

The Continuum of Teacher Learning

Tracy Huebner

Whenever I set out to write this column, I embark on a learning experience that involves both individual knowledge gathering (making sense of what I read, reflecting on prior knowledge, and connecting it to new knowledge) and interdependent knowledge gathering (drawing on colleagues' thoughts and ideas and discussing them to build new meaning).

Teachers, as they strive to improve their professional practice, travel a similar path to learning. For each individual, the journey is personal and often circuitous.

What We Know

Many recent studies on teacher learning are grounded in the works of Rosenholtz (1989), Ball and Cohen (1999), and Putnam and Borko (2000). Their research, collectively, suggests that teacher learning occurs in at least two realms: the individual and the interpersonal. In the individual realm, teachers gain knowledge about content and pedagogy, agree or disagree with this knowledge, and make decisions regarding implementation and change. In the interpersonal realm, teachers engage in dialogue and collaboration to further develop and support their own learning.

More recent studies by Coburn (2001, 2004) identify a phenomenon that pulls both realms together. Coburn calls this phenomenon *sensemaking*—the process by which teachers notice and select certain messages from their environment, interpret them, and then decide whether to act on those interpretations to change their practice. To understand how teachers react to and make sense of messages they receive from district policies, the school administration, and professional work groups, Coburn conducted research spanning approximately 30 years at schools engaged in efforts to improve reading instruction.

In a qualitative study of urban teachers in California, Coburn found that teachers enacted their revised understandings of policies and practices through a continuum of action—ranging from rejection on one end to accommodation on the other end—drawing on both individual experiences and interpersonal interactions. As their understanding of the strategy grew, teachers who had started at the rejection end shifted toward the accommodation end if the strategy met students' learning needs.

For example, one of the key instructional strategies teachers were introduced to was the word wall, a series of words posted on a bulletin board in the classroom. This tool is used to build fluency in vocabulary. At one end of the continuum, a teacher may absolutely *reject* the practice and not bring it into her classroom, or she may choose to put up a word wall but not use it in her instructional practice (*decoupling/symbolic response*). As time goes on, she may use the wall with some students but not all (*parallel structures*), or she may *assimilate* the word wall and use it in a way that makes sense to her but that may not necessarily be the intended use. Finally, a teacher may fully adopt the practice (*accommodation*) and use the word wall in its intended way; this stage would be achieved only when the teacher has made meaning of the strategy.

Through oral histories and in-class observations, Coburn documented that these shifts in implementing new strategies occurred as teachers reflected on their own practices, had collaborative conversations with colleagues, tried new strategies, and used both individual and interpersonal interactions to build new, more meaningful learning activities.

Coburn's research shows how work knowledge develops over time from both independent and interdependent interactions. Teachers' learning is an ongoing process; teachers continually take in messages about how to teach and actively work through them to construct their practice.

What You Can Do

This research, as well as many supporting studies, suggests two levels at which schools can support teacher learning. First, provide messages to teachers through multiple means—in print (both online and offline), in one-on-one interactions, and in small and large groups. Making the learning part of the environment and reinforcing it in many ways increases the possibility that teachers will hear, absorb, understand, and apply the information. To support collaborative discussion in both large and small groups, establish such routines as ongoing, purposeful meetings of teachers to share information about teaching and learning.

A second essential level of support is to ground teacher learning in examples of practice—for example, through peer observations or examination of student work. Both of these strategies give teachers concrete feedback on the effectiveness of their teaching. Evidence about practice derived from student work and peer observations is a powerful feedback tool for reflection and learning.

Educators Take Note

Knowing that teacher learning is an iterative process that involves group interactions as well as self-reflection helps us think about a developmental continuum of support for teachers and not simply a one-dimensional approach to professional development. It also challenges the myth that once teachers walk into their classrooms and close the door, no messages get through. In fact, we know that classroom doors are permeable. Engaging teachers in thoughtful conversations about their practice, encouraging them to try out new approaches, and giving them ongoing opportunities to reflect on their efforts are important elements in supporting teacher learning.

References

- Ball, D., & Cohen, D. (1999). Developing practice, developing practitioners: Toward a practice-based theory of professional development. In G. Sykes and L. Darling-Hammond (Eds.), *Teaching as the learning profession: Handbook of policy and practice* (pp. 3–32). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Coburn, C. E. (2001). Collective sense-making about reading: How teachers mediate reading policy In their professional communities. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 23(2), 145–170.
- Coburn, C. E. (2004). Beyond decoupling: Rethinking the relationship between the institutional environment and the classroom. *Sociology of Education*, 77(3), 211–244.
- Putnam, R. T., & Borko, H. (2000). What do new views of knowledge and thinking have to say about research on teacher learning? *Educational Researcher*, 29(1), 4–15.
- Rosenholtz, S. J. (1989). *Teachers' workplace: The organization of schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Tracy Huebner is Senior Research Associate at WestEd, San Francisco, California: thuebne@wested.org.
