Structuring Professional Development to Build Expertise with Common Core Learning Standards

SUMMARY

High-quality professional development opportunities are key to continuous improvement in teaching. New York state teacher centers provide professional development on a range of topics including the *New York State P-12 Common Core Learning Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy*. This author describes a process for assisting educators in deepening their understanding and use of best practices with the Standards and their accompanying shifts in instruction.

The intent of the *New York State P-12 Common Core Learning Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy* (CCLS/ELA) is to give practitioners a foundation on which to guide students in constructing deep understanding and skill with reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Historically, it has been common practice for educational systems to relegate the instruction of literacy skills to English language arts classes or instructional blocks. Moving forward with CCLS/ELA means embracing the principle that all subject area teachers and specialists are also instructors of literacy skills. No, we are not doing the reading teacher's job — we are however, focusing on the appropriate literacy skills which best fit our particular content area.

This article will present ideas for those planning ongoing professional development — across content areas — related to the CCLS/ELA and their accompanying *Instructional Shifts*.

Ongoing Professional Development is Critical to Success

Research has clearly demonstrated that if we expect our young students to be able to apply new learnings in various ways at various times, we need to support the process of how they can "own" their knowledge and use it when necessary. Knowing the skill you need, at the moment you need it, means that you have integrated new learnings with prior knowledge and can implement new skills successfully. Likewise, for adults, the design of professional learning activities needs to provide support "along the way."

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Children and adults benefit in a similar way from a guided model of instruction as opposed to simply offering information on a one-time basis.

Focusing on the Instructional Shifts in Professional Development

The six Instructional Shifts required by CCLS/ELA are below:

Shifts in English Language Arts & Literacy		
Shift 1	Balancing Informational & Literary Text	Students read a true balance of informational and literary texts.
Shift 2	Knowledge in the Disciplines	Students build knowledge about the world (domains/content areas) primarily through text rather than through the teacher or other activities.
Shift 3	Staircase of Complexity	Students read the central, grade-appropriate text around which instruction is centered. Teachers are patient, and create more time, space, and support in the curriculum for close reading.
Shift 4	Text-based Answers	Students engage in rich and rigorous evidence-based conversations about text.
Shift 5	Writing from Sources	Writing emphasizes use of evidence from sources to inform or make an argument.
Shift 6	Academic Vocabulary	Students continuously build the transferable vocabulary they need to access grade-level complex texts. This can be done effectively by spiraling like content in increasingly complex texts.

From EngageNY.org of the New York State Education Department. *Instructional shifts for the common core.* Retrieved from *http://engageny.org/resource/common-core-shifts*

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This gradual release of responsibility supports participants in becoming independent in their abilities to make connections with prior knowledge and expertise and incorporate new information into their teaching practice.

At the Kenmore Staff Development Center, we have utilized an approach referred to as the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model (GRR) when planning professional development related to the CCLS/ELA and the Shifts. The GRR Model is a particular style of teaching which was originally discussed by Pearson and Gallagher (1983), and is the foundation of a work by Fisher and Frey (2008) entitled *Better Learning through Structured Teaching*. The purpose of this model is to shift the responsibility for learning from the instructor to the students, or in the case of professional development, from the facilitator to the participants.

Discrete stages are followed which are designed to facilitate understanding of new content. New information is introduced. This is followed by structured guided practice and opportunities for collaborative learning. The final stage of learning culminates with the participant engaging with the information independently. The stages are essentially, as the authors state, "I do it," "We do it," "You do it together," and lastly, "You do it alone."

As noted by Fisher and Frey, individuals do not develop high levels of skill from just being told how to complete tasks. A high skill level is often the result of having models, feedback, support, and many practice opportunities.

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The "Focus Lesson": Introducing the New Information

During this first stage, referred to as the Focus Lesson, the facilitator introduces the concepts or skill to be learned. This may include discussion of the "purpose for learning" along with modeling some thinking strategies which demonstrate how the participants might make connections between prior knowledge and expertise and the new content. The facilitator clarifies: this is what we are exploring, this is why, and these are the expected outcomes.

