



Commentary

A Professional Learning Odyssey

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ABSTRACT

Through the use of personal anecdotes drawn from a long career as a professional educator, the author contends that professional development for professional educators is not just an isolated “quick fix” program now and then, or a series of performance-focused activities, but rather, professional learning opportunities exist in multiple, diverse, and occasionally in unusual and unexpected situations and contexts throughout one’s career. He suggests that what all teachers and school leaders require for professional learning to flourish is both time and space, a clear sense of purpose based on student learning, learning opportunities that are appropriate to roles and career stage, and the support and trust from leadership both inside and outside of schools and districts. It is professional learning, not tests, targets, or performance training, that increases students’ learning.

A few years ago, the assistant superintendent of a mid-sized American school district asked me to conduct a workshop with the principals and assistants of her city based on my book, *Leadership for Mortals* (2005). What she liked about the book was its focus on leadership for student learning that I had defined broadly as learning to know, learning to do, learning to be, learning to live together (UNESCO, 1996), and learning to live sustainably (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). I spent a day and a half with 150 very engaged and thoughtful school leaders and came away feeling my work had really made a difference. After I finished, the newly appointed superintendent spoke to the school leaders. He was young, articulate, and in private conversations had let me know he was on the “way up.” The school district had chosen him over the well-liked assistant superintendent who had invited me. His PowerPoint

presentation perseverated on each school's scores on the state's standardized tests and his analysis of successes and failures, mixed in with commendations for successes, which as I discovered, were schools located mostly in white neighbourhoods, and failures that were almost exclusively in black communities. There was nothing in the speech that was motivational, or suggested approaches to improvement, or even available support, but rather, it consisted of rhetorical exhortations for everyone to do better or there would be unstated consequences. I left for home feeling more deflated than a New England Patriots' football.¹

This vignette is a microcosm of the ongoing international clash between two very different paradigms of educational change—one that sees school leaders and teachers as professional educators who guide and support students in their pursuit of broad learning goals, and the other based on the primacy of markets and a production model of education that considers education to be a commodity that is bought and sold—and students and their parents are the consumers who choose among competing educational settings. In this production model of how education should work, often called New Public Management (NPM), teachers are merely human capital, not professionals to whom society entrusts its children's education, while principals are managers of the productivity of this “workforce,” not leaders of learning, and the results of these efforts are neatly and simplistically codified into easily understood and manipulated numbers based on the bottom line—students' test scores, rather than evaluations based on the full range of students' learning experiences (Leana, 2011). By ignoring the complexities of teaching, and leading and reducing these activities to commodities to be measured, these value-added metrics derived from increments in students' attainment enable policy makers at all levels, such as the aforementioned superintendent, to glibly draw conclusions about teachers' competence, principals' leadership, and district and even state (or provincial) departments' efficacy. Like the stock market or quarterly business reports, a school's success goes up or down depending on the numbers, and in more recent times, particularly in some of the states of the United States, teachers and principals' salaries fluctuate accordingly.

In this edition of *LEARNing Landscapes* dedicated to professional development, the first question to be asked is: “What are the educational purposes for which leaders and teachers need professional developing?” and second, “How do planners of professional activities create conditions that will enhance their learning?” The key word here is “professional.” Programs and activities designed to further the goals of the production model with its narrow focus on test scores or managerial functions can hardly be called professional. I like Andy Hargreaves' (2003) term for this kind of activity, *performance training sects*, in which intensive implementation support is given to educators “but only

in relation to highly prescriptive interventions in basic areas of the curriculum that demand unquestioned professional competence” such as reading or mathematics that potentially can lock “teachers and students into cycles of low level dependency rather than offering a first step towards something better” (p. 7). The “something better” he defines as “professional learning communities.” In my work with Andy we parsed the term this way:

- communities where diverse people have a shared commitment to a common purpose, to each other as people in pursuing that purpose, and to acknowledgement and inclusion of minority views in collective decision making,
- learning of the students, the adults, and the organization more generally,
- professional in how they value grown up norms of difference, disagreement and debate about the best way they promote, value, and bring together formal evidence and experiential knowledge and intuition as a basis for decision making (Hargreaves & Fink, p. 126).

In my long career that has encompassed just about every role on the educational spectrum, I have experienced several different kinds of professional learning communities that seemed to meet my professional needs at various stages of my career. As a young teacher I didn't really know what I didn't know. In my third year I was promoted to department head in a secondary school largely because I was the only specialist in my field; it certainly wasn't because of my proven leadership ability at the time. What kept my head above water and helped me to avoid doing stupid things was the opportunity to work with a few experienced and very professional department heads in other subject fields who not only willingly shared their explicit knowledge of educational practice with me, but also their tacit knowledge drawn from their years in the job.

