

Connect

How can high quality professional development translate theory into classroom practice in authentic, meaningful ways?

It's one thing to listen to experts lecture on teaching or watch a master artist create a masterpiece in front of the class. Distilling ideas to use in the classroom from those presentations requires a different kind of processing. Professional development can help educators internalize new habits. The challenge comes when we try to bridge the gap between concepts and practice.

Design teacher-driven professional development. What do educators want to know how to do? What do they want to improve? What needs do they perceive for students? In their analysis of multiple general education studies, Hyde and Pink reaffirm the need to encourage teachers to shape professional development. Researchers Fred Korthagen and Tom Russell remind us to "Pay attention to the voices of the people that do the work." The practitioners in the classroom bring an important reality check, creativity, and humility to theoretical work.

Investigate and engage with concrete, practical ideas. To get started, select something manageable. Your success in step one may lead to something larger. Likewise, educators appreciate strategies they can use in the classroom right away. Professional development balances the introduction of valuable tools teachers can use the next day with cultivation of the complex big idea that can improve education in the long-term. See [Arts Education Collaborative](#).

Transform theoretical concepts into planning tools. Teachers can connect ideas to practice by using of a variety of educational tools including action plans, lesson plans, curricula, assessment tools, integrated units, co-teaching strategies, and checklists. See [Chicago Arts Partnership for Education \(CAPE\)](#).

Practice. Teachers benefit from multiple chances to practice new concepts and skills. When teachers have the opportunity to try out a teaching or leadership skill, reflect with others to improve the practice, and try again, they can begin to connect the dots from idea to what really works. Some structural approaches include having educators teach each other in small groups, piloting a teaching concept at a summer school when team teaching with someone more experienced at the technique, refining an unfamiliar arts area during after school classes taught with a partner, and meeting with colleagues across the year to share and refine approaches. See [Music Center: Performing Arts Center of Los Angeles County](#), [Perpich Center for Performing Arts](#).

Reflect and assess. Don't just try it and move on. Create opportunities for teachers to process how it went, with questions such as: "What did students learn from this? How do I know they learned it? How is this different from the way I normally teach, if at all? How comfortable did I feel teaching this way, this topic, this lesson? What would I do differently next time? How can I deepen

the intent of the unit to challenge students and myself further?" Such self-analysis happens effectively in small discussion groups with people who have learned to be critical friends (*Arts Connection*). In such a group, ideas are welcome, hierarchy is minimal, the stakes are low, and it's everyone's job to raise questions for one another. See *Perpich Center for Performing Arts, Rhode Island Arts Learning Network*.

Encourage a risk-taking, "try and try again" environment. Educational change can be risky business. Professional developers can help create incubators that encourage learning from failure as well as success. This gives teachers permission to try new things. With time, they can adapt content and approaches until they find what works for their situation. Districts and learning communities that can support this risk-taking allow teachers time for growth and improvement. However, given the current high stakes accountability environment in selected other subject areas, such support cannot be taken for granted. Rather, it needs to be cultivated with people who have the authority to create buffers from the pressures of the larger system.

Encourage ongoing learning opportunities. Planning, risk-taking, reflection and practice all take time. It is unrealistic for this sort of change to occur after one workshop. Instead, consider an experimentation cycle where educators test the waters with new ideas, teaching approaches and skills, buoyed by a group culture of reflection. See *Arts in Basic Curriculum (ABC), A+ Schools, Chicago Arts Partnerships (CAPE), Stockton Unified School District (SUSD)*.

Promising Practices

Peer-to-peer teaching and mentoring. When you learn from someone who does what you do, you can get specific answers. Colleagues will have their own experiences and stories to illustrate an approach. Some learning communities cultivate teacher leaders who can offer formal professional development that bridges theory and practice for colleagues. Experts come in only for the occasional infusion of ideas. See [Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education \(CAPE\)](#), [Empire State Partnerships](#), [The California Arts Project \(TCAP\)](#).

