

Learning Teams for Professional Development—Why? (January 2001) By Judy Arter

Open just about any issue of the *Journal of Staff Development* or the *Phi Delta Kappan* and you'll run into an article about the value of collaborative learning teams in professional development. You'll likely see statements like "It's not enough to have facilitation skills; staff development doesn't get done unless groups work together" (*Journal of Staff Development*, Vol. 20[4]: 2).

Because collaborative learning teams are the professional development option stressed by ATI and the Trainers' 'Net'work for learning about classroom assessment, we want to provide an update on the rationale for this approach.

Although workshops, individual study, and learning teams are all viable professional development options under certain circumstances, there is considerable agreement that the use of collaborative group work and learning is the most powerful mechanism for developing the "professional learning communities" needed to support on-going school improvement (e.g., Evans and Mohr, 1999; Garmston, 1999; Johnson and Johnson, 1999; and Putnam and Borko, 2000).

Change requires doing things differently in the classroom. As Putnam and Borko (2000) put it, "for teachers to be successful in constructing new roles they need opportunities to participate in a professional community that discusses new teacher materials and strategies and that supports the risk taking and struggle entailed in transforming practice" (p. 8). In fact, in several studies, teachers cite the opportunity to collaborate as the most important factor in instituting change (e.g., Bay, et al, 1999). There is also research evidence that learning in groups significantly improves learning and that, although structures for group work vary widely, all are more effective than learning alone (Korthagen and Kessels, 1999; and Springer, et al , 1999c).

Think about the last time that you, the reader, learned a complex body of knowledge and/or skills that resulted in a real change in ability, application, or performance. What were the features of the learning environment that facilitated this learning? If you are like most others, you probably cited some subset of the following.

- *Clear goals.* The material to be learned was clearly framed—you were able to see where you were headed.
- *Self-assessment and reflection.* You were able to monitor progress toward your learning goal(s). This enabled you to feel a sense of accomplishment as you grew. You were in control. You also had a chance to reflect on and articulate issues, concerns, and learning.
- *Relevance.* New ideas or skills directly related to your needs. If theory was provided it assisted to help organize and extend your current knowledge and experience in ways relevant to your current needs.
- *Pacing.* Learning began with your current understanding and proceeded at a rate comfortable for you.

- *Helpfulness.* The new information or skills resulted in effects that were immediately obvious. If your learning topic had to do with teaching, the new information or skills quickly delivered benefits in student motivation, student learning, saving you time, and/or increasing your confidence.
- *Practice.* You had the opportunity to practice with new ideas or skills in a relatively risk-free environment. It felt safe to stretch.
- *Collaboration.* Working with others helped to deepen and refine your understanding and application.
- *Flexibility/efficiency.* Learning occurred in a way that fit easily into a diverse and busy schedule.
- *Long-term.* You had an extended time to learn and practice.

Not surprisingly, these are also the features generally cited in the literature on professional development that really result in change (Bay, et al, 1999; Darling-Hammond, 1999; Evans and Mohr, 1999; Guskey, 1999; Korthagen and Kessels, 1999; and Sparks and Hirsh, 1999) Researchers cite the need for “situated learning” (Korthagen and Kessels, 1999; National Staff Development Council, 1995; and Putnam and Borko, 2000) in which concrete experiences and needs provide hooks on which to hang theory.

How does this apply to learning about classroom assessment? First, there is much consensus right now that for reform efforts to succeed, professional development must focus on topics needed to implement standards-based classrooms—understanding standards (being really clear on what students need to know and be able to do), being skillful with instructional methodologies that best promote learning, and assessment that provides information on the extent to which instruction has been successful. Professional development must focus directly on learners and learning (e.g., Sparks and Hirsh, 1999; Guskey, 1999; Darling-Hammond, 1999). High quality classroom assessment clearly must be in place for standards-based education to work.

But, even more than this, we are used to thinking about assessment as the measurer of change—the index of what students have learned through various instructional innovations. But, as you know, we’re presenting classroom assessment as the change itself—a direct precipitator of learning; a way to significantly alter the relationships between teachers and students in ways that directly promote student learning to higher standards. Because of the complexity of what is to be learned about classroom assessment, we must, therefore, approach professional development on classroom assessment the same way as for other topics—through classroom contextualized learning teams.

Selected References

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