Above the Fold:

Creating Individual Professional Development Plans

Above the Fold: Introduction

Educators need their own books of important stuff. We can't learn everything. We can't take every course, read every book, attend every conference. We must have priorities. We must be able to say, this is my year to learn _____, and we fill in that blank with one topic, one issue, one area of inquiry. ..Just as the New York Times *places the most significant news stories above the fold, educators need to ask, "What's above the fold?" "What's most significant?" What really matters for me at this point in time?" Setting limits and devoting big blocks of time to one area of study is the only way we can study issues deeply and lead scholarly lives.*

Shelly Harwayne

At the start of the year we get swept up in so many details, everything from organizing classrooms to scheduling parent events and fire drills. One of the most positive uses of all that fall energy and enthusiasm is to develop individual learning plans which can be sustained all year long.

Many administrators require teachers to fill out professional development plans for the year in early fall, setting goals and charting how to move the learning development forward. Being part of a strong professional community is so important when it comes to professional development that endures. As Shelley Harwayne notes in the above quote, nothing is more energizing than realizing your colleagues around you are also "swept up" in learning new things about literacy and students…and working as a community to design professional development plans together.

This eGuide includes a six-step process for creating individual professional development plans. The process can be completed by teachers or administrators working alone to devise these plans. But ideally, the steps should be completed with a partner or group of colleagues. The more everyone in the school community knows about the learning agenda of their peers, the better. This process will help foster more collaboration around emerging interests, needs, and strengths.

The meetings to devise plans together might include administrators and support personnel—anyone in the school who has some responsibility for helping students learn. The workshops can be completed in one long day of collaborating with others, or you might choose to complete them over a few days or a week. You might even try one step a week through the first few weeks of school, to allow the ideas to percolate longer as you work with students and colleagues.

The plans are also suitable for one-on-one sessions with teachers if you are a mentor or coach assigned to assist colleagues with individual plans. These activities are appropriate for any grade level or setting.

Reference

Harwayne, Shelly. 1999. *Going Public.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

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Step 1: Stones in Our Shoes

…the stones in our shoes --
we like to feel them down there
working things out -- those little homes.

from "All Day in Shoes" by Adam Chiles

The stones in our shoes are the things that nag at the edge of our consciousness, the small irritants that demand just a bit of our attention every day, whether we want to give it or not. But those stones can also be "little homes" for the questions or concerns that can drive professional development all year long.

Brainstorm a list of the things that you wonder about in your classroom, beginning with worries, irritants, and issues you haven't been able to "work out" yet. Write down at least five topics and don't censor your list.

Five "Wonderings" or Stones in My Shoes

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Be specific in your concerns. Many teachers reject their first questions or needlessly broaden them. They don't always believe that their concerns are worthy of study. "What works well in writing workshops?" is a question we have been presented with more than once by colleagues. This is a monumental question, too global for anyone to frame or answer in a professional development inquiry.

Yet when we are presented with specific questions by teachers like "How are Julie's perceptions of her role in writing response groups changing over time?" the question is often followed with, "But I know that's not important enough to study." Professional development shouldn't ignore the complexity of teacher and student interactions, and how key they are to teacher learning and growth. Your professional development will probably start with individual students and their needs in your classroom. The more specific you are, the easier it will be to develop a plan.   Many teachers find it helpful not to write about an issue, but to write about a student who is a mystery. Often focusing on one student gives educators a way into bigger teaching and learning concerns.

Make an appointment to get together with a teaching colleague to talk about your list of wonderings. We suggest meeting off school grounds—for lunch on a weekend or at your favorite cafe after school. Treat yourself to a comfortable and inviting environment in which to explore your emerging professional development agenda. As you sip some coffee or share a meal, talk through your list. We find that just airing possibilities with a trusted colleague can help anyone find a focus that is personally intriguing.

Once you have narrowed your topic, write down your concern as a question. Consider the question a first draft. Don't worry yet about how it is framed; just get it down on paper. Write it as fully as you need to, as a whole paragraph if necessary. Give yourself permission to play with the question, writing it several different ways until you have all the information you want included.

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Step 2: Narrowing the Focus

Give yourself a little time to mull over the question you've selected for professional development this year. Read it again after you've let it settle for a few hours, days, or weeks. Does it still intrigue you? Are you still itching to investigate this area? If the answer is no, look over your process and see where you lost your enthusiasm. Make sure you get that aspect back into your draft before you move on to the refining stage.

Here are some examples of questions that have intrigued teachers we've worked with in the past:

- *What happens when I give my students more time to select books for independent reading?*
- *What happens when I use chapter books during read-alouds with my first graders?*
- *What are the best lessons or procedures for teaching my fifth graders about the value of rereading texts?*
- *What alternatives are there to end-of-the-chapter questions for linking writing, talk, and reading comprehension with my 11th grade students?*
- *What is the role of peer response in improving student writing?*
- *What procedures can I put in place to help my students do more thoughtful independent work?*
- *How can I provide alternative texts for my struggling 8th grade readers that still enable them to be full participants in the reading community?*
- *What revision strategies should I teach to my fourth graders at the start of the year? What revision strategies are best taught later in the year?*

Try beginning your question with one of these stems:

- *What is the role of... ?*
- *How do ... ?*
- *What procedures ... ?*
- *What happens when ... ?*

Avoid yes/no questions – they will limit your learning. As you draft, keep asking yourself these questions:

Why is this issue more important than others I could explore?

