TEACHER RESEARCH AS A MODE OF DELIVERY FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

In the fall of 2003, the Eastern Townships School Board grades 5 & 6 teachers were faced with implementing a one-to-one laptop initiative, a new provincial curriculum, a balanced literacy framework and a language initiative whereby the students would receive more of their instruction time in a second language. To guard against Initiative Overload, the education consultants delivered the necessary professional development using an ongoing teacher research model in order to merge the four initiatives into one understandable and doable project. This mode of delivery allowed the consultants to adjust to the diverse and ever changing needs of the teachers.

Overview

The author of this paper (along with three other consultants[1]) was faced with the task of helping teachers implement four new initiatives. In order to combat 'initiative overload' (Reeves, 2003) and to support teachers' skills and abilities, they designed and put in place a teacher research delivery model that merged the four initiatives into one.

Background

In fall of 2003, our grade five and six teachers were faced with the implementation of four relatively new initiatives. The Quebec government had mandated a new Education Program (Q.E.P.) that was to be fully in place for cycle three (grade 5 & 6) in September 2003. In addition, our local board, the Eastern Townships School Board (E.T.S.B.), had adopted and was in the process of implementing a Language Initiative whereby the students in grade 5 & 6 would receive more of their academic education in a second language (French), a 'Balanced Literacy Framework[2]' for both English and French instruction, and a one-to-one laptop initiative called the Dennis McCullough[3] Enhanced Learning Strategy (E.L.S.). It was not surprising that in the fall of 2003, our grade 5 & 6 teachers were experiencing initiative overload and struggling to know where to start. This paper outlines what we put in place first, to help the teachers implement the four initiatives, and second, to improve the level of communication and trust between the teachers and the Board.

Starting Point

In October of 2003, the two language consultants at the time, Johanne Richard[4] and I, visited all twenty E.T.S.B. elementary schools in order to speak personally with many of the English Language Arts and French Second Language teachers about the type of support they needed to implement the four initiatives. In addition, all language teachers were asked to complete a Literacy Checklist so that we could get an understanding of what type of professional development was needed in terms of the Q.E.P. and Balanced Literacy. Armed with this data we designed not only a series of workshops[5] to educate teachers in the new initiatives but equally as important, a mode of delivery that would allow us to be more receptive to the teachers' changing needs.

Key Questions/Key Decisions: Several key questions needed to be answered before we could conceive of a delivery model. How could we merge our four initiatives (Q.E.P., Balanced Literacy, E.L.S. & the Language Initiative) into one understandable and manageable project? How could we do this without adding to the teachers' already stressed workload and how could we do it in such a way that the teachers believed that we were all part of the same team?

Merging of Initiatives: It was decided to provide technology support to the teachers through language instruction—in particular, how to improve student writing outcomes. This would allow us to link all four initiatives. We would design the workshops so that we could model for the teachers how to improve student writing competencies (Q.E.P.) by using Balanced Literacy and technology strategies (E.L.S.) concurrently in both languages. Concurrent implementation in both the French and English classes would make is easier for the students to transfer knowledge and skills from one language to the other and would demonstrate for the teachers how to effectively implement the Language Initiative. We felt that by merging the four initiatives into one and by concretely modelling Balanced Literacy and technology strategies to improve student writing outcomes, the teachers' feeling of initiative overload would decrease.

Teacher Attendance: Two key decisions had to be made in this area. The first decision revolved around whether or not we would make workshop attendance compulsory for all cycle 3 language teachers. Our second decision looked at whether we should deliver the workshops on teaching days or the built-in professional development days[6]. Our first decision here affected the second. Because we set workshop attendance as compulsory, we decided not to encroach upon the teachers' professional development days. Instead we would release the teachers from their teaching duties in order for them to attend 3 monthly workshops. We did not want to add to the teachers' workload, and we felt that the above decisions would be the least intrusive upon teachers' timetables.

Size of the Workshops: An improvement in communication was one of our targeted objectives. In light of this, we decided that we would meet the teachers in fairly small geographic clusters of 15-25 teachers, rather than bringing them all together into one large gathering. This meant that we would have to repeat each workshop five times. We felt, however that the smaller groups would increase teachers' participation in group discussions.

