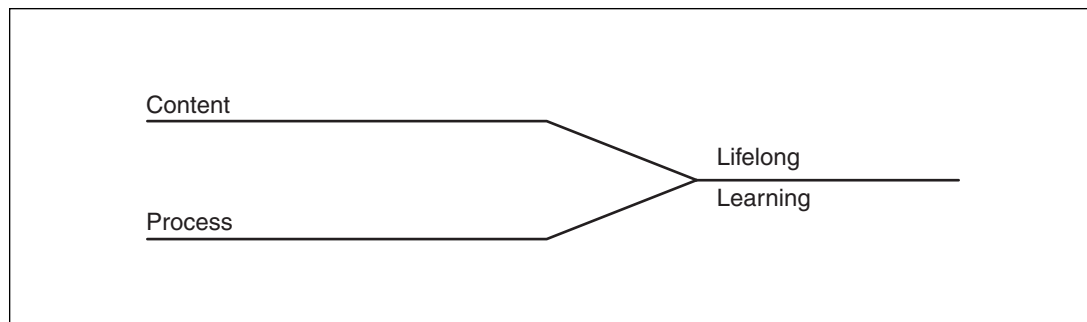
You are about to embark on a professional development journey. There are many approaches to teachers' continuing professional development, and each one operates from a set of assumptions, beliefs, and expectations. For many, these are implied but not made explicit. Here, we will attempt to lay some assumptions on the table so you will know and understand the basis for your experience. We will attempt to make transparent the beliefs about teaching and learning upon which this experience is constructed. We will also clarify expectations by describing the change process as it is applied here, how the PDS is delivered, and the role you will have in this professional development process.

ABOUT THIS TEXT

You have already learned that this text is written for use in several types of settings and with several audiences. The content of the text includes a discussion of an instructional change process that began in the United States and was eventually implemented successfully in over 30 countries and with well over 75,000 teachers (Meredith, 2002; Klooster, Steele, & Bloem, 2002). The instructional change model begins with a framework based on sound, well-documented instructional theories of practice (Steele, 2001). The framework acts as an umbrella under which an array of practical instructional strategies is organized. The framework guides the instructional process, leading students from a pre-awareness level through genuine and thoughtful encounters with academic content, resulting in genuine learning experiences—the kind that enable practical applications of content and thorough understandings that facilitate critical thought and the creative reordering of knowledge.

The instructional model we are encouraging cannot simply be discussed. The model advocates that learning occur at two levels simultaneously: *process* and *content*. (See Figure 1.1.) *Process* refers to the means and procedures by which information is introduced to a learner and the steps the learner takes to take ownership of content, making it personal, practical, applicable, and accessible within multiple contexts.

Figure 1.1 Learning on Two Levels



Content represents the ideas, information, and concepts, the nitty-gritty, to which learners are exposed both formally and informally. Content includes both the intended information and material developed purposively for instruction and considered to represent the intended curricular content and the content that emerges through dialogue within the learning community, what Eisner (2002) called the operational curriculum. Content also includes the prior knowledge relevant to curricular content held by learners at the outset of instruction. In this text, content and process will be presented on parallel tracks, as they are intrinsically linked. While reading the text, remain cognizant of the content and process connection and be actively experiencing both during the various model lessons. As a participant, you will be both a student of that particular content and a student of pedagogy, interested in the instructional process as it unfolds. Engaging as a learner allows you to experience and understand how your students will learn when you apply the teaching-learning approaches with them.

As suggested in this text, instructional practices will be modeled then described. This is most often accomplished in an inservice context but can be accomplished through text if we agree to be partners in this process and work together. It requires your commitment to active participation in the various guided strategies that make up the preponderance of the text. We believe strongly that learning is an active, involved, and demanding process. Yet learning is also personal, driven primarily by seeking answers to your own questions, connecting what you know to new and perhaps different or conflicting knowledge, and engaging in experiences that create a larger, richer universe of understandings and possibilities. This text will lead readers through an experiential learning sequence to both model and inform an instructional framework and companion strategies that, in aggregate, define a way of thinking about, organizing, and implementing instruction. Rather than as separate subjects, the model defines reading, writing, speaking, and listening as tools for learning across grade levels and content areas. Consequently, the model framework offered here, though literacy based, is intended for application across content areas.

As will become evident, we place high value on learning communities and believe in the power of dialogue and shared experiences as a way to facilitate discovery and long-term learning (Yangchen, 2009). We encourage critical inquiry and spirited discourse. In life, it is essential that we ask hard questions, seek solutions to our most vexing problems, and attempt to resolve our most intractable dilemmas in order to move forward to better ways of thinking and living. So too must we encourage academic communities to address their most pressing issues.

