

Professional Learning 101

A Syllabus of Seven Protocols

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Seven protocols call for professional learning that is sustained, job-embedded, collegial, interactive, integrative, practical, and results-oriented.

By Robin Fogarty and Brian Pete

Adult learners have preferences and predilections that make them different from other learners. That is especially true for teachers who are seeking professional development. Research in the field of professional learning has revealed what works with adult learners

(Knowles 1973; Zemke and Zemke 1981), how change happens in schools (Fullan and Stiegelbauer 1991; Guskey 2000), what standards apply to high-quality staff development (National Staff Development Council 2001), and what are the “best practices” in professional learning.

soul of sound, productive, professional learning that moves from the staff room to the classroom. These seven protocols call for professional learning that is sustained, job-embedded, collegial, interactive, integrative, practical, and results-oriented.



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ROBIN FOGARTY is president of Robin Fogarty & Associates, Chicago, Illinois. **BRIAN PETE** is co-founder and consultant to Robin Fogarty & Associates.

Seven protocols frequently appear in the literature. These seven components are particularly important for successful Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). But, regardless of what models of professional learning are implemented, these seven elements anchor the experiences for lasting impact.

We call these protocols the *Syllabus of Seven*, and they provide the heart and

#1. SUSTAINED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING: IT'S NOT GOING AWAY

Adult learners are self-directed learners (Zemke and Zemke 1981). Give them the big picture, offer options for learning, support their practice stages, and they will take charge of their own learning paths. That kind of learning calls for a long-term implementation plan that occurs consistently and continually over time (Fullan and

Stiegelbauer 1991). Inherent in this concept of sustained professional learning is the presence of regularly scheduled team meetings and multiple options that enable all staff members to participate. This includes varied time options (summer, after school, Saturdays) as well as various format options (collaborative, independent, face-to-face, remote). When staff sense that this is a major initiative that is not going away, teachers are more likely to get on board early and to expend genuine effort.

The sustained effort by staff members dictates that professional development be planned for the long term and that guidance and support are provided for PLCs. Sustained professional learning certainly means, at the least, regularly scheduled collaborative sessions that encourage relevant dialogue about student-centered concerns. It also means there should be fewer school-wide initiatives and more team-based initiatives.

#2. JOB-EMBEDDED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING: HELP WHEN I NEED IT

When support is visible, available, and accessible all day, every day, the rate of success for implementing new initiatives increases phenomenally. When learners know that they can always find someone with the time and commitment to talk things through, when there is immediate and consistent help, the learners' efforts become more deliberate and more focused. This support is the critical factor in maintaining the sustained efforts necessary for lasting change.

Peer coaching, expert coaching, teacher facilitators, and lead teachers are needed on site in every building. These are the support teams, with clearly articulated responsibilities that support teachers' professional practice. The evidence is clear: Coaching makes a difference.

#3. COLLEGIAL PROFESSIONAL LEARNING: SOMEONE TO TALK TO

Adult learners want to work with colleagues (Knowles et al. 1998; Zemke and Zemke 1981). This preference for

collaborative work with peers — in department teams, grade-level teams, or vertical teams — fully supports the establishment of professional learning communities (DuFour and Eaker 1998). When teachers put their heads together over student-centered concerns, that team effort can be the most

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powerful school improvement tool in the school (Schmoker 1996). The promise of professional learning communities as problem-solving bodies for school improvement has been well-documented, but they need time, support, and structures to become effective.

The implications of professional collaborations are profound. Teachers become interested in what other teachers are doing. Team time is a scheduling priority. This means protocols for functioning as a team, goals for directing the work, and leadership for accomplishing the aims are necessary tools for success. Thus schools should honor collaboration in all professional interactions, including the practice of sending teachers to conferences in teams of two or more to foster conversations about purposeful applications.

#4. INTERACTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING: IT'S NOT A 'SIT AND GIT'

Adult learners don't want theoretical or hypothetical learning. They want hands-on learning (Knowles et al. 1998; Zemke and Zemke 1981). Active, engaged, interactive learning is the hallmark of effective, applicable, and transferrable professional development. When teachers become involved in the learning, immersed as a member of a team, exposed to continual and guided practice that is application-oriented, they demonstrate deeper understanding, more skill with the practice, and more authentic implementation in their classroom settings (Joyce and

Showers 2002). The interactivity often results in the learners' ownership of the new practices. And, when they own the learning, real application and varied uses of the practice occur more frequently in their classrooms.

This kind of highly interactive professional learning includes a number of

critical ingredients, such as small-group work-pairs, partners, trios, and table teams. Other critical ingredients are roles and responsibilities for the participants in those groups, internal leadership, and clearly articulated expectations for full participation by all members.

#5. INTEGRATIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING: DIFFERENT STROKES FOR DIFFERENT FOLKS

Adult learners want it all. Focus groups have confirmed over the years that adult learners want face-to-face, Internet, web-based, collegial kinds of learning opportunities embedded in the professional learning. Diverse and varied methods of learning are as necessary for the wide and diverse population of adult learners as they are with the wide and diverse population of young learners. High-quality professional learning experiences differentiate both through the media by which they are delivered — for example, face-to-face, web-based, online, or text-supported — and through the methods by which they are addressed — for example, book studies, action research, data analysis, collaborative planning, reflective questioning, model lessons, peer dialogues, and journaling and conferencing.

