

Do This, Not That: Designing Effective Professional Development

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Heafner, T. L., Handler, L. K., & Journell, W. (2016). Do this, not that: Lessons learned for designing effective professional development. *Social Education*, 80 (6), 381-384.

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Abstract:

Do you find yourself ... searching for a new approach to teaching social studies that incorporates inquiry? ... in a school, district, or state that hasn't offered professional development for social studies instruction in the last 3, 5, 10 years? ... the lone body interested in bringing real world issues and current events to your classroom? ... in a school, district, or state that thinks that C3 only refers to a Star Wars character? Social studies teachers often find themselves in search of professional development that transforms lessons from facts, figures, and boldfaced vocabulary to lessons that develop the sophisticated thinking skills students need to make sense of the social issues of our everyday world.

Keywords: social studies instruction | social studies teachers | professional development

Article:

*****Note: Full text of article below**

Do This, Not That: Designing Effective Professional Development

Tina L. Heafner, Laura K. Handler, and Wayne Journell

Do you find yourself ...

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Social studies teachers often find themselves in search of professional development that transforms lessons from facts, figures, and boldfaced vocabulary to lessons that develop the sophisticated thinking skills students need to make sense of the social issues of our everyday world. Furthermore, teachers want their own learning to be similar to that offered to their students: collaborative yet allowing for autonomy and facilitated growth with content connected to practical teaching experiences.¹

While implementing the C3 Literacy Collaborative over the last two years, we led more than 50 teams from various schools, grade levels, districts, disciplines, and states with the goal of offering guidance to educators who want to bring inquiry-based instruction and disciplinary literacies to their classrooms.² We relied on the C3LC website ([www.](http://www.socialstudies.org/c3/c3lc)

[socialstudies.org/c3/c3lc](http://www.socialstudies.org/c3/c3lc)), which can be accessed by teachers anywhere, to host and archive webinars led by social studies scholars, and present content pedagogical investigations. We also shared reflections, posted artifacts, and communicated progress. We attempted to facilitate collaboration amidst and amongst the teams, which were drawn from across the country. The purpose of this article is to share our lessons in order to improve professional development experiences for social studies educators. We propose utilizing a hybrid approach that maximizes the conveniences of technology while cultivating the face-to-face relationships that foster the professional development that transforms classroom instruction.

Technological Possibilities

Using Online Resources

Our teams worked through investigations and online learning modules developed by leading researchers and practitioners across the country. A webinar served as the crux of the professional development, with a renowned leader guiding exploration of pedagogical methods and concepts, then facilitating discussion and applications. Each investigation also included compelling and supporting questions and reflection exercises, which could be shared using blogs, discussions, and a tagging system on the website ([www.literacyinlearningexchange.](http://www.literacyinlearningexchange.org/group/ncss-c3-literacy-collaborative-grant-project)

[org/group/ncss-c3-literacy-collaborative-grant-project](http://www.literacyinlearningexchange.org/group/ncss-c3-literacy-collaborative-grant-project)).³ Finally, the learning culminated with an artifact created by teams to demonstrate their understanding and application, which was posted on the website as a shared resource for all participants.

The following elements of this technological design proved advantageous for each team's professional development.

Modular Format: Participants had an array of available online resources, and we were impressed by the extent to which they selected resources and activities that were most applicable to their particular team goal rather than simply work straight through a single assigned module. Their approach was comparable to the learning format that teachers often design for students, which allows for choice, adaptation, and differentiation, in addition to relevancy and personalization of learning. Technology permitted this "Lego" approach because all resources were available via the website,⁴ and this flexibility was a key component of the online learning. The modular design also allowed teams to work at their own pace, scheduling meetings conducive to their respective schedules, and offered autonomy in deciding how much time and depth to allocate to various components based on what was needed in their particular schooling context. Teams were most interested in investigation modules that were both rel-

evant and practical. Participants sometimes expressed impatience with learning modules that were too theoretical or took too long to get to the application stage. They especially valued tools and frameworks that helped them build and test their own instructional resources. With the modular format, teams often selected only the investigations and their components that would offer quick, profitable returns for their time investment. The convenience, accessibility, and flexibility of the online professional development resources were key attributes acknowledged by teams.