Why do I think this topic will sustain my interest?

Our final advice is the most important: Give yourself the time you need and the permission to modify your question as you begin your professional development planning. Carry poet Rainer Maria Rilke's advice with you as you embark on this learning adventure: "Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves."

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Step 3: Resources

One of our favorite activities is to post large sheets of chart paper on the walls of the teacher workroom, each containing one teacher's professional development question at the center. Markers are taped on strings or tacked to the board, and colleagues are asked to suggest resources related to the topic or question. These resources might be books, upcoming conferences, other colleagues who know a lot about the topic, or websites with useful materials.

If the pages are posted for a full week, they will be filled with a rich array of sources far beyond what any one teacher could find on his or her own. In addition, it's a marvelous way to ensure everyone is aware of the different professional development interests in the school community.

As the year progresses, teachers will often keep the topics of peers in mind and continue to share new books and materials. Many teachers also write down and seek out resources unrelated to their topic, just because they are interested in the suggestions related to other professional development plans.

Web sources for books, videos, workshops, and print materials include:

Choice Literacy   www.choiceliteracy.com
Stenhouse Publishers   www.stenhouse.com
Heinemann Publishers   www.heinemann.com
Scholastic   www.scholastic.com

Professional organizations offering local, state, and national conferences include:

International Reading Association www.reading.org
National Council of Teachers of English www.ncte.org

If there is a budget to support the purchase of books, professional memberships, or conference registrations, administrators may want to think through in advance how to allocate funds in a way that is perceived as fair by all, or designate a team of teachers to assist with allocation once everyone has completed wish lists of resources.

Step 4: Collecting Information

What information do you need to answer your question? The information will likely fall into four categories:

1. Professional Reading
    - Books
    - Articles
    - Web Resources
    - Journals

2. Workshops, Courses, and Conferences
    - Local Events (through the school, district, or a regional college)
    - Regional and National Conferences
    - Seminars (through publishing and consulting firms)

3. Colleagues
    - Classroom Visits
    - Written Exchanges
    - Informal Meetings or Discussions

4. Data from Teaching
    - Observations of Students at Work
    - Survey Questions (add these as a routine part of the start or finish of reading and writing workshops)
    - Student Interviews
    - Observations by Colleagues
    - Student Work Samples
    - Test Data
    - Audio (listen "raw" or transcribe excerpts)
    - Video (watch "raw" or view excerpts)

Try to adapt records and assessments you already use now with students, rather than adding many new records tied to your professional development topic. For example, if your question is about the value of students' responding to the drafts of their peers in writing workshop, perhaps you could have students write silently once a week in workshop for five minutes to a prompt about the issue, and then analyze their responses. This information will not only help you with your professional development agenda—it will be useful when it comes time to assess student progress and the growth of your classroom community.

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Step 5: Support

Connecting with others through new learning is joyful. In order to find a colleague or colleagues who can provide ongoing support for your professional development, you'll need to ask yourself these questions:

Who can be a good sounding board?

Who is someone you already turn to when you need professional advice and support? It could be someone in your school, or an old friend from student teaching days, or even a family member whose teaching inspired you to become an educator. Try to list at least three friends or colleagues, knowing that at least one or two won't be available consistently as a sounding board.

How will you schedule regular time to share new information related to your question?

What kinds of support are most helpful to you? Some teachers prefer a cup of tea or a walk early morning once a week to discuss progress; others will want agreed-upon times and dates for email updates; others will need a regular group meeting with peers. Flexibility in how and when you exchange ideas allows participation of those who have severe time constraints for after- or before-school meetings (i.e., young children or caregiving responsibilities, graduate coursework).

What are the ground rules for working together?

Will you each be working on individual professional development plans, or share the same inquiry topic? What time commitment is involved? Is the project open-ended, or will there be a specific time when you both move on to other projects?

Once you've thought through these issues, you can pick a date and time for your first discussion. It's useful to call the first sessions exploratory, taking time after you've met once or twice to tweak the schedule to fit your emerging collaborative style.

Step 6: Drafting the Professional Development Plan

Now that you've done all the preparation for developing your professional development plan, all that is left to do is to put it in writing. Use all the materials you've pulled together from the first five steps to answer the following questions. The final format for the plan should be whatever works best for you – simple notes, completing a form required by your district or school, or a communal bulletin board in the teacher's workroom with plans from everyone posted.

Question:

- What is your professional development question?
- Why is it important to you?
- Why is it more important than other questions you brainstormed originally?

Resources:

- What will you read?
- What expertise from colleagues might you tap?
- Whose classroom might you visit?
- What conference or workshop might you attend?

Data:

- What information will you collect?
- How will you collect it?
- How will you analyze it?
- When will you analyze it?

Support:

- What type of support is most helpful to you?
- Who will help you make sense of the data you collect?
- How will you maintain contact with them?
- How often will you discuss your inquiry?

Timeline:

- When will you begin?
- What checkpoints will you include throughout the year for determining progress?
- When will you finish analyzing this issue?
- How will you know you are finished?