The Power of Reflective Exercises for Staff Development

To quote one of the exercises that appears later in this book, let’s “Begin at the End”:

- If you want to develop with your colleagues a coordinated teaching and community relations strategy to achieve more positive student outcomes (not only test scores but other evidence of achievement)
- If you want to examine with your colleagues the legitimacy of current educational practices in the interests of more positive student outcomes
- And if you know that regardless of district, state, or federal policies, improved working relationships with your colleagues will enhance student achievement

... then this book deserves your attention.

PURPOSE AND AUDIENCE

This book is about enhancing the performance of schools as successful organizations, ones in which both staff and students are active and productive learners. Most directly, it allows school staff the opportunity to determine, to a great extent, the content and course of their own development as education professionals. It is designed especially for professionals who want to undertake a stimulating journey toward more effective working relationships with their colleagues. Professionals who believe that the “whole” of collective efforts is infinitely greater than the “sum” of individual efforts. Professionals who are convinced that their own learning is prerequisite to the learning of students—and that the learning of students is enhanced by their own learning. Professionals who understand that
staff development must *embody* new ideas about learning, not just *espouse* new ideas about learning. Professionals who enjoy challenging themselves and who see playfulness as an essential ingredient of professional self-improvement. Professionals who hunger for new ideas and fresh perspectives. In sum, this book is for those seeking to open themselves to different ways of learning and working with each other and with students.

Most particularly, the text is for teachers, counselors, administrators, and staff developers as they undertake formal staff development efforts. It also encourages them to take advantage of opportunities for professional learning in such forums as staff meetings, school improvement team sessions, site-based management group meetings, and curriculum planning sessions.

At the same time, the ideas and exercises in the book can meet the needs of citizen leaders and parents who are as interested in self-development as their educator colleagues—people who not only want to see the investment in their schools pay off but also seek to become inspired and critical learners themselves. The exercises can be as useful to a group of parents and citizen leaders seeking to foster improvement in their schools as to a group of education professionals out to do the same.

**GUIDING PRINCIPLES**

The guiding principles of the text are as follows:

- Educators can and should take responsibility for their own professional development. While there are advantages to securing the services of outside experts to assist with both the substance and process of development, there are compelling advantages to educators shepherding their own development. This book not only advocates this principle but offers readers a set of tools to implement it.

- If school staff—teachers, administrators, counselors, staff developers—want to adopt fundamentally different approaches to working with each other and with their students, then they have to do different things with each other, from the very beginning of their development activities through to their completion. They have to experience modes of interaction that reflect the developmental challenges they will confront in their workplace—questioning and adjusting operating assumptions, assessing and reframing goals and values, and probing and reshaping relationships. (This principle is the “bell that rings in my ears” every time I interact with a group of professionals who say that they are interested in examining and improving their practices, anxious to get out of well-worn patterns of behavior, questing for renewal and revitalization.)

- All exercises chosen for staff development purposes, especially those chosen as starters, should exemplify sound learning concepts. With few exceptions, they should be responsive to the proverb,
I hear and I forget.
I see and I remember.
I do and I understand.

This is to say that good staff development should take advantage of the real context and circumstances in which the participants find themselves as professionals. A collection of individuals from the same workplace with different interests and talents and a set of prevailing relationships, brought together in a particular space at a particular time—these can provide ample grist for learning if the right elements are combined and creativity is applied to the design of the development experience. If mediated properly, experience can be a most powerful teacher.

- Staff development should in significant part be about finding allies, colleagues, even soul mates for ideas that are worth pursuing. So much of the activity that takes place in schools is isolating for the professionals who work there. Good professional development should counter this sense of isolation. Thus, exercises should be rich in opportunities for staff to become more familiar with each other as professionals, to see how they might join forces, to begin to view each other in a new, more understanding and appreciative light.

These principles point to the conclusion that staff development is inevitably about collective capacity building. In fact, the two words, “staff” and “development,” imply collective capacity building. Thus, education professionals who attend staff development sessions should feel that they have learned important things about each other and about how to do their jobs better. And they should return to their daily responsibilities uplifted, renewed, and ready to assume new challenges. They should feel more empowered and enabled to act on behalf of the children and youth they serve.

