

Part I

The Power of Reflective Exercises for Staff Development

One of the exercises that appears later in this book is called Beginning at the End. So let's do just that here:

- With several of your colleagues you have developed and refined interdisciplinary teaching strategies that have the potential to achieve more positive student outcomes.
- You have jointly examined the legitimacy of one or two current educational practices and are advocating changes that you believe will have positive effects.
- You now know for sure that improved working relationships with your colleagues not only provide greater job satisfaction for you but also enhance student achievement.

If these are outcomes you see as desirable, then this book deserves your attention.

A short story from a young teacher friend dramatizes how collaborative professional learning can engender changed practices.

The first day of every school year I outlined for students the ground rules that would govern their behavior while in class—such things as “respectful interaction” and “good preparation.” Having recently participated in staff development where I was involved in establishing ground rules for my own learning, I have begun to start off each year differently. I now ask my students to write on sticky notes the ground rules they believe will make our experience together mutually satisfying and one from which they might benefit. When all the notes have been posted on the wall, we create a written framework of ground rules, no more than one page in length. This gets posted in front of the room and also duplicated on sheets that can be placed in the front of their notebooks. I have noticed over the course of the year that their

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investment in “our” ground rules has begun to pay off in small ways. I was particularly gratified when one day a student referred specifically to one of the rules and suggested that it was being violated.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Having laid the groundwork by forecasting outcomes, it would be useful to go back to the beginning and outline some guiding principles. Here are the ones that infuse the text and exercise descriptions that follow:

- **Educators can and should take responsibility for their own professional development.** While there are advantages to securing the services of outside experts to assist with both the substance and process of development, there are compelling advantages to educators shepherding their own development. This book not only advocates this principle but offers readers a set of tools to accomplish it.
- **Doing big things differently requires doing little things differently from the outset.** If school staff—teachers, administrators, counselors, staff developers—want to adopt fundamentally different approaches to working with each other and with their students, then they have to do things differently with each other, as well, from the very beginning of their development activities through to their completion. They have to experience modes of interaction that reflect the developmental challenges they will confront in their work place—questioning and adjusting operating assumptions, assessing and reframing goals and values, and probing and reshaping relationships. (This principle is the “tap on my shoulder” every time I begin working with a group of professionals who say that they are interested in examining and improving their practices, anxious to get out of well-worn patterns of behavior, and ready for renewal and revitalization.)
- **All exercises chosen for staff development purposes should exemplify sound learning concepts.** With few exceptions, they should be responsive to the proverb,

I hear and I forget.

I see and I remember.

I do and I understand.

“Shared doing” can be an especially powerful teaching tool if properly prepared, presented, and mediated. When professionals in the same field, but with different interests and talents, engage jointly in a low stakes exercise that poses intriguing questions and mild challenges, great energy is unleashed. There are few motivations to learn stronger than the emotional investment in one’s own experience, even if that experience is cursory and light. If intelligent questions follow the experience as prompts for discussion, the learning is deepened immeasurably.

- **Staff development should be about finding allies for ideas that**

are worth pursuing. Much of the activity that takes place in schools is isolating for the professionals who work there. Good professional development should counter this sense of isolation. Therefore, exercises should be rich in opportunities for staff to become more familiar with each other as professionals, to see how they might join forces, to begin to view each other in a new, more understanding and appreciative light.

These principles point to the conclusion that staff development is inevitably about collective capacity building. In fact, the two words, “staff” and “development,” imply collective capacity building. Thus, education professionals who attend staff development sessions should feel that they have learned important things about each other and about how to do their jobs better. And they should return to their daily responsibilities uplifted, renewed, and ready to assume new challenges. They should feel more empowered and enabled to act on behalf of the children and youth they serve.

MAKING THE EXCEPTION TO CURRENT PRACTICE THE RULE

Unfortunately, the outcomes to which the principles point are still the exception, rather than the rule. Most staff development sessions are one-shot events that professionals are compelled to attend, and from which they learn less than they would like—and less than their students deserve. Too often they return to their jobs more convinced than ever that whatever they accomplish will be attributable to their own lights, their own perseverance as individual professionals. It is a regrettable reality that many education professionals feel more alone in facing the real challenges of their job after a staff development session than they did before it.