Skill: Developing **Text-dependent Questions** (Related to Instructional Shifts 4 and 5)

New information for participants (key points):

- The questions we ask of students should cause them to interact with what they have read and to gather evidence and insight while providing **supporting evidence**.

- Good questions require **deep inquiry**. They should move students beyond questions like: "What is the main idea?" or "What are three supporting details?"

- Questions should **motivate** students toward further investigation.

The facilitator may model reflection regarding the concept or skill:

"I taught reading for a number of years and it was my practice to introduce my students to the study of biographies. I felt there were many valuable lessons which could be gained from learning the life, struggles, and accomplishments of individuals who came from similar backgrounds to my students. I would ask questions pertaining to how students would assimilate these struggles into their own understandings, but I think I fell short on not crafting my questions to require them to use textual references to support their answers. I needed to ask questions in which my students could cite examples from the text. In other words:

- Did this person feel that her struggles shaped her life?

- How do you know that?

- Where do you see that in the text?"

Participants are given Planning Questions to guide their development with this skill. These are drawn from the principles of *Understanding by Design* by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe. The theme of their work is that instructors need to identify the desired outcomes for learners, and plan instruction which will lead learners to acquire the new knowledge. This is best accomplished by identifying what learners will know, understand, and do to demonstrate competence. Therefore, when our purpose is to teach participants how to write text-dependent questions, we model the planning that must occur. The Planning Questions are:

- What is the essential learning for this reading?

- What will my students have to demonstrate to indicate their understanding?

- Which vocabulary words are embedded in the reading and will need to be understood to acquire the content?

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■ What types of text-dependent questions can I ask that will lead my students to the essential learning?

■ How can I scaffold the questions to provide encouragement for students to take some risks with sharing their thinking?

Guided Instruction and Practice: "We do it"

During this interactive stage, the instructor begins the shift from direct instructor to that of facilitator. Participants are strategically grouped (in this case by grade level, not subject/content area) to further their ability to interact, collaborate, evaluate and assimilate new information. Reviewing content from different subject lenses helps participants to clarify that literacy instruction varies in accordance with the lens that is needed for the reading. It also helps identify that content vocabulary varies but strategies to reinforce that vocabulary could be similar.

To familiarize participants with the GRR model, a video of the model in use is viewed. Participants are asked to pay close attention to student engagement. Following this, participants:

■ **Discuss their observations** from the video about **Releasing Control to Students** and identify what they could replicate in their own plans.

We often hear participants admit that they struggle with releasing control to their students and that much of the learning in their classroom is dependent on them. It is not uncommon to struggle with releasing control for learning, yet that is what we must do to fully engage our students. Therefore, the "release of responsibility" becomes a necessary component of lesson design.

■ **Identify how students read, write, speak, and listen in their content areas.** Each participant reflects on how literacy unfolds in her or his classroom. We have found this to be a very meaningful activity. It helps point out differences in approach which may occur when introducing vocabulary and new material to students. We remind participants that predetermining essential vocabulary is critical when planning instruction which embodies the literacy shifts.

■ **Work with text and draft text-dependent questions.** Participants are provided with "informational reading" excerpts from their content area to give them Guided Practice with relevant content. These readings are selected based on the grade levels of the enrolled participants. Participants work with the Planning Questions and are reminded that the ultimate goal

is that their students should have to **use** the readings (or text) as a resource to answer the questions. In other words, what evidence from the text supports the students' thinking? The Planning Questions also require that participants identify a culminating activity for their students — that is, what students will do to demonstrate what they have learned.

During this guided instruction and practice stage, the facilitator **frequently** checks for understanding and provides prompts when necessary to assist participants in making connections.