**MAKING THE EXCEPTION THE RULE**

Unfortunately, the outcome to which the principles point is still the exception rather than the rule. Too many staff development sessions are one-shot events that professionals have been compelled to attend and from which they learn less than they would like—and than their students deserve. Too often they return to their jobs more convinced than ever that whatever they accomplish will be attributable to their own lights, their own perseverance as individual professionals. It is the unfortunate reality that many education professionals feel more alone in facing the real challenges of their job after a staff development session than they did before it.

This situation must change because it is a waste of human capacity and a squandering of scarce resources. The current exception needs to become the future rule. Education professionals and their charges—school-attending
children and youth—deserve no less. Local communities and the nation deserve no less. Achieving this needed change in practice, however, requires significant shifts in policy at all levels—federal, state, and local. And preceding this policy shift is a necessary shift in attitude and assumption.

COMMITTING TO ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING CONCEPTS

All those concerned with staff development have to agree that its underlying aim is learning—both individual and organizational learning. This means that those who oversee and influence, and design and carry out, staff development programs must first of all adopt the ideas of theorists like Chris Argyris, Edgar Schein, Don Schon, and Peter Senge. Similarly, they must subscribe to positions advanced by educational theorists like Michael Fullan, Tom Guskey, Anne Lieberman, Linda Darling-Hammond, Seymour Sarason, and Roland Barth. The latter have, among other things, contextualized sound learning concepts in school operations and cited their implications for the design of staff development programs. Some of the central concepts they identify include the following:

• The necessity of reflective practice by professionals, individually and collectively—the ability to step back regularly from daily responsibilities and pose hard questions about functions, roles, and performance, to focus on why things are being done the way they are and whether they might be done differently. True learning communities function in this way.

• The distinction between theories-in-action and espoused theories—the differences between what school professionals really do and how they really interact, as opposed to what the mission statement mounted on the wall of the school foyer says about what they do and how they interact.

• The power of assumptions in shaping school culture and determining the behavior of all who work in the school. These are the tacit beliefs that distinguish the acceptable from the unacceptable. If, for example, it is assumed that teachers should not share professional knowledge with each other, then they will not.

The essential requirement of this kind of learning is that professionals explicitly and jointly commit to reaching for broader and deeper perspectives on their demanding roles, that they create the time and space to ask themselves and each other a few basic questions, such as the following:

• As professionals, what are we doing in this school? What are our most dominant “theories-in-action”?

• What are we really doing in this school? What underlying assumptions drive our behavior as professionals in this school?
What should we be doing differently? What do we want to change to better fulfill our collective aims? What can we do to narrow the gap between our espoused theories and our theories-in-action?

A key aspect of these ideas is that each and every participant in a staff development process has an active, in fact, determining, role to play. Indeed, it takes the minds of all staff to address honestly the challenging questions noted above. Thus, participants in staff development, grounded in sound learning principles, are by definition not the audience in a play presented by outsiders—they are the principal actors. Each has an important part in composing a better future.

The principles of sound staff development cited under the section headed “Guiding Principles” are remarkably consistent with the ideas outlined by the theorists mentioned above:

- Participants take responsibility for their own learning.
- Development exercises reflect high-impact learning.
- Development exercises engender collective energy.

**IMPORTANT CAVEATS**

The material in this book is meant to be supportive of established ideas, not generative of new ones. The exercises described in the next section are intended as ways to engage participants in a process of individual and organizational learning. The book sets forth experiences that can aid an ambitious learning agenda. Yet it does not include the full range of strategies, tactics, and activities that would comprise a comprehensive staff development initiative. Simply put, this book is an attempt to “start and keep a ball rolling” in a way that is consistent with important theories about how individuals and organizations learn.

At the same time, the relationship between theory and practice is such that new practices sometimes engender new ideas as much as the other way around. In fact, theory is often enriched, deepened, even reshaped as practitioners attempt to act in concert with theory. So readers should view this book as a significant beginning to turning staff development sessions into substantial learning sessions. Yet they should also understand that they will likely affect the development of ideas about learning in the process.