Here is the way all too many staff development sessions unfold:

The presenter provides a self-introduction, followed by an introduction of the day’s topic, and then states the session’s objectives. Frequently, the presenter seeks to “break the ice” by asking participants to offer something about themselves or their expectations. But rarely is this important data synthesized and used as a reference point for the group’s work going forward.

Then the day’s work begins in earnest. Generally, participants get a break in the middle of the session and are allowed time for social interaction. Since the session itself has offered little of this, the break usually runs over, and it is difficult to reassemble the participants for the succeeding segment.

The meeting space itself almost always inhibits free and easy interchange among participants. Although the presenter’s intention may be to encourage open interaction, the furniture is often arranged in a way

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that makes this hard. Tables consume most of the available floor space in the room, and participants can't easily see each other's faces. During most of the session, the energy in the room is with the presenter, not with the participants. Participants receive mainly lip service about their central role in improving teaching and learning.

The conditions just described may only partially reflect those that you as readers have experienced. Yet it is probably fair to say that most contemporary staff development efforts do not support group processes advocated by organizational learning theorists or teaching techniques advocated by adult learning specialists. This situation must change, quite simply because it is a waste of human capacity and a squandering of scarce resources.

The current exception should become the future rule. Education professionals and their charges—school-attending children and youth—deserve no less. Local communities and the nation deserve no less. Achieving this needed change in practice, however, requires significant shifts in what educational professionals expect from staff development and what staff development specialists offer to educational professionals.

COMMITTING TO ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING CONCEPTS

This “raising of the bar” means that those who oversee, influence, design, and carry out staff development programs must tap into the ideas of theorists like Chris Argyris, Edgar Schein, Don Schon, and Peter Senge. Similarly, they must subscribe to positions advanced by educational theorists like Michael Fullan, Tom Guskey, Anne Lieberman, Linda Darling-Hammond, Seymour Sarason, and Roland Barth. These educational theorists have, among other things, contextualized sound learning concepts in school operations and cited their implications for the design of staff development programs. Some of the central concepts they identify include the following:

- **The necessity of reflective practice by professionals, individually and collectively**—the ability to step back regularly from daily responsibilities and pose hard questions about functions, roles, and performance, to focus on why things are being done the way they are and whether they might be done differently. True learning communities function in this way.
- **The distinction between “theories-in-action” and espoused theories**—the differences between what school professionals really do and how they really interact, as opposed to what the mission statement mounted in the school foyer says about what they do and how they interact.
- **The power of assumptions** in shaping school culture and determining the behavior of all who work in the school. These are the tacit beliefs that distinguish the acceptable from the unacceptable. If, for

example, it is **assumed** that teachers should not share professional knowledge with each other, then they will not.

The essential requirement of this kind of learning is that professionals explicitly and jointly commit to reaching for broader and deeper perspectives on their demanding roles, that they create the time and space to ask themselves and each other a few basic questions, such as the following:

- As professionals, what are we doing in this school? What are our most dominant theories-in-action?
- What underlying assumptions drive our behavior as professionals in this school?
- What should we be doing differently? What do we want to change to better fulfill our collective aims? What can we do to narrow the gap between our espoused theories and our theories-in-action?

A key aspect of these ideas is that each and every participant in a staff development process has an active, in fact, determining, role to play. Indeed, it takes the minds and hearts of all staff to address honestly the challenging questions noted above. Thus, participants in staff development, grounded in sound adult and organizational learning principles, are by definition not the audience in a play presented by outsiders—they are the principal actors. Each has an important part in creating a better future.

The principles of sound staff development already presented in the Guiding Principles section above are remarkably consistent with the ideas outlined by the theorists mentioned in this section. They can be distilled as follows:

- Participants take responsibility for their own learning.
- Development exercises reflect high-impact learning.
- Development exercises engender collective, positive energy.