Synchronous and Archived Webinars: The webinars were an anytime-anywhere technological resource that afforded opportunities for participants to engage with experts in the convenience of their own home, office, school, or workplace (and free of charge). Although the webinars required synchronous collaboration, only one team member was required to

attend the live session, and then webinars were archived for teams to use at their later convenience. Teams enjoyed participating in the live webinars because of access to experts and the ability to ask them questions, and they found the archived versions to be extremely useful.

Learning Platform and Organization: In addition to the webinars, all of the documents and resources associated with the investigations were housed in one location on the website (www.socialstudies.org/c3/c3lc). Multi-media materials could be incorporated into the investigations, maximizing teacher learning with the most relevant articles, images, and videos. Because the website was created under a previously existing structure, with which participants were not particularly familiar, we were limited in the adaptations we could make to make it fit our design and purpose. Some found the platform itself cumbersome and not conducive to effective collabora-

tion. Participants also had to spend time “learning” how to navigate the website, time that could have been devoted to learning the content the project was designed for. As we attempted to encourage virtual collaboration within the parameters of the website, we uncovered many teams’ initiatives to create alternative sharing and dissemination spaces which included asynchronous tools (e.g., Google Drive) as well as synchronous online and face-to-face meetings. Since teachers typically have lower motivation to engage with colleagues in the online environment,⁵ our recommendation is to house professional development in a technological platform that participants are already adept at using. At the very least, to foster greater interaction and collaboration, reflections and discussions could be facilitated in socially designed applications such as Google+, Edmodo, Canvas, or Facebook. Polling participants at the onset of the project

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would determine their preference and allow for early support to those who need it most.

Real Time, Real Talk

While technology afforded advantages for working independently as teams and as individuals, synchronous collaboration amidst and amongst teams was needed to elicit deeper learning and develop plans for integration into classroom instruction. Although some of these meetings could be conducted virtually, using applications such as Google Hangout, Skype, or FaceTime, ultimately teams recognized that face-to-face interaction provided the most valuable experiences of the professional development. Ongoing opportunities for real time discussions with the rapid exchange of ideas and feedback proved integral for shared learning, modeling, implementing newly acquired pedagogical methods, and trying out/experimenting new lesson designs and units.

When planning face-to-face professional development for educators, intentional consideration should be given to the following collaborative aspects to maximize effectiveness, learning, and discourse.

Forming Strong Relationships: Interpersonal dynamics are crucial to productive collaboration, and most times technology simply could not replace the connections made when educators gathered in person. When teams formed strong relationships, they were committed to supporting each other and committed to fulfilling the goals and initiatives set by the group at the onset of the project. Despite attempting to forge online relationships with participants across the country whom we had never met, these efforts seemed forced and unnatural. Several teams became close-knit groups that wanted to continue the work beyond the end of the C3LC project. Pinpointing that deciding factor, one team leader shared her

thoughts on the importance of building relationships and establishing a team culture: “Make it an environment where people want to be together, and people will work hard, and magic happens. You cannot ignore that affective element in any community of learners, kids or adults.”

Reflection and Collaborative “Looping”: Springboarding from these relationships were opportunities for immediate, authentic discourse, which proved invaluable for supporting the transfer of ideas into classroom practice. This sort of exchange was most effective in the face-to-face setting, as colleagues’ input fueled continuous improvement. The circular process that resulted was an ongoing “loop” of idea sharing, implementation, reflection, and revision that participants viewed as an ideal model for professional development. Again, the collaborative element proved pivotal for such a process. One participant commented, “I always like PD better that has that cohort or group mentality... We were able to try things out and get feedback from colleagues and modify. The time to be able to edit and change in addition to bouncing ideas off of others was very beneficial.”

Research suggests that one-shot sessions do not yield instructional change;⁶ instead, teachers need time to take the information, use it in classroom, and then come back to discuss plans for future adaptations. Synchronous, face-to-face discourse made this cycle of professional learning possible. The advantage was summarized by one teacher: “The most effective outcome of the team approach is that we can make adjustments quickly as needed. The feedback is immediate: we debate, share, brainstorm, and walk out with ideas for improvement and implement right away.” We encourage designing professional development that allows space for this “looping.”