Delivery Model: Although we were confident that we had made all of the above decisions in order to lessen the teachers' stress level, we knew that we needed to openly and aggressively address our level of communication with the teachers. Not only did we need to let the teachers know that we were listening, we needed to be flexible enough to adjust to their changing needs throughout this project. This, in fact, became one of our biggest challenges and one of our biggest successes. How could we listen to each teacher's concerns and as importantly, how could we adjust to their diverse needs? Finding the right tools and activities would be key in our delivery model

Tools and Activities

1. Entrance and Exit Slips

I had been introduced to the idea of entrance and exit slips at the 2003 International Conference on Teacher Research (I.C.T.R.) in Chicago. Dr. Sue Hansen, from National Louis University, talked about how she had been using entrance and exit slips to improve the group dynamics in her university classes. All of her students wrote how they were feeling at the beginning of each class and again at the conclusion. Dr. Hansen would then type these up and present them back to the class at her next lecture. After the conference, I too, implemented entrance and exit slips in the 3rd year Education class that I was teaching for Bishop's University. I had my students jot down questions pertinent to the night's lecture topic before I lectured and again at the conclusion of the lecture. These questions helped me adjust the lecture to my audience and then let me know what questions were still unanswered at the end of the evening. I felt that Entrance and Exit slips could be the very tool we needed to get at the teachers' changing feelings and needs while allowing us, the consultants, to respond. This, in itself, should improve the level of communication and trust between teachers and us.

Our team decided to begin each of the 3 workshops with the teachers independently jotting down their most pressing issues and concerns (see figure 1). Teachers were given the

opportunity to discuss these in a small group and then to share the most important ones with the whole group. Consultants refrained from participating in the small group discussions as we felt this was the teachers' time to consolidate and share their concerns. We did, however, listen carefully, take notes on, and respond to the group sharing. Sometimes the issue or concern could be answered directly by us. Sometimes the issue and concern could be worked into the workshop and sometimes the issue and concern would need to be investigated and addressed again at a later workshop. In addition, as the teachers' comfort level, confidence and trust increased, many of the later issues and concerns could be solved by other teachers in the group. In order to get a feel for how the teachers were feeling at the end of the day, we repeated the above procedure at the conclusion of the each workshop. These issues and concerns were typed up and used by us to construct the next workshop at which time the typed version was presented back to the teachers.

2. Teacher Goal Sheets
Although the entrance/exit issues and concerns would give us a window into the teachers' attitudes, we also needed an instrument to answer our questions about whether or not we were successful in merging the 4 initiatives into one understandable package so that teachers could and would implement our suggestions. We needed information on what part of each workshop the teacher's felt comfortable implementing and how much help they perceived they needed to be successful. In order to gather this information, we designed a teacher goal sheet to accompany each workshop (see table 2 for an example of such). The goal sheets allowed us to adjust our workshop material and to provide support, along with Apple trainers, to the teachers as they implemented various strategies in between the workshops.

3. Best Practices
Based on the fall teacher interview data, many of the teachers felt inadequate because they were unable to keep up with all of the new initiatives. They no longer felt successful and they were having a very difficult time knowing where to start. Although the teacher goal sheets would help the teachers set a 'first step', we also wanted to start the content section of each workshop celebrating the teachers' current successes and allowing them to share their valuable classroom knowledge with each other. We felt it was very important for the teachers to acknowledge their own and their colleagues' expertise and for us to use this as a starting point for the content portion of the workshop. With this in mind, we scheduled a 30 minute block for teachers to share first in a small group and then in the whole group, what they were currently doing successfully around the 'workshop topic'. After the first workshop, this time slot was also used for teachers to share which strategies from the previous session they had tried in their classrooms.

4. Workshop Content
As mentioned above, all the workshops revolved around improving students' first and second language writing outcomes. The writing process was divided into three phases-- generating ideas, organizing the composition, and editing and revising. This portion of the project[7] was very carefully designed in order to help the School Board judge the efficacy of the overall wireless writing project[8]. As part of the overall data collection for the wireless writing project, teachers and students were asked to complete a pre and post Attitudinal Survey on writing and computer practices. This data was used both as a starting point (pre survey) and as an evaluative tool (post survey). The pre-survey data helped us choose the appropriate digital and writing strategies. New Q.E.P. and digital strategies were introduced at each workshop using a Balanced Literacy framework to both the French and English teachers and as mentioned above, teachers were asked to set a 'first step' to try before their next workshop. For an overview of one the workshop's complete structure see table 3.

