
Preface

The Rationale

Professional learning is the cornerstone of many (if not most) school improvement efforts. The basic idea is that student learning, engagement, and success are dependent on high-quality practices in classrooms and schools. And high-quality practice emerges from meaningful professional learning. That said, despite best intentions, significant research has found that professional learning is often about activity rather than about learning. And if it's not about learning, then it is unlikely to have an impact on practice in a way that will lead to real and sustained improvements in schools. The key question, then, is what does it mean for professional learning efforts in schools and districts to really be about the kind of learning that truly improves practice?

The Focus

This book takes up that question. In essence, what does it mean to truly leverage the *learning* in professional learning? We have set the bar high in defining "learning" and use a strict, psychological definition of the term. Learning is a *permanent* change in thinking or behavior. When this permanence criterion is included in the definition of learning, it becomes easier to understand why typical professional development is often less about learning and more about activity. Real new learning is hard work. It is about people thinking, knowing, and understanding differently than they did before. Research has shown that this is very difficult because human beings are not naturally inclined to make these kinds of changes. Simply put, and contrary to conventional wisdom, our minds tend to get in the way. There is a range of "cognitive biases" that work to impede

new learning—things that our minds do that get in the way of changing what we think, know, and understand.

Getting to real learning requires disrupting our natural propensity to avoid it. This is challenging and requires intentional facilitation of a particular sort—what we call *intentional interruption*. It's about an intentional interruption of the subtle cognitive and affective supports that work to preserve the status quo of thinking, knowing, and doing and that impede new learning. This book will outline what it means to intentionally interrupt the status quo of professional learning in order to enable real new learning that takes the form of permanent changes in thinking and practice.

Organization

This book is organized into six chapters: In Chapter 1, "From Activity to Learning," we provide an overview of our research-based theoretical model, which shows why professional learning is so important, as well as introduce our notion of facilitation as intentional interruption. In Chapter 2, "The (Very) Hard Work of Learning," we take a step back and examine in depth what learning is from a psychological perspective (a permanent change in thinking or behavior) and why it is so difficult to make it happen. In Chapter 3, "The Problem With Professional Learning," we describe how educators typically try to enable learning—through professional development activities—and why this is often problematic from a true learning orientation. In Chapter 4, "How Do Focus, Collaborative Inquiry, and Instructional Leadership Enable Learning?" we look at how professional learning that does have the potential to impact on teacher practice and student achievement occurs, specifically examining how it is enabled through focus, collaborative inquiry that challenges thinking and practice, and instructional leadership. In Chapter 5, "The Barriers: How Our Minds Get in the Way," we describe the psychological biases that interfere with professional learning and get in the way of putting the enablers (focus, collaborative inquiry, and instructional leadership) into place. These psychological biases are the barriers to real learning that need to be interrupted. In Chapter 6, "Intentional Interruption," we look carefully at the notion of interrupting the barriers to learning. Specially, we explore strategies and methodologies for intentionally interrupting the barriers described in Chapter 5 to ensure that focus, collaborative inquiry, and instructional leadership unfold in a way that truly enables learning.

Reading and Using This Book

This book is for anyone who has a stake in supporting the kind of professional learning that truly impacts on student achievement. This includes school, district, and legislative leaders who have responsibility for promoting professional learning and professional development. It also includes teachers, who are responsible for facilitating their own professional learning, as well as that of their colleagues. Wherever possible, we provide concrete, school-based illustrations of the ideas being described, with various roles reflected therein. These examples are drawn from real practice and come from our own work and experience in facilitating and researching professional learning in many school districts over the last decade. The book can be read straight through, or it can be a resource for learning and conversation among school and district teams. Each chapter finishes with a section called “Time for Reflection,” which includes a number of reflection questions relating to major ideas in the chapter. These questions are designed to help readers digest and personalize the content of the chapters and can be considered either individually or in groups.