

Summary of Research Findings: Redesigning Professional Development

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Old workshop delivery models for teachers are giving way to vibrant ongoing professional learning communities where teachers generate, as well as gain, knowledge. The National Writing Project, arguably the most successful teacher network in the United States, offers a model of how to foster learning communities of teachers. Begun in 1974, the project has spawned 175 regional learning communities – school-university partnerships that help teachers improve how they teach writing and foster student learning. Based on a two-year study of two sites, we conclude the project’s successful approach lies in a distinctive set of social practices that motivate teachers, make learning accessible, and build an ongoing professional community. The social practices include:

Treat every colleague as a potentially valuable contributor. The project builds its agenda around the contributions of every participant. What each teacher thinks, wonders, reads, learns, and questions becomes the content for professional development.

Teach other teachers. The project encourages a dual commitment from teachers to share what they know and to learn from what colleagues know.

Share, discuss, and critique in public forums. Key to breaking through teacher isolation and silence are the public forums that the project creates for teachers to share their work and then critique and discuss it.

Turn ownership of learning over to the learners. The project insists on professional development built around the problems and concerns that teachers raise. Such a practice turns the current notion of teacher accountability on its head because teachers become responsible for assessing classroom practices.

Situate learning in practice and relationships. This kind of learning requires a community that encourages and supports those who take risks, that tolerates mistakes and learns from them, and that values constructive critique.

Provide multiple entry points into learning communities. Inexperienced teachers want to learn basic strategies; those with some experience may be in search of new strategies, veteran teachers find that they learn a great deal by sharing what have honed from years of practice.

Reflect on teaching by reflecting on learning. Teachers who reflect on their own learning can apply these insights to their teaching.

Share leadership. From the beginning, teachers lead discussions, give teaching demonstrations, and prepare for taking their best work public.

Adopt a stance of inquiry. Inquiry and research are fundamental to good teaching. Together, teachers can find better ways to answer the learning needs of students.

Rethink professional identity and link it to the professional community. Quality teaching is not just an individual but group responsibility.