Collaborative Learning: "You do it Together"

In this stage, participants are given more opportunities to explore their thinking with one another. They solve problems with their peers based on common new information. This is when participants begin to create with others — moving beyond looking to the facilitator.

Participants are asked to develop a lesson outline for each of their readings. Participants plan instruction as well as critically review each other's outlines and text-dependent questions to determine if they fulfill criteria. The expectation is that their questions will be ordered in a manner which will guide their students to demonstrate

Template for Lesson

- ■ Provide title of text.

- ■ Provide background information to clarify understanding of lesson you will teach.

- ■ Identify the standards addressed in your plan.

- ■ Identify the core understandings and key ideas of the text. This is the essential learning which students are expected to know and understand.

- ■ Describe how the lesson will be introduced along with the purpose for learning.

- ■ Identify vocabulary words which are connected to key understandings and ideas.

- ■ Explain how the vocabulary will be introduced.

- ■ Create a coherent sequence of text-dependent questions which are carefully structured to build toward deep understanding and analysis. These questions should provide a guide for learning.

- ■ Describe how students will be prepared to answer questions using reference information from the text. All questions should keep the students engaged with the reading.

- ■ Identify portions of the reading which might present difficulty for students and how the teacher will scaffold learning. This should include specific strategies that will be used with students with Individualized Education Programs, as well as any unique scaffolding for students who are English language learners.

- ■ Create a culminating assessment around the key ideas or key understandings.

competency (through the execution of the culminating activity). Lesson plan outlines are written on chart paper to make sharing easier, and each group presents their work. The facilitator and participants provide feedback, which further solidifies understanding of how best to write text-dependent questions.

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Allowing students to self-assess and openly discuss their thinking increased interaction and made the content livelier.

Independent Work: "You do it Alone"

The final stage is to structure independent practice in which participants use the new information, know where to access additional information, and develop greater expertise with the CCLS/ELA. Participants create and implement a lesson which highlights a shift to greater use of text-dependent questions. When rejoining the group at a later date, they may model for the group and request feedback. This can lead to a cycle of building greater levels of refinement with this skill. (See lesson template, p. 33.)

We maintained contact with participants over the several week period in which they worked on their lessons. We created a blog for participants and were able to address individual questions as well as provide guidance as needed. Participants submitted lesson plans prior to our final session. At that session, participants discussed their personal reflections about how students responded to their lessons.

Their feedback was excellent. Many participants discussed how they were excited about certain topics in their content and assumed their students were equally enthralled. However, they could not validate this because they were too much in control of the learning. Shifting responsibility for learning allowed them to facilitate student understanding in a more meaningful manner. Additionally, many participants recognized the importance of actively engaging students as learners. Allowing students to self-assess and openly discuss their thinking increased interaction and made the content livelier.

Implementation Sustained Over Time

At a time when there is an infusion of simultaneous mandates, we need to be continuously mindful of the principles of good instruction for ourselves as well as our students. The GRR Model for professional development, or variations on it, can foster teachers' and other team members' abilities to successfully implement these changes. In a follow-up evaluation, more than 80 percent of our participants felt they were able to implement major objectives taught in the workshop in a regular sustained fashion. Samples of comments include: "I was able to find activities in literacy that help my students become more self-directed learners" and "The questions being asked are more open ended, and the students are asked to elaborate more on their answers." The Instructional Shifts will cease to be shifts as they become teacher routines — an everyday part of how teachers think, plan, and instruct. High-quality professional development is key in this transition to new standards and new routines.

New York State Teacher Centers

Throughout New York state, 130 teacher centers provide professional development to meet the needs of the constituents they serve. Professional development programs created by teachers, for teachers provide delivery of information which participants can assimilate and immediately use for improved instructional practice. Teacher center trainings correlate with NYS initiatives and the Regents Reform Agenda. The mission of teacher centers is to provide meaningful training as a result of ongoing collaboration with higher education and a vast network of public and private partnerships.

**Find your local
teacher center at
*www.teachercenters.org***

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