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What Are the Benefits of Analyzing Student Work?

“What’s in it for me?” That’s the question many educators secretly ask themselves when they are presented with a new educational initiative, program, assessment tool, or resource material. Put in different words, they may ask, “How will this make me a better educator?” “Will this have an impact on my entire practice?” or, “How will this enhance my students’ learning?” Yes, they might even ask, “How will this simplify my life?”

It is stating the obvious to say that educators are busy people. Within a normal week, when they are not with their students they may participate in at least one committee or staff meeting, make a dozen phone calls, spend an hour or two at the copy machine, gather resource materials, locate appropriate software or Internet sites to enhance their lessons, hold a parent conference, and participate in a staff development workshop. They might even find a few hours for their personal lives. It’s no wonder they view any new initiative with a skeptical eye. How can they possibly find the time to try one more new approach when they are already caught up in the dailyness of teaching?

Teachers are responsible for the health and safety of their students, and increasingly, the teacher’s role is being extended to include the social and emotional well-being of the students. Often teachers are so immersed in the immediacy of daily schedules, routines, and activities that it is easy for

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them to lose sight of their primary responsibility: to provide a safe, nurturing environment where students are engaged in relevant and memorable learning. However, committed educators must never lose sight of this primary responsibility; it is where educators need to focus their energy and commit their valuable time.

Additionally, teachers are all participants in some form of evaluation process. The process usually involves an external evaluator and classroom observation of a range of criteria, from the environment to the instructional strategies. While the intent of these evaluations is to improve and refine teacher practice, in fact they are primarily designed to comply with Board of Education policy. The evaluator usually focuses on teacher behavior rather than what the students are learning. At best, this type of evaluation affirms what teachers are doing well at that moment or offers constructive feedback for improvement. At worst, the evaluation is limited by the evaluator's knowledge of best practice. Evaluations are isolated in nature and focus primarily on teacher behavior within a limited time frame. Once the evaluation is completed, teachers rarely use the information gathered to plan for their individual growth or to improve student learning. While newer teachers may be observed annually, tenured teachers often teach several years without a formal classroom observation. With the development of teacher standards, cognitive coaching, peer review, and other such initiatives, the type of teacher evaluation described above is slowly vanishing, but unfortunately not quickly enough.

Regardless of the daily schedules, routines, activities, and the evaluation processes that consume so much time, educators need to focus their energy and commit their valuable time to their primary responsibility. Quality instruction cannot be left to chance after all the other responsibilities are attended to. The stakes are too high. Today's society demands that all students obtain the skills and attitudes necessary to be productive and contributing citizens. In order to be successful, students must have solid content knowledge. They must comprehend fundamental concepts and demonstrate their understanding in a variety of circumstances. Additionally, students must know how to begin and what processes to use when they are faced with new situations outside the classroom. This is the true purpose of learning. However, to successfully accomplish this, schools must be committed to helping educators shift the focus in all areas of their practices.

THE LEARNER-CENTERED CLASSROOM

Educators need to shift from teaching isolated content to promoting the development of essential thinking skills and processes that will equip their students to be lifelong learners. The Coalition of Essential Schools' (2002) first common principle for elementary and secondary schools defines it as "learning to use one's mind well." A shift from using textbooks as the

primary source of content to emphasizing learning through real-life problem solving is needed. Students must be encouraged to constantly ask questions and seek answers, constructing and refining their knowledge base as they proceed. Experiences that enable students to self-assess, and to articulate their areas of strength and areas needing further attention, are vital to their academic growth. To support this type of process-oriented learning, teachers need to create classrooms in which interaction between students, and interaction between students and teacher, is valued—classrooms in which everyone works together and cooperative problem solving thrives. In this type of learner-centered classroom, the teacher shifts from being the leader on stage to being an expert, facilitator, and co-learner interacting and learning alongside the students. Educators need to focus their attention on these shifts in thinking in order to remain true to their primary commitment: to provide a safe, nurturing environment where their students are engaged in relevant and memorable learning that will continue throughout their lives. Teachers need to be thoughtful and deliberate when designing experiences for students. They need to carefully consider the content and process skills that are essential to their students' learning. Teachers need to provide experiences that are intellectually engaging and relevant to their students' lives. These experiences must be structured in a way that promotes self-directed learning.