ASSUMPTIONS, VALUES, AND BELIEFS

Students need to tell each other and the world what they know—in order to find out what they know. Through the telling, they will learn. Through the telling, they will interpret the world as they see it to the rest of us.

—Judith Renyi

As we have suggested, this PDS experience is best described as literacy based in that it employs reading, writing, speaking, listening, and thinking as tools for learning across all content areas. There is tacit acknowledgment that the central component of learning is language based, social, and centered on the mediated construction of meaning between, say, an author (teacher) and learner. Relying on the work of Rosenblatt (1978) and many others, teachers and students will be actively engaged in the social act of creating and sustaining dynamic learning communities where responsibility for teaching and learning is shared. Often, the proclamation of a literacy-based PDS centered on reading and writing alarms content teachers, concerned they may be expected to become reading teachers. This professional development construct does *not* suggest this and encourages content teachers to remain focused on content and determine how best to apply the framework and strategies constructively and creatively to that content.

The premise here is that effective content teaching involves grounding instruction in the effective application of the framework and strategies so students gain not only specific factual information but also working knowledge of content. In other words, students will be able to reforge information into resources for problem

solving, for practical or creative application, independent analysis, or opinion formation. Alfred North Whitehead (1957) wrote in *Aims of Education* something about what to avoid in higher education that now seems to apply to all of education today. He said, “So far as the mere imparting of information is concerned, no university has had any justification for existence since the popularization of printing in the fifteenth century” (p. 138–139). What he deplored, of course, was the idea that teaching or learning is somehow complete with the sharing of facts. We agree and view learning as the process whereby we develop agency, in the way Maxine Greene (1994) speaks of agency as the capacity to act with knowledge in ways that utilize knowledge to advance our own constructive purposes.

Content knowledge, then, is compressed into two symbiotic elements or attributes. The first comprises the vocabulary, concepts, and information base on which the content area is defined and constructs itself as a quasi-identifiable entity. The second element contains the language and thinking skills necessary to successfully understand, assign meaning, manipulate, judge, create, and apply. In other words, content must come to us, to borrow a word from the tech world, bundled. That is, for content to be made meaningful and lasting, it needs to be packaged and presented with a process that leads to an increased capacity for learners to connect to the knowledge encountered and make it useful as an agent for advancement. When this is not accomplished, there is overwhelming evidence that long-term learning is less likely to occur. Here we seek to provide the means for bundling content, if you will, to make the outcome of study not simply the acquisition of information but the development of informed thinkers and doers.

In the book *The Discoverers* (1983), David Boorstin wrote, “The greatest obstacle to discovering the shape of the earth, the continents, and the oceans was not ignorance but the illusion of knowledge” (p. 86). In the final analysis, our students will join a global culture. They will be confronted by new technologies, a continuing information explosion, unprecedented cross-cultural global encounters, unimagined career paths and skill expectations that will demand both a sound information base and advanced independent thinking and learning skills. Preparing young people adequately for this reality requires an educational experience rich with opportunities to reconceptualize knowledge to accommodate heretofore unforeseen demands, new discoveries.

EXPECTATIONS

We begin with the basic assumption that most teachers are engaged in teaching at a highly professional level and are typically applying instructional strategies believed to be effective methods for teaching and learning. This PDS begins with the idea that most participating teachers do not need to radically alter their teaching, nor should they consider tossing out those approaches they know to be effective. Rather, we are building on a foundation of solid instructional practice. To be sure, this PDS represents a change process. There are clear expectations that teaching practices will change. What is anticipated is that instruction will evolve as a cogent, comprehensive, and systematic activity that addresses the fundamental needs of today’s learners and raises their learning horizons.

Thomas Szasz (1974) wrote, “Every act of conscious learning requires a willingness to suffer injury to one’s self-esteem. That is why young children, before they are aware of their own self-importance, learn so easily” (p. 18). Change is threatening because it

is fraught with personal risk and uncertainty. Yet we are asking you to take these risks. The instructional model requires students to be active, engaged, and co-responsible for their learning; so too does the PDS you have now joined. Best results demand you be fully engaged with your learning community and in the experiential components offered. Your contribution is vital to your development and to your learning community. Your thoughts, opinions, experiences are all essential content. The good news is that many colleagues have already completed this process, and they suggest the risk is minimal while the rewards are great.