5. Overall Evaluation
It is commonplace for our School Board to have teachers fill in an overall evaluation of all professional development offered. By restructuring the form, we would be able to gather valuable insight into how we did and how we could design next year's support to better meet the teachers' needs.

Results, Discussion and Conclusions:

Results, discussions and conclusions go back to our original questions: Were we successful in merging four initiatives into one understandable and manageable project? Did we do this without adding to the teachers' already stressed workload? Did the teachers feel that we were all part of the same team, and were we able to find tools that allowed us, the consultants, to listen and adjust to the teachers' diverse needs and concerns? Each of these questions will be discussed separately.

1. Were we successful in merging four initiatives into one understandable and manageable project?

To collect data and form a judgement on this question, I looked at whether or not teachers were able to implement the strategies that we were demonstrating in the workshops.   If teachers were able to change their classroom practice to implement components of the four initiatives, then we could conclude that we had been successful in responding to the first question.

A synopsis of the fall, 2003 *Literacy Checklists*, teacher interviews, and the January, 2004 pre attitudinal surveys indicated that a large majority of the teachers 'never used' Q.E.P. strategies such as graphic organizers, task criteria, rubrics and Q.E.P. literacy outcomes. In addition, many of the teachers indicated that they 'never used' the Balanced Literacy components of Modelled Writing, and Shared and Interactive Writing.   Additionally, they pointed out and that they were having difficulty with the peer revision and editing phase of process writing. It was also obvious, based on the teachers' sharing of 'best practices', that the French and English teachers had never coordinated their programs so that the students would be receiving the same strategies concurrently in both classes. Of course, the final initiative, one-to-one computing, was new to everyone and many of the teachers indicated that they were neophytes when it came to technology. One teacher went so far as to say that she didn't even know what sort of questions to ask because she knew so little. In addition to the lack of technology knowledge, most of our teachers had difficulty visualizing how one-to-one computing would change the classroom dynamics.

At the conclusion of the project all cycle 3 teachers had spent at least one day setting anchor papers using Q.E.P. literacy outcomes and placing student writing samples on a rubric. All English and French grade five and six teachers were given many digital graphic organizers and instructed in their use. Eighty-four percent (84%) of the teachers targeted implementing the use of digital graphic organizers as their goal for the second Wireless Writing workshop. Apple Consultants reported that, during their classroom visits, the teachers and students were using the graphic organizers. In addition, during each of the workshops, when teachers shared with their colleagues, they reported that they had used the organizers and indicated which ones they liked the best.

Our strongest data on the change in the teachers' use of 'task criteria' come from the students' self-assessment results. At the beginning and end of this project, students were asked, in their English classes, to write a personal narrative and a self-assessment. Comparison of the baseline and exit self-assessments indicates that 50% more (from 43% to 93%) of the students understood task criteria and process writing. Students were now commenting on the changes they had made to the 'content' of their narratives so that it was more in line with the rubric criteria as opposed to just commenting on changes they had made to the mechanics of the piece (i.e. spelling or punctuation). In addition, according to the Teachers' pre and post Attitudinal surveys, there was a 21% increase in the number of teachers who reported generating criteria with their students 'at least sometimes' (from 69% to 90%). The Teacher Goal sheets after the first workshop supports this. Ninety-four percent (94%) of the teachers intended to implement building criteria with their students, 78% intended to do it on the laptops and 16% did not stipulate whether it would be on posters or on the students' laptops. In addition to task criteria, other indicators showed that teachers were implementing a writer's workshop format: students were given more choice in topics; students were also able to work in pairs or small groups in the planning phase; and more teachers were allowing students to engage in peer revision and editing[9].

In addition to the above, some phase of the process writing showed up on every teacher's individual Goal Statement in the first two Wireless Writing Workshops and many of the final School Goal Statements reflected school wide goals for process writing or a movement to look at process writing through other mediums like *imovie* (an apple program for making movies). This was particularly exciting because having the students move their process writing skills into producing videos also moves the teacher and students in media literacy, which is the newest English Language Arts' competency.

In addition to the increased implementation of technological strategies to improve writing outcomes, teachers' attitudes and use of the laptops changed over the 3-month study. By the end of the project there was 17% increase in the number of teachers expressing confidence in using computer technology 'often' or 'most of the time', a 6% increase in the number of teachers using the computer to assist them in their planning and preparation 'often' or 'most of the time' and a 15% increase in the number of teachers encouraging their students to use the laptops to complete writing assignments 'often' or 'most of the time'.