Educator teams. Working teams of educators involved in the same professional development journey can create an accessible support group as people try out their new skills and ideas. Such teams may be ongoing or formed for a limited time. These groupings vary, and can include specialists, classroom teachers, education administrators and others such as aides, special educators, and teaching artists. A team can provide a ready sounding board for reflection. One research team notes that when teacher educators write back and forth with their peers about their work as it evolves, they create a document of their teaching development which helps chart their growth. For teams to work, they need upfront support from administration and scheduled time to meet regularly. Together, they plan and monitor putting new ideas to practice. See [Discipline-Based Arts Education \(DBAE\)](#), [Music Center: Performing Arts Center of Los Angeles County](#).

Research digested for practice. Busy teachers do not have the time to slowly peruse all the source material that could help them improve their practice. One professional development service gives educators digests. Arts specialist service organizations offer specialized journals, targeting particular audiences within an arts education discipline. National networks summarize research findings and disseminate to practitioners and local partners. Brokering organizations help local school people and cultural partners develop habits of inquiry through protocols, checklists, diagrams and regular lunch box sessions to discuss practice. See [Arts Education Partnership \(AEP\)](#), [Arts for All: Los Angeles County Regional Blueprint for Arts Education Resources for Schools and Communities](#), [Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education \(CAPE\)](#), [National Art Education Association](#), [National Association for Music Education](#), [National Dance Education Organization](#).

Lab school environments. You might think of before school, after school and summer school as extracurricular. But, when key curricular people work with others, like teaching artists, youth leaders and mentoring teachers, these external teaching environments can provide laboratories to try new ideas in a lower risk environment. Teachers can experiment with new teaching theories while team teaching and working in smaller classrooms with fewer children. See [Arts Impact & Puget Sound Education Service District](#), [ArtsLit: The Arts Literacy Project](#).

Higher education-school collaboration. Structured collaborations between schools and teacher education programs allow teachers in training, current educators and those who teach teachers to work and learn from each other. One such interaction consisted of a music specialist, a university teacher educator, and a handful of college students who co-taught an elementary general music class or high school choir. When examining their own learning community, they found the

arrangement encouraged exemplary practice, joint investigation of questions and shared responsibility for music teaching over the long term.

Lessons Learned

Collegial dialogue and reflection are important professional development tools. Time must be dedicated for teachers to process information and new ideas and reflect on issues, concerns, problems, options, opportunities, needs and celebrations. *See Arts Education Collaborative.*

Support the inquiry process. Support teachers and artists so they can ask questions about their practice and find ways to seek the answers. *See Chicago Arts Partners in Education (CAPE).*

Specialist/generalist collaborations are essential. Collaborations are most important between classroom teachers and fine arts specialists. Give teachers opportunities to make decisions that affect their work. *See Stockton Unified School Districts (SUSD): Pavala Tutti.*

Sharing. Teachers involved in professional development opportunities should share what she/he learned from the process and what the outcomes were. *See ArtsSmart Institute for Learning.*

Mixing educator backgrounds supports risk-taking. Mixing participants across grade levels (K- 12) and urban -rural sites leads to unanticipated collaborations. At first teachers tend to want to stay with those who they know, or those who teach the same grades as they do. The mixing has been important for teachers truly learning from each other and moving out of their comfort zones. *See Alaska Arts Education Consortium.*

Useful Tools

Arts Impact Teacher Training Video

See the Arts Impact program in action as teachers participate in the summer institute and teach the arts in their classrooms.

Evaluating Professional Development

Guskey, Thomas. Corwin Press Inc., 2000

Advises reader of ways to assess, understand, and maximize professional development benefit for students and their learning. Offers processes and tools.

From Promise to Practice: Stories From the Regional Education Laboratories

Kober, Nancy. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1996.

Case examples of professional development that makes the connection to in classroom work.

Teacher's Autonomy for Arts Instruction Protocol

Assesses level of educator's ability to teach core arts concepts; useful for professional development for generalists teaching the arts.

Your Turn

When considering new ideas and theories to present to teachers through professional development, consider:

- If this professional development is successful, what will the classroom look like?
- What will teachers know and be able to do?
- What will students know and be able to do? How will I know they understand?

To connect theory to classroom practice, ask yourself:

- What planning tools can you provide your teachers to support their ability to turnkey professional development theories into actual classroom practices?
- What structures can you put in place in which teachers can practice applying new ideas and developing skills?
- What opportunities can you provide for teachers trying out new ideas and skills to reflect on and assess their experience?