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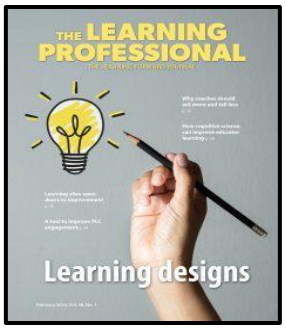

In Professional Learning, Form Should Follow Function

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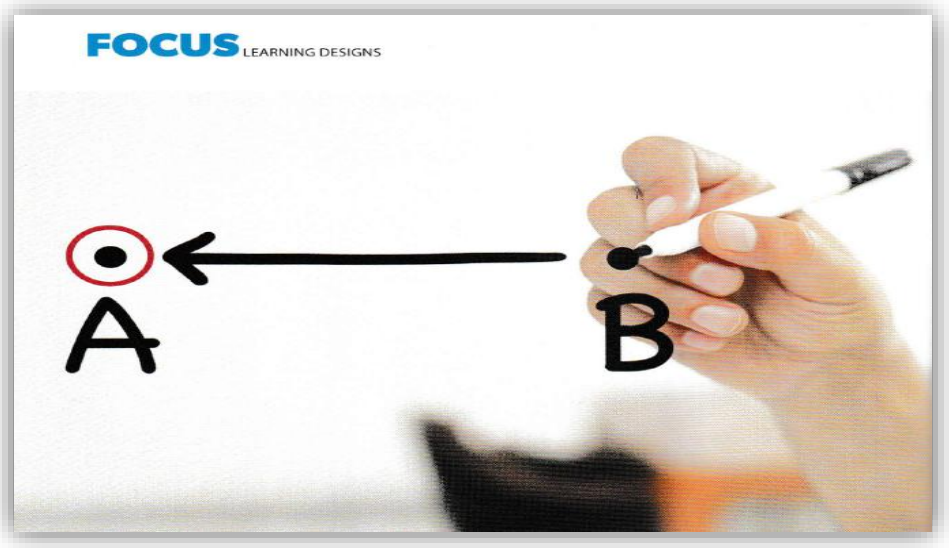

In 1896, renowned architect Louis Sullivan coined the phrase "form follows function," which became the guiding principle in 20th-century architecture. Sullivan meant the purpose of a building should be the starting point for its design. The same is true in designing professional learning.

To achieve the goal of improving results for all students, we must make student success the starting point in planning *all* professional learning experiences and activities. Design issues related to *how* best to engage educators in professional learning and develop their buy-in, *how* to build on their existing knowledge, *how* to address issues of equity, and *how* to integrate expectations for collaboration are all important.

But before we consider these crucial "how" questions, we must first address the more important question of "why?" Purpose must be our starting point in designing any professional learning experience.

PLANNING WITH PURPOSE

To make its function our starting point in designing professional learning, we must begin by clarifying our primary purpose. Traditionally, discussions of professional learning's purpose have centered on what educators want to learn. Guided by the results of surveys administered to teachers and school leaders, learning professionals have designed activities to address educators' identified interests, curiosities, desires, and perceived needs. Too often, however, this results in a focus on ideas and innovations that are faddish and trending, rather than those with well-documented, supporting research evidence (Schmoker, 2019). In his book, *So Much Reform, So Little Change*, Charles Payne (2008) argues this emphasis on innovation over evidence is the main reason so many education reform efforts fail.

In the *Standards for Professional Learning*, Learning Forward (2022) recommends a different starting point: students' learning needs and the research-supported ideas and strategies that will help educators better address those needs.

FIVE STEPS TO SUCCESS

A planning approach that is proving successful in clarifying our purpose and designing effective professional learning experiences aligned with that purpose is based on reversing the order of the five crucial levels of evaluation evidence described in *Evaluating Professional Development* (Guskey, 2000, 2024). In reverse order, these revised levels include:

Step 1: Identify the improvements in student learning we want to achieve.

Clarifying our purpose in professional learning begins with addressing three essential questions:

1. What do we want to accomplish with students?
2. How will we know if we have met our goals?
3. What else might happen, good or bad? (Guskey, 2017).

The first question clarifies our professional learning goals. We may want to improve student achievement in particular subject areas, such as language arts, math, or science. Or we may want to help students develop important life skills, such as collaboration, empathy, self-regulation, perseverance, or social responsibility. Perhaps our focus is on increased levels of student engagement, improved attendance, higher graduation rates, or decreased disruptions and disciplinary actions. Whatever the case, articulating these professional learning goals provides the foundation for all other aspects of professional learning planning and design.