THE SPECIAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF SENGE ET AL.

Undoubtedly the most popular and best accepted representation of organizational learning concepts is the five disciplines that Peter Senge et al. outline in *The Fifth Discipline* (1990), *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook* (1994), and *Schools That Learn* (2000). The five disciplines are personal mastery, systems thinking, mental models, shared vision, and team learning. Try to keep these in mind—or come back to them again—as you review the exercises for possible use in your staff development effort. They represent a persistent subtext underlying both the activities and the reflective questions.

Personal mastery simply reaffirms that the ability of an organization to learn is dependent on the capacity of key individuals to learn and grow. Such learning and growth correlates with the individual's confidence and expertise-gathering skills.

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Systems thinking recognizes that every element of an organizational system affects every other element. Altering one practice has a significant impact on others. Those seeking to change complex systems like schools have to be cognizant of essential interactive effects within them as they move to improve their functioning.

Mental models refers to the enduring mindsets, the collective assumptions of those who work in organizations. How we see what we ought to be doing as organizational actors will to a large extent dictate what we in fact do. If we really see schools as collections of separate work contexts, that is, classrooms, then our behavior as professionals will be dictated by that assumption. We will tend to operate quite independently of each other. If, on the other hand, we see schools as highly integrated work settings framed by common purposes, then our actions will be quite different.

Shared vision (easy to say, hard to do) means that group members discuss purposes, aims, and missions with each other until they achieve enough common understanding and appreciation of each other's points of view that they can declare a coherent, collective direction—and pursue it vigorously.

Team learning is just that—dynamic interactions among group members who possess a clear, shared sense of direction or vision, in pursuit of mutual professional learning, which leads to greater fulfillment of vision.

This book builds on the concepts Senge and his colleagues lay out. Much like the exercises in *The Fieldbook*, it is a practical extension of these concepts. In fact, in many respects, its singular focus on the practical is a fulfillment of an aspiration implicit in Senge's work—the availability of diverse forms of experiential learning that support organizational development.

A PERSONAL APPROACH TO TEACHING AND CONSULTING

Over the past two decades, I have specifically patterned my own teaching and consulting after the ideas of Argyris, Schein, and Schon, as extended by Senge et al., Fullan, Sarason, and their theorist colleagues. By engaging with the exercises in this book, readers will be joining in the process of mutual discovery represented in the approach I take with students and clients.

The principal “text” we use is **shared experiences**. Reading—that is, decoding and understanding—this text helps us to develop our capacity to reflect more deeply and broadly on what happens at work. In light of joint reflections on our common experiences (first) and expert opinion in books and articles (second), we prod each other to construct new ideas about what makes for effective practice.

As colleagues, we begin to **frame new ideas about our professional practice from these shared experiences**. When discussing a possible project or initiative, we make as many explicit references to our experiences as to expert perspectives drawn from published books and articles. Experts rely, to a great extent, on ideas that are formed in the wake of their own experiences. So, for example, if our assigned task is learning about the value of community service, we are essentially doing the same thing as Peter Block when he formulates ideas about community service.

Included in our shared experiences will be **individual and group exercises or problems, service projects, and field analyses**. Under the heading of exercises or problems are case studies and simulations or games that pose organizational or group challenges. In all instances, the consequences of actions taken in these situations are considerably less serious than those made in situations where jobs and reputations are at stake.

Because these shared experiences take place on “safe ground,” they promote a willingness to experiment. At the same time, they provide a guaranteed opportunity—since they take place on territory we have agreed to explore together—to try out deeper modes of observation that might lead us to refine our capacity for reflection and concept formation. The work we do together, more than anything else, is meant to promote what I call **hyperobservation**.

A persistent thread running through our joint learning is an understanding of how real-world quandaries are almost always reflected in the experiences we share. These experiences may seem artificial, but in reality they are not. They are as real as those that occur in the workplace. The point here is that there is often as much, if not more, **potential for learning from the “here and now”** of a low-stakes, shared experience as there is from a powerfully written text—an understanding rarely exploited in academic and even corporate settings.