Overall, there was a definite change in what teachers were implementing in their classrooms in terms of the writing competencies in the Q.E.P. (task criteria, peer editing/revising, student reflection, using prewrites such as graphic organizers). In addition, there is evidence that the teachers were implementing these writing strategies with the use of the laptops (E.L.S.). Evidence also shows that the implementation was done in both the French and the English classrooms, thereby allowing for more transference between the languages for their students (Language Initiative). Evidence of whether or not the strategies were introduced to students using a Balanced Literacy framework is sketchy. There is some evidence in the Goal sheets and Evaluation forms that teachers were using the Balance Literacy vocabulary to talk about writing, however further investigation needs to be done here to determine if teachers are comfortable with and are using the Balanced Literacy framework to teach writing. All in all, however, I think that the teachers' implementation data is fairly strong evidence that we were successful in merging the four initiatives into one understandable and manageable project and in providing the tools and support to assist teachers in taking a first step.

2. Did we do this without adding to the teachers' already stressed workload?
Although we worked hard on alleviating the teachers' stressed workload, we were not totally successful. The stress level of the workshops, however, declined noticeably from the introductory sessions in January to the final sessions in April. As the project progressed we received more and more written comments such as "I have to admit that I appreciated the last 3 sessions because I felt less pressure from your side. I now have the feeling that you are supporting us instead of pushing us! I am really honest here" (Quoted from a teacher's feedback sheet). We took these comments as an indication that we were all moving in the right direction to find a successful solution to our second question.

In addition, on the teachers' final evaluation form, 47% of the respondents indicated that they would be willing to take on an additional task to work with us on designing additional professional development.

3. Did the teachers feel that we were all part of the same team, and were we able to find tools that allowed us, the consultants, to listen and adjust to the teachers' diverse needs and concerns?
Before the Wireless Writing Project formally began in February, 2004, the October, 2003 Teacher Interview data shows that the three most common teacher complaints were:

1. Teachers were feeling overwhelmed due to the number of new initiatives (Initiative Overload).

2. Teachers wanted to be more involved in School Board decisions about their professional development.

3. Teachers wanted more time to meet and share ideas with their colleagues.

In addition, in January, 2004, when we introduced the Wireless Writing project to the teachers, many of them felt that this project was just "one more initiative" (Teacher quotation from introductory session) that was being implemented without their "consultation" (teacher quotation from introductory session).

From the introductory sessions to the final Wireless Writing workshops, data on teachers' attitudes showed a growing, positive trend towards the Wireless Writing project, the consultants, and the School Board Administration in general. This change, however, happened gradually and evolved mainly through the sharing of entrance/exit Issues and Concerns. We were able to listen to the teachers' frustrations, and the teachers, were, in turn, able to watch us adjust to their frustrations, "Well done, it is obvious that time was taken to listen to comments made at previous meetings" and "I appreciate the way the planners listened to the participants from Sessions 2-3" (written teachers' comments from feedback sheets). The issues and concerns shifted from angry complaints about technology in the Introductory and Wireless Writing Workshop 1 (WWW1) to a sharing of pedagogical and technological problems and solutions in the third Wireless Writing Workshop (WWW III). The tone changed from "It's a done deal!" (Teacher quotation at Introductory session) to one of cooperation and appreciation, "At the beginning of the computer I felt I was going a little crazy. By the 3rd session, I'm beginning to see the light! Thank-you!" (teacher quotation on final feedback sheet). Not only did the tone change but the content also moved from purely technological issues to more of a balance between pedagogical and technological issues. In the teachers' overall final evaluation of the Wireless Writing Project, 99% of the teachers rated the project with a 3 or above on a 5 point scale with 1 being poor and 5 being excellent. Seventy-four percent (74%) of the participants rated the project as a 4 or 5. In addition to the ratings, 47% of the participants were interested in helping us plan additional sessions indicating to us that the teachers felt we were on the same team. The pre and post teacher survey also showed a 30% increase in the number of teachers who were enthusiastic about participating in the Wireless Writing project 'often' or 'most of the time'.

Question #3 was the most difficult to successfully address and took a lot of 'listening and sharing'. The entrance/exit Issues and Concerns proved to be a very valuable tool. It was not always easy to listen to the teachers' concerns. However, all involved reaped the benefits from the process.