At the same time, there is a need for an ongoing evaluation process to determine whether teachers are making these crucial shifts that are so vital to their students' futures. The evaluation process must reflect on student work to guide teachers' Professional Development Plans. Finally, due to the teachers' already overloaded agendas, the process must be easily incorporated into their daily practices. As Costa and Liebmann (1997c) state, "we are coming to understand that the act of teaching is a highly intellectual process involving continuous decision making—before, during, and after classroom instruction" (p. 37). They go on to state that these thought processes are influenced by deeply buried theories of learning, beliefs about education and student conduct, and teachers' cognitive styles.

THE COLLABORATIVE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

The Collaborative Professional Development Process is designed to take this highly complex and deeply buried thinking and raise it to a level of conscious decision making. It is a comprehensive approach to teaching that builds on understanding, designing, implementing, and examining student work. It focuses on the students for evidence of intellectual engagement. Educators using this process are able to design work that not only involves their students in activities but ensures that the activities are engaging their students' minds. Because of its reflective nature, the process allows educators not only to analyze the learning experiences they are designing for their students, but also to determine their effectiveness.

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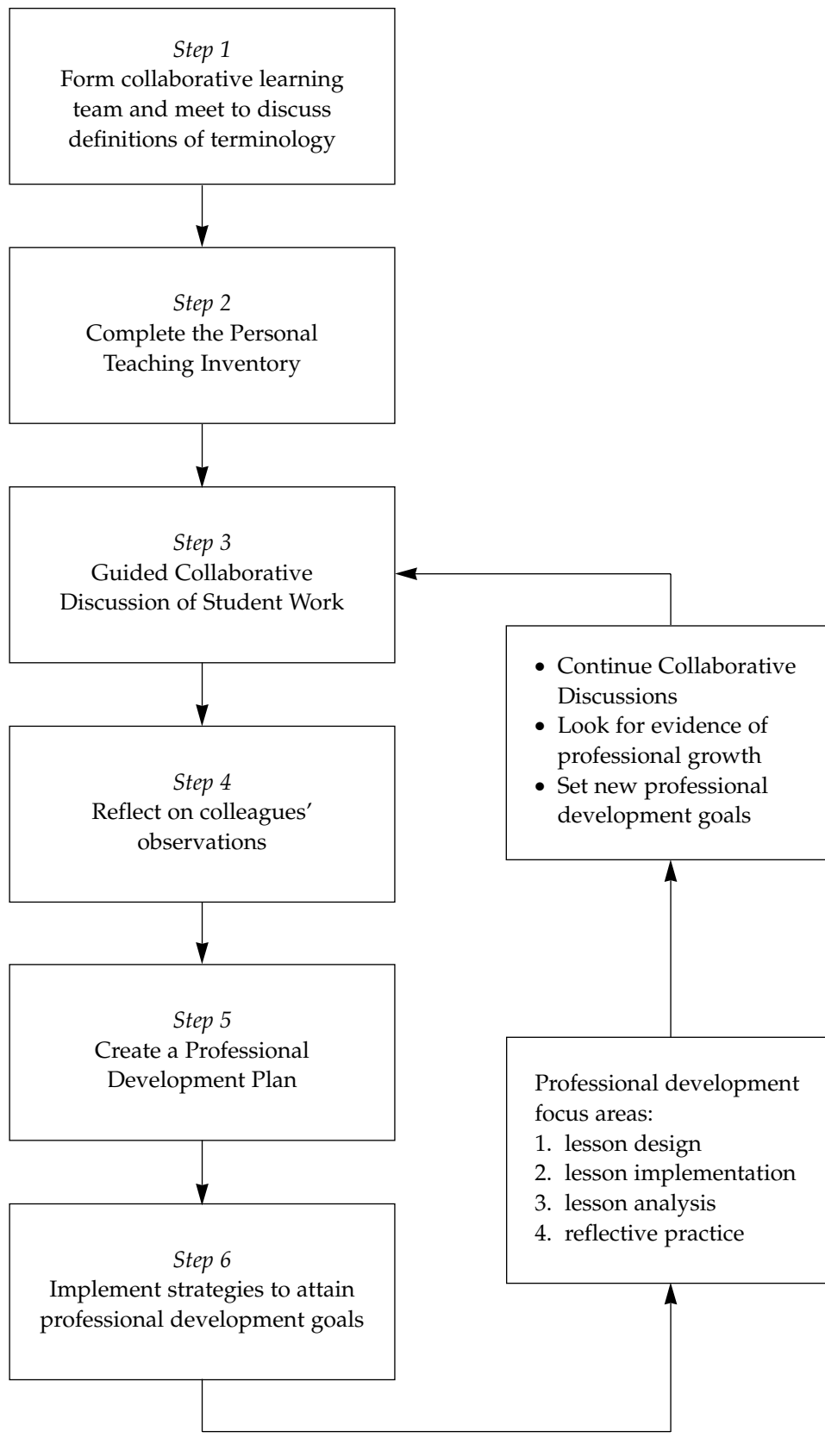
In discussions with teachers and administrators from seventeen school districts in Ohio, I found that truly committed professionals continually evaluate themselves. Highly successful educators discuss student progress with their colleagues and share ideas with each other. They believe that collegial discussions centered on teaching and learning have more impact on their practices than formal administrative observations. The administrators interviewed strongly agreed. Exemplary teachers believe in the power of collaboration so deeply that they will find the time for these dialogues. The challenge is to use this precious time in the most productive manner.