Finally, there are three major sequential (more or less) **steps learners need to go through to analyze and use experience**—“**what**,” that is, what happened within the boundaries of the experience; “**so what**,” that is, what interpretations can one legitimately draw from the experience or what are the general implications of the experience; and “**now what**,” that is, what should one do differently in more high-stakes contexts, such as the school, because of what was just learned.

This approach—avowedly experiential—contrasts sharply with the traditional scholastic approach, which involves first presenting concepts, and then second, inviting learners to apply them in their work lives. While it risks some conceptual integrity, the approach has the potential to engage learners more deeply with ideas and help them make **more direct connections between theory and practice**.

IMPORTANT CAVEATS

The material in this book is meant to be supportive of established concepts, not generative of new ones. It is a practical tool rather than a theoretical treatise. Furthermore, what is contained here is not a comprehensive approach to school improvement. Rather it abets school improvement by providing experiences—activities and debriefing questions—that engage participants in a process of individual and organizational learning. This learning can, in turn, promote new teaching strategies.

Simply put, this book “gets the ball rolling” in a way that is consistent with important theories about how individuals and organizations learn, and supportive of accepted approaches to school improvement.

At the same time, the relationship between theory and practice is such that practice can affect theory as much as theory affects practice. Theory is often enriched, deepened, even reshaped, as practitioners attempt to act in concert with it. So readers should view this book as a significant beginning to transforming staff development sessions into great learning opportunities. They should also understand that they will likely change their view of how learning occurs in the process.

As already suggested above, the way staff development sessions begin and the way they are carried out signal to a great extent the outcomes they achieve. The very first moves in a session, for example, almost always foretell ultimate effects. Significant indicators of success or failure cluster in large part in the first few minutes of joint work.

Additionally, the right set of moves in the middle of a session determines whether the learning from a previous segment is captured or if it evaporates into thin air. Simple as these axioms are, it is remarkable how seldom they are heeded, as staff developers think about how to get underway and maintain momentum.

With this said, it is important to note that the exercises in this book are not intended as “icebreakers” or “sidelights.” The former term connotes a diminishing of the icy conditions that may exist as people nervously assemble for a new experience. The latter connotes a welcome distraction, capable of capturing interest, but largely unrelated to the substantive work at hand. After the icebreaker or sidelight, participants are supposed to be more amenable, less resistant, to facing the task at hand. The “real work” of the session then commences or resumes.

We have all participated in staff development efforts punctuated by an artfully deployed icebreaker or sidelight. Unfortunately, what often follows in its path is well-patterned drudgery—one-way conveyance of ideas with relatively little earnest interchange. Absent is mutual learning about the collective assets of participants, intense reflections on current practice, surfacing and

addressing key assumptions, or the identification of new ways of looking at old problems.

Icebreakers and sidelights have a legitimate role, but usually a minor one tangential to the task of supporting individual and organizational learning. Much more than softening, warming, or melting has to happen at the beginning of a serious staff development session for it to be effective in the end. Much more than enticing distraction has to happen in the middle. In fact, icebreakers or sidelights, viewed largely as parenthetical, should shed their parentheses and connect seamlessly with the entire flow of the development effort. They should herald the work ahead, reinforce the work behind, provide the participants with robust cues about what is in store for them, and cap off what they have just learned. Most importantly, the exercises have to stimulate and inspire, providing a sense of anticipation that will be rewarded and a challenge that will be fulfilled.

Included in an expanded portfolio of possible supportive experiences are such factors as a call to participants to become active and stay active throughout the session; a robust suggestion or reminder that all the participants represent significant learning resources for each other; a signal that participants will be encouraged to experiment with modes of behavior that promote their becoming more professionally effective; and an object lesson confirming that the task of running an effective school is not the job of the principal alone, but is owned by everyone in the room.