The way staff development sessions begin and the way they are carried out signal to a great extent the outcomes they will achieve. The beginning of a session, for example, almost always foretells what will follow. Significant indicators of success or failure cluster in large part in the first few minutes of joint work. Furthermore, the right set of moves in the middle of a session determines whether the learning from a previous segment is captured or if it evaporates into thin air. Simple as these axioms are, it is remarkable how seldom they are heeded, as staff development designers
and session leaders think about how to get sessions under way and maintain their momentum.

With this said, it is important to note that the exercises in this book are not intended as “icebreakers” or “sidelights.” The former term connotes a softening, warming, or melting of hardened, cold, or frozen conditions that may exist as people nervously assemble for a new experience with each other. The latter connotes a welcome distraction, capable of capturing interest but relatively unrelated to the substantive work at hand. Following the “icebreaker” or “sidelight,” participants become more amenable, less resistant, to facing the task at hand. The “real work” of the session then commences or resumes.

We have all participated in staff development efforts punctuated by an artfully deployed “icebreaker” or “sidelight.” Unfortunately, what often follows in its path is well-patterned drudgery—one-way conveyance of ideas with relatively little earnest interchange. Absent is mutual learning about the collective assets of participants, reflection on current practice, uncovering and addressing key assumptions, or generating new ways of looking at old problems.

Understand that “icebreakers” and “sidelights” have a legitimate role, but it is usually a minor one that is tangential to the task of supporting individual and organizational learning. Much more than softening, warming, or melting has to happen at the beginning of a serious staff development session. Much more than enticing distraction has to happen in the middle. In fact, these experiences, viewed largely as parenthetical, should shed their parentheses and connect seamlessly with the entire flow of the work. They should herald the work ahead, reinforce the work behind, provide the participants with robust cues about what is in store for them, and cap off what they have just learned. Most important, the exercises have to stimulate and inspire, providing a sense of anticipation that will be rewarded and a challenge that will be fulfilled.

Included in an expanded portfolio of possible supportive experiences are such factors as a “call” to participants to become active and stay active throughout the session; a robust suggestion or reminder that all the participants represent significant learning resources for each other; a signal that participants will be encouraged to experiment with modes of behavior that will promote their becoming more professionally effective; and an object lesson confirming that the task of running an effective school is not the job of the titular head of the school alone, but is owned by everyone in the room.

### CURRENT PRACTICE

By and large, the present repertoire of experiences offered in support of staff development reflects relatively little imagination and only tenuous connection to the main topics of the development sessions. They rarely exemplify the exciting, challenging, and universally engaging focus of the sessions themselves.
Here is the norm: The session leader provides a self-introduction, followed by an introduction of the topic to be treated, and then articulates the objectives for the session. Frequently, the session leader asks the participants at the beginning to offer something about themselves or their expectations for the session. But rarely is this important data synthesized and established as a reference point for the work of the group as it unfolds in the session itself. Then the intended work begins in earnest. Generally, participants pause in the middle of a development experience and are allowed time for social interaction. Since the session itself has offered little of this, the break usually runs over, and it is difficult to reclaim the participants for the work that has been put before them.

In addition, the meeting space itself almost always inhibits free and easy interchange among participants. Although the session leader’s intent may be to encourage open interaction, the furniture is often arranged in a way that makes this difficult. Tables consume most of the available floor space in the room. This arrangement precludes much open interchange among participants, and it is frequently difficult for all participants to see each other’s faces. During the session, the energy in the room is with the facilitator, not with the participants. Participants expect, and usually receive, little acknowledgment of their central role. The principal focus remains on the session facilitator for most of the available time.

The conditions just described may only partially reflect those that you as readers have experienced. Yet it is probably fair to say that the character and aspect of most contemporary staff development efforts do not support the group work proposed by organizational learning theorists. They do not foster a reflective capacity on the part of school professionals bent on improving the quality of their efforts in schools. As a consequence, there is little attention to the task of uncovering the underlying assumptions that drive behavior in the school as an organization, with the ultimate aim of altering those assumptions in favor of improved performance.

THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF SENGE ET AL.

Undoubtedly the most popular and best accepted representation of organizational learning concepts is the five disciplines that Peter Senge et al. outline in The Fifth Discipline, The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook, and Schools That Learn. The five so-called disciplines are personal mastery, systems thinking, mental models, shared vision, and team learning.

Personal mastery simply reaffirms that the ability of an organization to learn is dependent on the capacity of key individuals to learn and grow. Such learning and growth correlates with the individual’s confidence and expertise-gathering skills.

Systems thinking recognizes that every element of an organizational system affects every other element. Altering one practice has a significant impact on others. Those seeking to change complex systems like schools have to
be cognizant of essential interactive effects within them as they move to improve their functioning.

*Mental models* refers to the assumption-making penchants of all who work in organizational contexts. What we do as organizational actors and how we see what we do will to a large extent dictate how well we do. If we really see schools as assemblages of individual work contexts called classrooms, then our behavior as professionals will be dictated by that mental model. If, on the contrary, we see schools as highly integrated work settings framed by common purposes, then our actions will follow.

*Shared vision* (easy to say, hard to do) means that group members artfully discuss purposes, aims, and missions with each other until they achieve enough common understanding and appreciation of each other’s points of view that they can declare a coherent, collective direction—and pursue it vigorously.

*Team learning* is just that—the interactive approaches that group members, possessing a clear, shared sense of direction or vision, can take to promote mutual professional learning and thus come closer to attaining that vision.

**A PERSONAL APPROACH TO TEACHING AND CONSULTING**

Over the past couple of decades, I have oriented my own teaching and consulting to the ideas of Argyris, Schein, and Schon, as extended by Senge et al., Fullan, Sarason, and the like. Below is a guide I use with whom I work, to give them a sense of what they might expect from our collaboration. It was originally written as a way of introducing a different approach to leadership development, but its message is equally valid for a host of other topics that might warrant staff development—everything from collaborative learning to whole-language instruction.

The principal “text” used here is *experiences we will share.* “Reading,” i.e., decoding and understanding, this text will help you to develop your capacity to reflect more deeply and broadly on what happens in your work lives. In light of joint reflections on our common experiences (first) and of expert opinion in books and articles (second), we will prod each other to construct new ideas about what comprises effective practice.

As colleagues, we will begin to frame new ideas from these common experiences about our practice as professionals. When you formulate a project or initiative, you should make as many explicit references to your own experiences as to expert perspectives drawn from published books and articles. Experts rely to a great extent on ideas that are formed in the wake of their own experiences. So, for example, if our assigned task is learning about leadership, you will essentially be doing the same thing that the likes of Warren Bennis and Peter Senge do when they generate ideas about leadership and organizational functioning.
Experience to me includes a wide array of interactions of individuals with their environment. The experiences participants bring to the ones we share are a baseline, to be sure. And it is important that we know enough about group members’ “real-world” experiences, both to build on and play off of them.

Included in our shared experiences will be individual and group exercises or problems, service projects, and field analyses. Under the heading of exercises or problems are case studies, and simulations or games that pose organizational or group quandaries or dilemmas. In all instances, the consequences of decisions made in these situations are considerably less serious than those made in situations where jobs and reputations are at stake.

Being that these shared experiences take place on “safe ground,” they should increase your willingness to experiment. At the same time, they provide a guaranteed opportunity—since they take place on “territory” we have agreed to explore together—to try out deeper modes of observation that might lead you to refine your capacity for reflection and concept formation. The work we will do together, more than anything else, is meant to promote a kind of “hyperobservation” or “sophisticated noticing” on your part.

A persistent thread running through our joint learning is an understanding of how “real-world” quandaries are almost always reflected in the experiences we will share. These experiences may seem artificial, but in reality they are not; they are as real as those that occur in your workplace. The point here is that there is often as much, if not more, potential for solid learning from the “here and now” of a low-stakes, shared experience as there is from the more removed experiences—an understanding rarely exploited in academic and even corporate settings.