The Collaborative Professional Development Process was developed from discussions such as these, interviews with students and administrators, classroom observations, and traditional research. Five different sources of national standards of best professional practice were examined to design a Personal Teaching Inventory that encourages continual examination of a teacher's individual professional development. Costa and Liebmann's (1997a) research into indicators of intelligent behavior as well as Schlechty's (1997) research on effective Design Qualities of student work were studied. I conducted discussions with students of all ages to determine the conditions under which they believe they learn best. I also observed dozens of classrooms and discussed my observations with teachers and administrators. The findings were then synthesized into a powerful, reflective process that examines student work to inform teacher practice.

The Collaborative Professional Development Process is based on possibly the highest form of assessment—self-assessment—coupled with collegial support. The purpose throughout is to rethink, refine, and refocus teacher practices. The process is a cycle of self-assessment, collaborative analysis of student work, reflection, goal setting, and professional growth, as illustrated in Figure 1.1.

Although the process is self-evaluative, it recognizes the importance of collegial support. It is based on the belief that a teacher's colleagues can offer insights and alternative perspectives on student work, and consequently an essential component of the process is collaboration with one or more trusted colleagues. In Step 1, educators form collaborative learning teams. The teams initially meet to reach common understandings on crucial elements that will be used in the subsequent steps of the process. (For a description of the formation of collaborative learning teams, see Chapter 4.)

Step 2 is the completion of a Personal Teaching Inventory, to assess the degree to which the teacher has made the necessary shifts in lesson design, implementation strategies, analysis during instruction, and reflective practices to ensure process-oriented instruction. This inventory addresses a teacher's commitment to continued learning and growth, based on widely accepted standards of best practice: the Ohio Praxis Model (*Praxis III*, 1992), the *California Standards for the Teaching Profession* (1997), the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (n.d.), and *Peer Assistance and Review* (2000). The inventory is a highly personal and confidential

Figure 1.1 Collaborative Professional Development Process

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document. It calls for honesty and a willingness to critically examine oneself. Once the inventory is completed, educators become aware of the practice areas that need further attention. These areas will form the basis for their long-term Professional Development Plan. (For a detailed discussion of the Personal Teaching Inventory, see Chapter 4.)

Step 3 is the Guided Collaborative Discussion of Student Work, which is used to further define educators' areas of strength and the areas that need further attention in their practices. In fact, student work is at the very heart of the process. The structured discussion guides educators to look for evidence of Design Qualities and Intellectual Engagement Indicators in the work their students are producing. Like the *Looking at Student Work* (n.d.) initiative, an inquiry "stance" is very important at this point in the process. Educators are trying to learn from the student work, rather than trying to see what they think they already know. It elevates teachers' everyday discussions of classroom work to a level that will contribute to increased student learning and the teachers' personal and professional development. The Collaborative Professional Development Process zeroes in on the work designed by teachers and produced by their students as the true data to determine whether students are learning and the teachers' practices are effective. (A detailed description of the Guided Collaborative Discussion of Student Work is found in Chapter 5.) Teachers will also be pleased to know that these sessions can be accomplished in approximately thirty minutes; they can work in a trusting environment with their colleagues, within a timeframe of their own choosing. Moreover, they will have a sense of satisfaction as they watch their students accomplish their learning goals and become self-directed learners because of the shifts the teachers are making in their practices.