Conclusion

Using a teacher research model for the delivery of professional development kept us ever mindful of our audience. We were able to merge the four initiatives into a manageable project while respecting the teachers' already stressed workload. We had made inroads in improving the level of communication between teachers and the Board. The Teacher Research model we used to deliver the professional development was, to a large extent, responsible for these results. As mentioned above, listening and adjusting to the teachers' issues and concerns was not always easy. We were constantly face-to-face with accountability for not only what we were presenting, but also for what we were asking the teachers to try. Nothing could be hidden behind or blamed on a 'we and us' division. We were part of the same team and the project turned out to be an 'on site' learning experience for both the presenters and the participants.

References

Brailsford, A. (2000). *Balanced literacy Division 2.* Edmonton: Edmonton Public Schools

Ministry of Education. (2001). *Quebec education program*. Government of Quebec:
        Bibliotheque nationale de Quebec.

Reeves, D. (2003). *Change in Education - Keynote Address*. Scottsdale, Arizona

Endnotes

[1] The other three consultants were Don McLean, Steve Weary & Claire Beaubien.

[2] We chose to use Anne Brailsford's Balanced Literacy framework that she developed for the Edmonton public schools.

[3] Dennis McCullough was a former Director of Educational Services for the Eastern Townships School Board. He was deceased in 2002.

[4] Johanne Richard was the French Second Language Consultant until December, 2003 at which time she took a half sabbatical and was replaced by Claire Beaubien.

[5] Sharon Jerowsi of Horizon Research & Evaluation Inc. along with Bob Kennedy and Trish Lee of Apple Canada provided our team with valuable advise and support.

[6] In Quebec, Professional Development days are built into the teacher's timetable.

[7] Sharon Jerowski of Horizon Research & Evaluation Inc., along with Trish Lee and Bob Kennedy of Apple Canada provided us with valuable advice on this. Carol'Ann McKelvey, an Educational Consultant for the Eastern Townships School Board, provided valuable assistance on sample selections and the tabulation of some of the results.

[8] An article entitled "Technology helps academically 'at risk' students in both their first and second languages" is currently in the review process with another journal.

[9] In the post Teacher Survey, 10% more teachers reported giving students a choice in topics that will be used to assess their writing 'often' or 'most of the time'. Fourteen percent (14%) more teachers indicated in their post Teacher Surveys that their students do peer editing 'often' or 'most of the time' and 5% more teachers allow their students to work in pairs (groups) in the planning phase 'often' or 'most of the time'.

Figure 1 - Entrance/Exit Issues and Concerns

Wireless Writing II
Planning to Write

Entrance Issues and Concerns
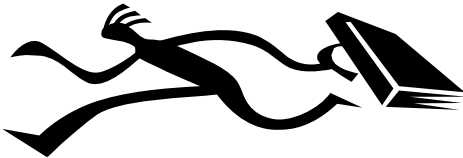
Please write down some of your issues and concerns.

Exit Issues and Concerns

Please write down your new issues and concerns.

Name _____ **School** _____

Circle   ELA   FSL

Figure 2 - Teacher Wireless Writing Goal Sheet

February Goal Statement

Before our March meeting I will

_____

_____

A weakness in my students' writing is

_____

_____

(Apple Consultants need this information for their class visit)

I will share my results with

_____

_____

You can help me by

_____

_____

Name _____ **School** _____

Circle   ELA   FSL

Figure 3 - Sample Workshop Format

Agenda
Wireless Writing Session #3
Revising and Editing

8:30 – 9:00	Coffee & Read Last Month's Issues and Concerns

9:00 – 9:15	Issues and Concerns – Sharing
9:15 – 9:30	Group Discussion- Implementing Strategies from Session #2; Successes and Frustrations
9:30 – 10:15	Writing Process in Review
10:15 – 10:30	Health Break
10:30 – 11:00	CENTERS-Model and Practice New Strategies
	1 – Websites 2- Teacher evaluation using digital tool 3 – Editing/Revising 4 – File management and ETSB Website
11:00 – 11:30	CENTERS
11:30 – 12:00	CENTERS
12:00 – 1:00	LUNCH
1:00 – 1:30	CENTERS
1:30 – 2:15	My Best ELS Activity
2:15 – 2:45	Issues and Concerns /Set School Goals as a Cycle
2:45 – 3:00	Wrap-up/Evaluation

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