#6. PRACTICAL PROFESSIONAL LEARNING: I CAN USE THIS

Adult learners are pragmatic learners. They want to know that what they are learning is going to help them do

their job. Those who direct professional learning must learn how to tap into this commitment of energy. They must do whatever it takes to help make the learning relevant for these self-mo-

Every session must include time to allow participants to make real-world connections to their everyday work.

tivated adult learners. In fact, Guskey (2000) suggests that when professional learning initiatives are successful in a school, it is because teachers are instructed, encouraged, supported, and held accountable to use the new practices. More often than not, they eventually “practice themselves into change.” They come to believe in the change when they realize it helps them do their job more effectively. Once they know that the new practice works, they are more willing to give up the old one.

Obvious implications of this protocol are easy to recognize but sometimes hard to do. It is one thing to say that the focus of the professional learning is relevant, it is quite another thing to demonstrate that relevance to each person in the room. In the language of learning, the real focus here must shift

to transfer and application. As part of the professional development, the transfer, applications, and uses of the learning must be targeted explicitly (Fogarty and Pete 2006). There must

be clear expectations and understanding of authentic transfer and the application of learning. And every session must include time to allow participants to make real-world connections to their everyday work.

#7. RESULTS-ORIENTED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING: THE DATA TELL US SO

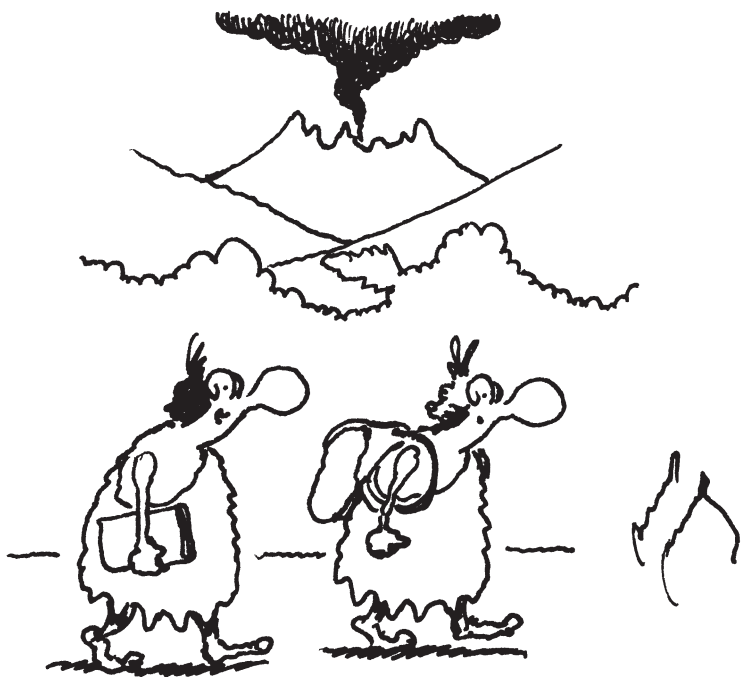
Adult learners are goal-oriented (Knowles et al. 1998; Zemke and Zemke 1981). If schools are to replace ineffective practices with research-based, teacher-tested, proven best practices, there must be measurable results or the efforts will never be maintained or sustained. Therefore, professional learning, at its best, is data-driven (Schmoker 1996). When student learning is successfully influenced,

we know, because the data tell us so.

As school leaders design and implement their comprehensive professional learning plans, the “syllabus of seven” provides a handy checklist to guide that work. By asking how the professional development provides each of the seven protocols, school leaders have a ready tool for judging the quality of the professional learning experiences they are planning and designing. **K**

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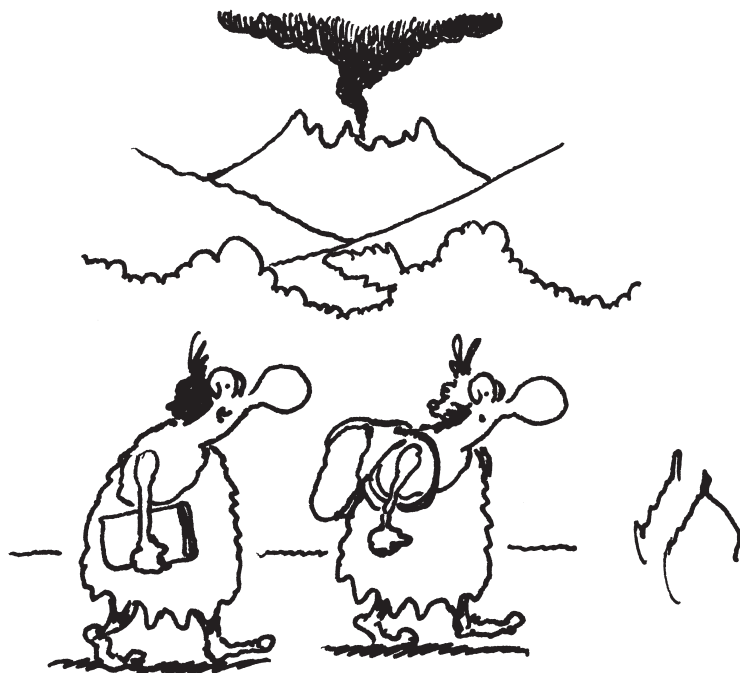
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