

Terrible Trope Tuesday #8: Professional Development Surveys

The weekly series where we break down long standing norms of teacher professional development sessions to get better results.

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It is 4:15 p.m. A group of nearly four dozen educators have been sitting uncomfortably in the child-sized chairs that are placed around crayon-stained wooden tables within their school’s media center. The site principal and instructional coach notice the clock tick closer to the mandated 4:30 p.m. ending of their carefully planned weekly professional development session.

Let’s be honest, after a full day of work, there is no amount of chocolate that would entice any of us to be fully excited for even the best planned and presented afternoon training session. But then it happens, like clockwork, either a piece of paper or a website link is distributed asking teachers to complete a survey about their training experience to help guide future trainings. And in that moment, through symbolic gesture, the single most detrimental message to any change initiative is delivered. The message that process is more important than product.

As well intentioned as a post-training survey may be to elicit feedback from teachers regarding the quality and applicability of a training session, it ultimately fails to provide any information that could possibly be valuable toward the actual goals of any professional development initiative.

To better understand this premise, we must first define the purpose of any professional training session whether it be a two-hour after school inservice, a 45-minute data and planning meeting or a full day seminar.

**What is the purpose of professional development
or teacher training?**

Is the purpose to provide information and an opportunity for discussion regarding a given concept or practice, or is the purpose to improve teacher effectiveness and thereby increase student outcomes?

You may be tempted to say both, but that is again a fallacy. If you were to go to a nutritionist, would the purpose be to learn about and discuss your personal nutrition needs, or would the purpose be to lower your blood pressure, decrease your weight and increase your lifespan? One of these choices focuses on process while the other focuses on product.

If you are not sure whether your staff focuses more on process or product, use this simple test.

Have you ever highlighted a specific data point of which a majority of students fell below the expectation of a state or federal test? What was the first response from the teachers? Did they say, “We taught that, but they...” (focusing on the delivery of instruction--process) or did they say “We didn’t teach that well enough so we should...” (focusing on the failure to learn -- product)

If the word *teaching* is used to describe the delivery of the lesson and not the outcome of learning, your campus has a focus on process instead of product.

Let's look now to any survey delivered at the end of a training. Even if this survey asks about how the content of the training will be implemented and requires a commitment of when the teacher will utilize a new strategy, the focus being communicated to teachers is explicit - trying this new skill is all that is being asked regardless of its outcome. As a teacher, one could return to their classroom, attempt the new skill, and discard it immediately all while rationalizing that they have "done it".

Does this mean that teacher surveys should be excommunicated from your district training process?

Absolutely not! It does however, mean that we need to turn this trope on its head to make sure that the surveys focus on product instead of process.

Give this a try. For your next professional development session. Do not survey the teachers at the completion of the training. Instead, hold onto the opportunity for a period of time that would allow teachers to utilize the skills discussed on multiple occasions and observe for its effect. This period of time is usually between two and four weeks

After this period of implementation, ask questions such as the ones below.

1. **At our last data meeting we discussed doing _____ . How many times did you implement _____ within your daily instructional delivery?**
2. **Which students were the focus when you implemented _____.**

(These questions are important because they will tell you about the validity of the remaining questions. Teachers who only tried the new skill or intervention once or twice or with only a single group of students will likely have different feedback and outcomes than those who attempted to implement regularly.)

3. **Why didn't you implement _____ more often?**

(This question is important because it tells us about what we need to do to address implementation in the future. Do the teachers cite time, a belief in the practice, an observed effectiveness, etc.)?

4. **What support did you seek to better implement _____ since the training?**

(This question is important because it will help determine what if any future supports for implementation have already been put in place. Did the teacher utilize an internet resource, team plan, request support from the coach etc.)?

5. **What were the students able to do after utilizing _____ that they were not able to before the lesson?**

(This question is important because it can help you determine if the teachers see a benefit for the use of the targeted skill or strategy.)

You will notice that none of these questions relate to the training itself. All of them relate directly to what is most important. How was the information in the training actually utilized in classrooms after the session? These same questions can and should be used after any team planning session or data meeting related to RTI programs, special education referrals, classroom behavior plans, etc.

By forgoing the first survey entirely, you are sending a symbolic message that attending a training isn't what is important much like delivering instruction isn't what's important. It is the utilization of the training to enhance teacher skills and the acceleration of student outcomes that is the focus of all teacher professional development.

Let us know what you think about this concept in the comments below. Ask questions. We will help you plan this into your next professional development session, planning or data meeting.

Even better, let us know what other professional development tropes always fall short but keep being repeated so that we can offer you better solutions.