The second question addresses what evidence we believe best represents the achievement of those goals. We must determine up front how we will recognize and confirm our success or lack thereof. Because we often seek multiple goals, and because different stakeholders in the professional learning process (i.e., teachers, school leaders, district administrators, board

members, etc.) trust different sources of evidence, multiple sources of evidence are likely to be required (Guskey et al., 2014). We also need to plan how and when to gather that evidence, how it will be analyzed, and how results will be shared.

The third question takes into account possible unintended consequences. Sometimes important things happen, either positive or negative, that may not have been planned. For example, improved achievement in math may help students perform better in science experiments that involve math calculations or problem solving. However, it also may be that the improvements in math achievement came as a result of taking time away from science experiments and, as a consequence, students' achievement in science declined. Appropriate planning requires looking beyond the intended goals to the broad array of possible unintended consequences.

Step 2: Determine the research-based strategies or practices most likely to yield those improvements.

After articulating the improvements in student learning we hope to achieve, the next step is to identify the instructional strategies or classroom practices most likely to produce those results. This requires examining the research evidence supporting those strategies and considering the validity of that evidence. Questions about the applicability of those strategies or practices to our specific context also need to be addressed. Finally, we need to identify the essential elements of those strategies to determine what we must do to implement those elements with fidelity.

Step 3: Clarify the organizational support and change needed for high quality implementation.

Once the research-based strategies or practices we want to implement are identified, we next must consider the organizational supports needed to ensure high-quality implementation. For example, many improvement efforts fail because of a lack of active participation and support from school leaders (Kraft & Papay, 2014). Others prove ineffective because teachers lack the resources necessary for successful implementation, such as time, funding, instructional materials, or necessary technology (Taylor et al., 2015). We also must ensure that all school policies are aligned with the change and don't impede implementation. For example, grading policies that average all scores from evidence of students' performance over time reinforce the idea that "everything counts." Such policies discourage students from trying new endeavors, investigating new topics, or exploring new ideas that they may find fascinating simply because it means risking failure and jeopardizing their chance of getting a good grade (Guskey et al., 2024).

Step 4: Identify the professional knowledge and skills required for implementation.

After considering organizational support, effective planning turns to identifying the specific knowledge and skills educators need to implement those strategies and practices with fidelity. In other words, what must educators know and be able to do to successfully implement the new strategies or practices and bring about the sought-after improvements in student learning? This fourth step is especially important because it establishes the basis for choosing the most appropriate and effective professional learning design.

Step 5: Select the professional learning design that will best enable educators to acquire that knowledge and skills.

There is no one best design for professional learning. The most effective professional learning designs are customized to fit educators' current knowledge and skills, the context in which they work, and the improvements in student learning we hope to achieve.

Several researchers have described the most common designs or models of professional learning used in schools today (e.g., Boylan et al., 2017; Cetin & Bayrakci, 2019; Ravhuhali et al., 2015). In addition, Bruce Joyce and Emily Calhoon (2010) and Linda Martin and colleagues (2015) offer detailed explanations of various designs and the research supporting them. SERC (2024) developed perhaps the most comprehensive description of professional learning designs (see sidebar, p. 25).

PURPOSE LEADS DESIGN

In professional learning, just as in architecture, form follows function. Although professional learning designs are vitally important, they cannot be where we begin in our planning. Purpose – our why – must be our starting point in designing any professional learning experience. Educators who begin by attending to the questions, "What do we want to accomplish with students?" and "How will we know if we do?" will be better positioned to design meaningful change in their systems. As Stephen Covey (2004) reminds us, we must "begin with the end in mind."

By following the simple, five-step process described here, derived from the five levels of evaluation, we can make professional learning more purposeful and far more effective. Thoughtful planning is the key to ensuring an effective link between teachers' professional learning and improvements in student learning.

SERC MODELS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

SERC lists 33 different designs that they indicate "have proven effective for adult learners in general, and educators in particular." Some of the better known of these designs include:

- Action research
- Case studies
- Curriculum learning and instructional planning
- Data analysis
- Direct teaching or training
- Distance learning
- Examining work
- Examining and assessing instructional materials
- Facilitated discussion groups
- Independent study or research
- Learning clubs and book talks
- Lesson study
- Mentoring and coaching
- Networking
- Observations and site visits
- Peer coaching
- Reflective journaling
- Reflective discussion and planning
- School improvement processes and action planning
- Shadowing and modeling
- Study groups
- Tuning protocols

Source: SERC (2024).

The key to the success of any of these designs rests in ensuring that it is carefully planned, well-coordinated, adequately supported, adapted to the characteristics and context of the educators involved, and well aligned with the knowledge and skills to be acquired.

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