Chapter 3
Personalizing Professional Development Through the Unconference:
A Constructivist Approach

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ABSTRACT

This chapter shares a framework for personalizing professional development through which adult learners' needs are determined in real time and discussed and investigated at the time of need for educators. The model, referred to as an unconference or EdCamp, brings educators together, either physically on the same site or electronically, where needs are identified at the start of the meeting, then shared and addressed by those with similar needs. This chapter traces a brief history of professional development (PD) in P-12 schools from the emergence of the National Staff Development Council, now called Learning Forward, and reviews the evolution of evaluation models. It then traces a brief history of learning theory from Behaviorism to Constructivism, and the impact of the evolving understanding of how we learn on changing professional development delivery. The authors share advances from the sciences that have influenced the design and delivery of learning and offer a brain-based approach for delivering PD.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN P-12 AMERICAN EDUCATION

In the 1970's, a new specialized role emerged within the education profession in the United States amidst roles such as "teacher" or "administrator." The new role was termed the "staff developer." Staff developers focused on the professional learning or professional development of the adults in schools rather than just the learning of the students in schools. Under the leadership of Ron Brandt, a group of these

educators, focused primarily on adult learning in schools, began to meet regularly; promoting the idea that teacher learning was equally important to student learning. They organized themselves, established annual conferences, and emerged as the National Staff Development Council (NSDC) in 1978.

This new organization grew both in size and visibility within the field. In 1987, with Brandt now serving as editor of the national, widely circulated journal *Educational Leadership*, two seminal works were published; "Staff Development and Student Learning: A Synthesis of Research on Models of Teaching" (Showers, Joyce, & Bennett, 1987) and "Synthesis of Research on Staff Development: A Framework for Future Study and a State-of-the-Art Analysis" (Joyce, Showers, & Rolheiser-Bennett, 1987). These articles presented a meta-analysis of studies relevant to staff development that had been conducted over the prior two decades. One finding was that "the number of studies dealing with the acquisition of teaching skills and strategies permitted the development of hypotheses about how teachers acquire teaching skills and strategies, although the number of investigations into how skills are incorporated into the active repertoire continued to be quite small" (Showers, Joyce & Bennett, 1987, p. 78).

Against a backdrop of increased interest in professional development, the National Staff Development Council continued to grow. By 2009, the NSDC reported a membership over 13,000 strong, with more than 3,000 members attending their national conference each year. At the same time, an emphasis on the outcomes of PD becoming intertwined with outcomes for student learning as a result of PD increased. The NSDC created Standards for Professional Learning for elementary, middle and high school level educators and on September first of 2010, officially changed their name from the National Staff Development Council to Learning Forward. One reason for this name change was the fact that the Council had become international in nature. Additionally, the new name reflected their core purpose, that of professional "learning." In 2010 and 2011, Learning Forward collaborated with 40 other professional educational organizations and published a revised version of their professional development standards. (For a brief history of the organization and the Standards for Professional Development see Shore, 2012 or the Learning Forward website.) The new standards do not offer a prescription for the many challenges facing educators and educational leaders; they focus on a now established core principle that improved learning by teachers in a school building tends to lead to improved learning by the students in that school (Jaquith, Mindich, Wei, & Darling-Hammond, 2010).

Today some states license professional positions and universities have developed degree and certificate programs aimed specifically for preparing staff developers in the education field. Some are referred to as Instructional Specialists or Facilitators as examples. Some have designated district level positions for this purpose. At the same time, the roles of school principals have broadened to include a focus on developing staff learning at the same time as providing optimum learning environments for their students, based on the knowledge that improving adult learning can lead to improved student learning.

LEARNING THEORIES: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

There is a plethora of definitions of what it means to have "learned" something. In one respect, learning is seen as a relatively permanent change in one's behavior due to some experience. It can also be defined as the acquisition of skills or knowledge through various mediums including experience, study, or being taught something. Cognitive experiences, emotional responses, and environmental influences, as well as prior experience, can all play a role in how we learn, how our understanding is developed or changed, and how knowledge or skills are retained. Over time, learning theories have emerged and evolved, pro-

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