

creating change through staff development

Quality staff development is the vehicle for providing the knowledge needed to support effective teaching.

The students piled into their social studies classroom on the 46th day of 2007. After being instructed to sit in

pods of four, the students were immediately drawn to the screen at the front of the room.

“Was this a mistake? Why did she leave her I-Tunes up on the screen? She must not realize it!” Sure enough, the LCD projector was displaying the teacher’s I-Tunes account. As any sixth-grade student would do at this point, they started requesting songs. Chaos followed. Students started arguing over which song to play.

To calm the storm that was brewing, the teacher informed the students that group members could voice their opinions within their pods and provide a rationale for their choices. After debating within their groups, each table sent a pod representative to participate in the full class song selection vote. The winning group would get to hear its song played for the entire class.

After several failed attempts, their efforts paid off and they listened and sang along to the song “Ebay” (the lyrics to which were projected on the screen). Students repeated the process for the next 20 minutes, and slowly, the students began to use a defined system to choose songs.

Pretty soon, the crowded room of 12-year-olds was bustling with laughter, dance and debate. Appropriately, “Free Bird” was the final class selection. The excitement that the lesson generated was palpable. What the students didn’t realize at that time was that they were demonstrating a perfect example of a representative democracy, under the leadership of their president/teacher.

Liz Schuetz, a master teacher at Lake Bluff Middle School in Illinois, was teaching a lesson based on a constructivist activity from the textbook series “History Alive!” The lesson, which Liz augmented with the use of I-Tunes and an LCD projector, was designed to help students uncover the key components of a representative democracy,

By Michael Donhost and Ron Hoover

and incorporated many components of effective instruction, including:

- Constructivist design
- Brain-based strategies
- Meeting students where they were; connecting new information with old
- Learning centered around the students, not the teacher
- A rich learning environment with a diversity of learning materials, opinions and options
- Engaged students in challenging, relevant work
- Experiential learning opportunities
- Collaborative learning environments
- Student reflection and self-analysis

Quality instruction in staff development

As administrators, we witness quality instruction on a regular basis. Marzano, Pickering and Pollock offer research-based strategies in "Classroom Instruction That Works" (2001), as does Gordon Cawelti's "Handbook of Research on Improving Student Achievement" (2004). These and other books attempt to quantify and explain what research tells us about effective teaching. Yet, even without this research to define quality instruction, we tend to know it when we see it.

What we see little of, unfortunately, is quality instruction in the form of staff development. Consider the last few experiences that you or your staff has had with staff development. Referring back to the components of the democracy lesson described earlier, how many were apparent in your last staff development session?

In our experience, we have found that staff development often violates the recommendations we make to teachers — even novice teachers — about quality instruction. We forget that staff development is adult instruction, and that we are teaching, not merely dispensing information.

Elements of constructivism

One potential way to enhance our staff development practices is to utilize constructivist strategies with our adult learners. There are many ways to define constructivism. At the root of any definition are the concepts of disequilibrium and equi-

librium. Disequilibrium is the initial stage that brings to the surface our preconceived notions, biases, knowledge and understanding (or lack thereof). It involves challenging our beliefs, exploring ideas, predicting and hypothesizing and, most importantly, creating questions.

The equilibrium phase seeks to answer the questions we have generated. In this discovery mode, we seek resources, information and experimentation, all directed toward resolving and integrating our current learning with our past knowledge. We are constructing knowledge and reflecting on our progress.

The following two-phase, eight-step outline contains the key components of a simple constructivist activity. The order of the steps is not rigid, though phase one should precede phase two.

Disequilibrium (phase one)

1. Cognitive dissonance
2. Analyzing
3. Hypothesizing
4. Predicting

Equilibrium (phase two)

5. Integrating current experience with past experience
6. Constructing knowledge
7. Application
8. Reflection

A catalyst for change

Earlier in our careers, we were both young administrators in the same 11-school district. The district's three middle schools were at various stages of middle-level reform, and the administrators of all three schools met to talk about working together on several initiatives.

While we knew there was support for some of the initiatives, we also knew that the changes would challenge many en-

trenched practices among some teachers. Much of our conversation centered on the current research that supports the middle school philosophy, and how we could share that with our teachers.

The outcome of the discussion was a district-wide inservice day that brought together the teachers from all three schools for the first time. The goal was to generate discussion and interaction around key concepts of the middle school philosophy, but this was new territory for us, and we needed an appropriate structure and a safe climate for good conversation.

In addition to a variety of elective informational seminars, we developed a game-based activity to accomplish our goal. The day's activities were designed to tackle phase one of the constructivist outline (phase two occurred over the three years and hundreds of meetings that followed).

"Building" an ideal school

The morning began with teachers from all three middle schools sitting at tables of 10 throughout the banquet hall. Each table had representatives from each school, in an effort to depersonalize the activity from any one current reality. The featured activity was called the School-Design Game, which asked each table to reach consensus on eight different components of a middle school — not for their existing school, but in their "ideal school" (the forced choice activity provided three variations/choices for each of the eight components).

As each table "built" its ideal school, there was conversation, debate, compromise and even a few stalemates. But throughout the process, 120 teachers were discovering the range of approaches that might be possible in teaming, curricula, scheduling, conferencing and many other areas.

The teachers formed a common language, and they made decisions based on

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ACSA's Leadership Summit will have special middle grades offerings on Nov. 8-9 including morning seminars (one will feature authors Donhost and Hoover), a luncheon sponsored by the Middle Grades Education Council and afternoon workshops. For more information go to www.acsa.org/events, or call 1-800-608-ACSA.

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what should be, rather than what is. They were creating, and most importantly, they were learning.

With that learning came questions: Why was that teacher so adamant about providing electives for students in the arts? How could teaching double-periods every other

day be better for instruction? What would our team talk about if we met every day?

For the next three years, the staff development was guided by those questions. While consensus was difficult to achieve in every area, educating our staff members was the goal. Opinions were certainly in no short supply, but what were they based

upon? Tradition? Complacency? Apprehension? Research? Best practice?

In the end, change occurred. Some changes were made quickly and easily. There was previously undiscovered support for improving many of our practices. Other changes were more difficult, stirring controversy and opposition from many. In the middle were the issues that just required more information, research, conversation, debate and analysis to find a consensus to move.

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Time to learn from our best teachers

We believe that by using a constructivist approach, organizations can build consensus for change by challenging the status quo with current research on best practices. The greatest obstacles to change are misinformation and inertia. What constructivism provides is a structure to challenge the stagnating attitudes, tired practices, complacency and lack of knowledge that barricades change. Quality staff development is the vehicle for providing the knowledge needed to support change and the interest needed to create momentum.

Perhaps it's time to learn from our best teachers. ■

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