Finally, there are three major sequential (more or less) steps learners need to go through to analyze and use experience—“what,” i.e., what happened within the boundaries of the experience; “so what,” i.e., what interpretations can one legitimately draw from the experience or what are the general implications of the experience; and “now what,” i.e., what should one do differently in more high-stakes contexts, such as the school, because of what was just learned.

This approach—avowedly experiential—contrasts starkly with the traditional scholastic approach, which is first, to present concepts, and then second, to invite learners to apply them to their work lives. While it risks some conceptual integrity, it has the potential to engage learners more deeply with ideas and help them make more direct connections between theory and practice.

**ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK**

The aim of this introduction has been to offer a foundation of ideas for the exercises that follow in the next section. The exercises in Part II are organized into broad categories. There is a rationale for these categories...
and a logic to the sequence in which the exercises are presented within each category. Users will be invited to heed this sequence in their own application of the exercises if they choose. If not, they can look through the list of exercises and select ones they believe will meet their needs for given occasions and purposes.

After the presentation of the exercises, there is a final section that presents several stories of the author’s application of the exercises in real professional development contexts. It might make sense for readers to peruse this last section at the same time that they are reading about the exercises and selecting ones that seem to meet their needs. In the back of the book, there is a one-page matrix that slots the exercises according to purpose and topic, and lastly, there is a short list of references of major works on which I have drawn to compose the exercises.

The 30 exercises are organized under the following headings. The first is Maps and Markers. These exercises are intended to expand the mental landscape of participants—in terms of time, space, political reach, organizational presence. They invite participants to delve deeper into their own resources, assets, and reserves as professionals and to see how what they have to offer connects with what their colleagues have to offer. They are also encouraged to expand the boundaries that they consider as the appropriate domain for their work as professionals in the school—to recognize their responsibility for the entire enterprise, not just their specialized role in it. Finally, participants are asked to become more self-critical of their work as professionals, to practice critical reflection by themselves and with each other.

The second heading is Multiplicity, Mutuality, and Meaning. These exercises offer participants the opportunity to shape a collective intelligence and a collective will as professionals—to move from disparate and poorly coordinated perspectives and approaches toward greater common understanding, shared vision, coordinated strategy, and joint initiative. In this series of exercises, participants are invited to share their different perspectives as professionals and to attempt to craft the ties that bind them to each other. They are also asked to question basic operating assumptions. And finally, they are urged to sketch out common ground that can serve as the basis of joint effort.

The third heading is Mission Maintenance and Momentum. These exercises are meant to solidify common purpose and engender concerted action. Some encourage new arenas of inquiry and analysis, while others seek to guide agenda setting for purposeful deliberations. A couple of them are meant to promote increased political savvy on the part of school professionals. Others foster the attainment of momentum for change or the deflection of unhelpful distractions.

Within each of these sections, the exercises are arranged in rough order, from mildly demanding and relatively light to more demanding and relatively serious. Many of the exercises presented first in each of the sections would work well as starters for staff development sessions. Those presented at the end offer opportunity for sharpening key points or
solidifying important gains as development sessions are unfolding and intensifying.

FORMAT OF THE EXERCISES

Almost all the exercises can be accomplished in less than 45 minutes, including postactivity discussions. Suggested questions for reflection are offered in each exercise as guides for these discussions. There may, however, be instances in which vibrant and engaging discussions are provoked by an activity, and additional time should be set aside to address the issues raised.

Few props and little preparation are needed for these exercises. This is quite intentional, the aim being to ensure that the exercises can be easily and readily carried out, with minimal encumbrance. In most instances, the exercises are best done with a small group, about 12 to 20 participants. Many, however, can be done with much larger groups as long as these can be broken down into smaller subgroups of participants who have a workplace relationship.

Each exercise description also contains a short section that suggests where the exercise might best fit into a staff development continuum, what organizational learning principles it embodies, and when it might have the most positive impact on a group of learners. Finally, almost all the exercises can be carried out via face-to-face interaction among participants. However, many of these could be adapted for Web-based use. In addition, there are three exercises that are explicitly intended to be accomplished on the Web, as a supplement to face-to-face staff development sessions.