Developing Commonalities: Over



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time, the teams that functioned the most smoothly had clear common needs: addressing the same standards, teaching the same course, or helping students succeed with the same project or assessment. Teams that shared a localized community interest as well as epistemological beliefs valuing literacy and inquiry found common ground in implementing C3 Investigations. External factors, such as state policies on C3 and the Common Core, contributed to the commitment and success of teams because the variability across states added complexities and complications that made it difficult for cross-state teams to coalesce and do meaningful work. For example, some states, such as Illinois, proposed revisions to their social studies standards with explicit alignment to the C3 Framework, particularly Dimension One. Thus, one team noted the advantage: “As a collaborative team, using the lens of the C3 Framework gave us a common ‘disciplinary language’ to guide our reflection and ideas for improvement in the future.” This was also seen in the projects of other participants who found common ground in designing inquiries addressing local and state curriculum (e.g., participants from Nebraska examining the building of the Keystone XL Pipeline). A bigger problem was faced by participants from states that did not accept the Common Core Standards because of the lack of common ground with those that had accepted the standards.

Diversity of Team Members: While participants were united in a shared vision for their work, we found that the most successful teams were strategically composed to include people approaching a common, compelling question from different perspectives (grade levels, subject areas or courses, roles other than core classroom teacher such as special education teacher, media specialist, coach, or administrator). During the learning phase of the work, the built-in diversity of perspectives broadened the exchange of ideas. While educators created and tested instructional resources,

having team members working in slightly (but not completely) different contexts revealed a broader range of possible solutions. A correlation seemed to develop in teams that were both diverse and close-knit. One participant reflected that as team cohesion built, she found that she was just as invested in others’ work as her own: “I was equally excited watching their projects as I was to bring mine to life. We have seen the planning and the pondering and we have gone back and forth over the questions, so to see the journey and the end product was exciting.”

Conclusion

Effective professional development is infectious and spreads excitement for teacher learning. This excitement was most clearly evidenced in the project’s largest face-to-face gathering, a session at the NCSS annual conference in New Orleans in 2015, where all teams finally had the opportunity to meet to engage in dialogue about their work. On this occasion, all project participants showcased their learning, the resulting pedagogical initiatives, and the student outcomes from the past year of participating in the project for the purpose of using inquiry to think forward and to design for professional learning outreach. This charrette proved powerful and transformational for everyone involved, as online learning came to life. Most importantly, as one participant astutely stated, at this point, “the teachers took over.” The deep, rich experience of learning and working through the C3 Literacy Collaborative Investigations resulted in a grassroots professional development experience that teams were eager to share with others. 🌍

Notes

1. Ann Jaquith, Dan Mindich, Ruth Chung Wei, and Linda Darling-Hammond, “Teacher Professional Learning in the U.S.: Case Studies of State Policies and Strategies,” *Education Digest: Essential Readings Condensed For Quick Review* 77, no. 2 (2011): 33-9; Stephanie D. van Hover, “Professional Development of Social Studies Teachers,” in *Handbook of Research in Social Studies*, eds. Linda S. Levstik and Cynthia A. Tyson (New York: Routledge, 2008), 352-372.

2. For a description of the C3 Literacy Collaborative (C3LC) Grant Project, please see www.socialstudies.org/c3_literacy_collaborative.
3. Available resources from the project, including the investigations, can be accessed at www.socialstudies.org/c3/c3lc. For an example of one such investigation that includes the Investigate, Create, and Connect cycle, please visit: www.socialstudies.org/resources/c3/c3lc/dimension-3-evaluating-sources-and-using-evidence.
4. The website for the C3LC grant is www.literacyinlearningexchange.org/group/ncss-c3-literacy-collaborative-grant-project.
5. Cynthia L. Blitz, *Can Online Learning Communities Achieve the Goals of Traditional Professional Learning Communities? What the Literature Says. REL 2013-003*. (Regional Educational Laboratory Mid-Atlantic, September 2013).
6. Richard Beach, “Research and Policy: Can Online Learning Communities Foster Professional Development?” *Language Arts* 89, no. 4 (March 2012): 256-262.

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