As the Collaborative Professional Development Process was developed, it became increasingly evident that self-assessment is extremely powerful when coupled with reflection. It is through reflection that educators adapt and expand their practices and pay special attention to their own professional development. As teachers expand their practices, they must also reflect on whether their students will be able to carry their learning into new situations when the teachers are no longer there to guide them. Teachers need to continually ask themselves whether their students have sufficient content and process skills to face new situations beyond the classroom walls. Step 4 emphasizes reflection. As part of the Guided Collaborative Discussion of Student Work, the teachers' trusted colleagues will offer their observations of the student work along with recommendations. Teachers may incorporate the recommendations into their practices if they so choose, but only after careful reflection on their appropriateness. Following these initial discussions, the teachers will complete Reflection Worksheets (see Chapter 5) and select samples of student work for their portfolios. On the Reflection Worksheet they will record any aspects of the discussions that are noteworthy. This is also the time for the teachers to reflect on the larger teaching purpose: will the work they are asking students to do enable them to apply what they've learned in situations outside the classroom walls?

During Step 5, teachers write a Professional Development Plan based on the Personal Teaching Inventory, the Collaborative Discussions of Student Work, and subsequent reflections. Teachers determine the practice area they would like to strengthen, and this becomes the focus of their Professional Development Plan. (Creating the Professional Development Plan is addressed in Chapter 6.)

In Step 6, educators work on their professional development goals. Educators will focus on one of four professional development areas: lesson design, lesson implementation, lesson analysis during instruction, or reflective practices. (The professional development focus areas are discussed in Chapters 7 through 9.) While working on their focus area, they continue to meet with their collaborative learning team to reflectively analyze student work samples. They look for evidence that their practices are being strengthened and that they are achieving their professional development goals. The evidence will be visible in their student work samples and will be recognized and commented on by their trusted colleagues during subsequent Collaborative Discussions of Student Work. The student work samples will be the benchmark of student and teacher growth.

After each subsequent Collaborative Discussion of Student Work, teachers will reflect on whether they have attained their professional development goals. As professional development goals are accomplished, other areas for improvement will be identified, and the teachers will revise their Professional Development Plans and set new professional development goals.

At this point the process becomes cyclic as teachers continue to set new goals; pursue professional development opportunities to study and strengthen the practice areas that need attention; look for evidence of growth by analyzing student work samples; and continue to reflect on, accomplish, and redefine goals to guide their professional development.

THE BENEFITS OF COLLABORATION

By using the Collaborative Professional Development Process, teachers will experience a depth of learning that can only occur in a truly collegial setting. They will have a running record of analysis, progress, changes, and thought patterns from which to build their practices. They will be using a formalized process that embodies the best practices of committed professionals, and that will guide them in planning for continual improvement. The process will enable them to equip their students for the “real” world and will achieve superior results for their students and for themselves as well.

Educators who use the Collaborative Professional Development Process have provided testimonials concerning its impact on their practices. They experience a newfound respect for each other as professionals. They realize that this process is not an add-on to their already busy professional lives, but is embedded in and enhances every aspect of their

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teaching. They see the value of a dynamic process that they will continue to use for the rest of their careers. One teacher said it succinctly: “The Collaborative Professional Development Process helps me plan for, not pray for, student success.”

“What’s in it for me?” teachers may still ask. Teachers, will it help your students take more responsibility for their own learning? Yes. Will it increase your effectiveness in the classroom? Yes. Will it promote your professional development? Yes. Will it simplify your lives? Yes. Well, at least it will allow you to use your valuable time in a more productive manner. Teaching and learning are complex processes and educators have limited time to analyze their practices. The Collaborative Professional Development Process is designed to be incorporated into the daily routines of all teachers. Teachers will find that it is an efficient method for analyzing and reflecting on student learning, and, as a result, their students will be more intellectually engaged in their work.