THE ROLE OF CRITICAL THOUGHT

There is reason to believe one of the highest goals we have for our students is for them to develop the skills of critical thought and with them the capacity to apply their knowledge and experiences to solve the vexing problems facing humanity. And vexing problems there are. In an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (June, 2009) McArthur and Sachs suggest that “. . . the world faces many . . . challenges that will require concerted and highly skilled policy efforts in coming years. Those interwoven challenges include the mitigation of climate change, the control of emerging diseases, the reduction of extreme poverty, the development of new and sustainable energy sources, and the sustainable management of water and food systems” (p. 64). If we agree that teaching students to think critically is essential, then it must be introduced into teaching practice systematically (Zelina, 1994). It cannot be assumed that students will come to thinking critically naturally. It is also not enough to simply make critical thinking a part of the content of the curriculum. We have learned that critical thinking does not occur by teaching, say, “the seven steps to critical thinking” or other prescriptions for thoughtful behavior. It comes when students are first modeled critical-thinking processes, guided to think critically themselves, and then given time to do so. Thinking is a process similar to reading, writing, speaking, and listening. It is an active, coordinated, complex procedure, involving thought about something. Critical thinking is best learned by experiencing thought as a way of approaching content—that is, as something that is part of and an expected outcome of the daily curriculum. Research concerning critical thinking and learning suggests that a model focusing on teaching isolated skills and fact learning minimizes critical thinking. One group of researchers (Brown, Palincsar, & Armbruster, 1984) argued that learning skills separate from real-world tasks and purposes may allow students to do well on an objective test but leave them unable to apply those skills in new situations. The reality of high-stakes testing and satisfying multiple stakeholders dictates that critical thinking come packaged with content mastery. What we do know is that we learn and remember better that which we think about and link to our own contextual frames. Throughout this text, thinking will be incorporated with reading, writing, speaking, and listening for learning.

OUTCOME EXPECTATIONS

General

Successful professional development sets target outcomes and goals so participants understand where they are headed and are clear when they have



arrived. Setting target goals is not always as simple as it sounds. This particular PDS seeks to facilitate change by guiding readers through an orchestrated change process. However, the outcomes will vary from one reader to the next as settings and practices differ. Furthermore, in a collaborative model, dictating specific outcomes in advance removes from participants the power to set individual and group outcomes. We prefer to see the process as one of “unfolding design,” a phrase coined some years ago by a colleague, Brian Shirley, responsible for professional development for schools in Augusta County, Virginia. That is, we have a set of outcome expectations but encourage readers to set personal outcome expectations and modify them as needed in response to individual professional development progress and the subsequent reality of changing goals as a result of working in learning communities.

Stop Now. In your journal take 5 to 10 minutes to think about and then write your own set of target outcomes for your work with this text. Some are listed below, but we suspect you have goals of your own that will help you measure the success of your work.

Some expectations for participants are that you will do the following:

1. Increase the capacity of students to think critically, engage in critical reflection, take responsibility for their own learning, and form independent opinions
2. Successfully apply practical methods of teaching based on philosophically consistent and theoretically sound ideas, which fully engage students in the learning process
3. Teach within a comprehensive instructional framework that guides instructional decision making and reflects the true value and purpose for lessons and context
4. Experience increasing confidence in your own teaching based on successful implementation of the framework and strategies in your own educational setting and content
5. Become master teachers, able to serve as instructional models and resource people within your own professional setting

CHAPTER REFLECTION

In this chapter, we discussed the need for continuing professional development. We also disclosed our philosophy of professional development as supportive of a practical yet theoretically sound model that thrives best within a partnership where all partners are active and fully engaged. We began by detailing some basic assumptions and beliefs that underscore the model implemented here. Those include the notion that whether you are an inservice or preservice teacher, you have a commitment to professional service. For inservice teachers, the basic assumption is that your professional practice is already highly skilled, yet you retain an appreciation for the importance of ongoing professional development. We have made a commitment to offering a pragmatic, experience-based PDS readily implementable in your classrooms with the intention of improving student learning. This chapter also offered discussion on the importance of critical thinking.

Finally, with journal in hand and your image of an ideal classroom in mind, dive in. The succeeding chapters will engage you in learning activities at both content and process levels. Be prepared to think on both levels.

JOURNAL ENTRY

At this point, you may have some questions about this chapter, your role, how the process will unfold, or something else you are wondering about. Before you turn to Chapter 2, ask yourself if you have any questions at this point, and write down any that come to mind.