A few years later I had my first (and only) opportunity to participate in an entire school as a professional learning community. Lord Byron High School was a new and purposely innovative school dedicated to optimum learning experiences for all students within a humane and caring environment. Elsewhere (Fink, 2000), I chronicled the many features that made this school unique, but for the purposes of this essay what contributed to Byron as a professional learning community was the principal's determination to break the mold on secondary schooling by creating both the time and space for professionals to work together across disciplines to promote learning for all students. He created cross-disciplinary departments; I was the head of social sciences. He arranged for workspaces so that related departments shared offices, and by creative timetabling provided the time for people to plan together. His staff was a

mixture of mid-career professionals who were not afraid to “rock the boat” and bright young people with a thirst for learning. The principal had only one rule for the staff: the coffee will only be available in the staff room. Coffee-addicted teachers had to go to the staff room during lunch and breaks where inevitably discussions of educational philosophy and practice dominated the conversations. As one of my former colleagues who became a highly successful principal declared, “the sheer intellectual acuity of those discussions in the staff room was the best P.D. I ever had.” The principal would often wander into the staff room, make a provocative statement, and leave with a big smile on his face while the rest of us wrestled with the topic he had planted. My three years at Byron were a turning point in my career. For the first time I saw leadership at the school and district levels that really made a difference for students and I decided that was the path I wanted to follow.

When I became the principal of my own secondary school, I entered another very different professional learning community—the district’s principals’ association. The district was created from a number of smaller districts and the founding Director of Education emphasized the need for quality leadership at all levels. For example, he organized a leadership program for 32 prospective leaders that met 12 times a school year and spent two weekends together, all funded by the district. On my first day on the leadership program I was handed 15 current books on educational philosophy and practice and these became the basis of our ongoing discussions. The Director also encouraged the elementary and secondary principals to develop associations and provided the time, a half day each month, and the space at the district office for meetings. He also encouraged and participated in annual retreats that proved to be vital bonding opportunities for principals. As a young principal I not only had the support of my contemporaries, but also that of the “senators,” as we called the older, more experienced principals, who were always available with advice and encouragement. I was lucky that the principal at the closest school to mine was a “senator” who took me under his wing and helped me through some serious challenges such as a lawsuit. It was always reassuring to know that if I had a question, Mike, who had seen it all in 25 years as a principal, had the answers or at least knew where to go to get the answers. As I look back, encouraging and trusting the principals at both levels to take on system-wide issues, such as suggesting policy initiatives, sorting out day-to-day problems, and implementing regional programs, was very clever management and allowed the system to operate with far fewer senior leaders than other districts of similar size. The principals’ associations also provided a pipeline for senior leadership in the system and enabled careful succession plans. Later in my career as a system’s leader, all I needed to do was get the associations behind me to ensure implementation of district or provincial initiatives and mandates for which I was responsible.

As these anecdotes suggest, professional development for professional educators is not just an isolated “quick fix” program now and then, or a series of performance-focused activities, although each may have its place, but rather, professional learning opportunities exist in multiple, diverse, and occasionally in unusual and unexpected situations and contexts throughout one’s career. What I experienced and what I believe all teachers and school leaders require for professional learning to flourish is both time and space, a clear sense of purpose based on student learning, learning opportunities that are appropriate to roles and career stage, and the support and trust from leadership both inside and outside of schools and districts. It is professional learning, not tests, targets, or performance training, that increases students’ learning.

While my examples may be easily dismissed as selective nostalgia from an over-the-hill educator, research by Carrie Leana (2011) and her colleagues demonstrates rather convincingly, “when relationships among teachers in a school are characterized by high trust and frequent interaction – that is social capital is strong – student achievement scores improve (p. 5).” Policies that try to change individual behaviours by hectoring, fear mongering, and reward and punishment strategies have short-term efficacy and virtually no sustainability. Conversely, policies that focus on peer pressure to effect change within organizations and cultures have a far greater chance of long-term success (Rosenberg, 2011). Investments in social capital, not just human capital, have the potential to profoundly change schools and educational systems (Levin, 2010).

Adler and Kwon (2002) provide an all-encompassing definition of social capital when they state that, “social capital is the goodwill available to individuals or groups. Its source lies in the structure and content of the actor’s social relations. Its effects flow from the information, influence, and solidarity it makes available to the actor” (p. 23). They explain that *goodwill* means, the “sympathy, trust and forgiveness others have towards us” (p. 18) and highlights the following qualities of social capital:

- Social capital can substitute for other sources of capital (such as financial)
- Social capital is collective, not located in individuals like human capital
- Does not depreciate with use, it grows and develops with use
- Not amenable to quantifiable measurement
- Needs maintenance, must be renewed and reconfirmed

In spite of context however, it is the individual’s responsibility as a professional educator, regardless of role or employment conditions, to be a continuous career-long learner. I like to think that in my over 50 years as an educator I fit that description. Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan (2012), two educators who have profoundly

influenced my work over the years, have succinctly and eloquently captured the idea of the professional learner. In their view, to teach—and I would add to lead, to consult, and so forth—“is a personal commitment to rigorous training, continuous learning, collegial feedback, respect for evidence, responsiveness to parents, striving for excellence, and going far beyond the requirements of any written contracts” (p. xiv).

Note

1. If you think my metaphor is too “clever by half,” google “deflategate.”

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