GUEST COLUMN - February 2022

Learning Strands
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It is the start of term and for INSET day an engaging and inspirational speaker has been booked. It is a financial investment but they have a great reputation on the conference circuit and some glittering reviews.

The speaker is a huge success. The opening speech is littered with knowing teacher jokes, the staff leave the session pumped up for the year ahead and there are enough accessible teaching and learning ideas for people to take with them for it to all feel worthwhile. Morale is high.

Unfortunately, by the middle of the term it is all forgotten and everyone is back in survival mode.

Anyone in education will know how often a well-meaning new idea, initiative or call to action is forgotten. Do we do ourselves a disservice by not allowing these new ideas the time to embed themselves and see if they can deliver meaningful change.

We've developed a model that I think shows how it can be done. We call it our *Learning Strands* and it involves giving staff dedicated time in their week to learn about and discuss new teaching ideas that they then try out and report back on to the group.

It took some time to get it up and running, and it remains a work in progress but here is how we made it work.

Step One: Build time

Any change that you want to work on needs to be supported with time. It will be the first criticism of everyone involved if it isn't put in place. In education, time is often a more significant investment than money and nothing will happen without it.

To do this we took five minutes off every lesson, re-structured the timetable and allowed students to start late on Tuesday.

So on a Tuesday Period 1 we now have professional development (PD) for teachers and the students get a later start. If this is not possible, find a slot in or after the school day where you can carve out time.

Step Two: Create a Vanguard

At the same time we created a 'teaching and learning group' of teachers who were keen to engage with educational research but also were confident enough to lead others in their development.

We made sure the structure we created supports professional growth and reflection with these group leaders acting as guides through the development process, rather than 'experts' who must be listened to.

Step Three: Choose your focus

Next we set about deciding the topics we would investigate that could perhaps boost learning outcomes. To do this each member of the teaching and learning group took a topic:

1. Practice and Retrieval
2. Explaining and Modelling
3. Dialogic Teaching
4. Self Directed Learning
5. Active note taking and reflection
6. Feedback and questioning
7. The MARGE model of Learning
8. Cognitive Load Theory
9. Mode B Teaching

We chose these as we wanted to ensure we were using evidence-informed practice based on ideas that were meaningful and had the possibility of improving student and teacher outcomes

With these chosen we held a central session with all teaching staff where each group leader had a three minute window to 'sell' and explain their session, followed by a form where people picked their top three choices. We then divided the entire staff into inter-department groups of 10-15 for each topic.

Step Four: Exposure to research

Once the groups were assigned, the first session was devoted to showing the teachers how they could access the research, outlining the basics of the idea and the upcoming process.

We created an internal website on our school system that allowed people to access collated resources and research materials.

All teachers were asked to sample some of the research and watch some videos.

Step Five: Plan-Do-Review

This was a lot to ask and we know change can be scary and new ideas intimidating.

As such we thought it important to set the criteria for what we expected and what we wanted, and create an environment where teachers understood this was about them reflecting on their craft with like-minded colleagues, not a criticism or pass-fail component of an appraisal.

As such we asked for all teachers to simply give something a go – there were not set outcome criteria or expectations; it was about trying and learning and seeing what worked.

So once they had picked their topic they would adapt one thing, in one lesson (or chain of lessons) with one class. This would be recorded on a single page, known as the plan/do/review document. This document would briefly outline the initiative they introduced, how they did it and end with a reflection on how it went.

We did not want or need a full research proposal, or extensive data gathering. We wanted to trust professionals to reflect without a need to prove anything beyond their own perception of self-efficacy.

It was important to clarify that if it didn't work and you didn't like introducing it to your teaching, that was fine. It was the trying, the exposure to research and the reflection that mattered.

Furthermore, we encouraged teachers to 'buddy-up' with another teacher and do an informal lesson observation. No paper trail, no judgements, just an opportunity to share your development with a trusted colleague and provide each other with feedback.

Step Six: Take it back to the departments

Once the process had reached its natural conclusion, the final stage was to take your single plan/do/review document back to your department for a departmental sharing session.

All the teachers would share what they had experienced and learned, and you would get a cross pollination of teaching and learning ideas back within departments, where decisions could be reached about what to share and pursue in the future.

The plan/do/review documents were all uploaded to the website to build an inventory of teaching and learning case studies.

We are still in the process of seeing how this works and, further, if it makes a difference to student learning. As a first iteration it feels like an approach to professional learning that is meaningful, effective, collaborative and promotes a positive learning culture.

We have seen teachers develop their practice by including evidence informed methods in their starters, their explanations and their feedback.

The costs are mainly in time but for that investment you build a huge bank of resources, encourage your middle leaders and teachers to drive the school forward, and begin to build in your school a distinctive teaching and learning culture.

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