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Educational Research

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

WHY IT'S SO INEFFECTIVE & HOW TO FIX IT

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Professional Development: Why It's so Ineffective and How to Fix It

We've all sat through Professional Development (PD) sessions. Naturally, we're inspired by the possibilities of using new strategies. Then Monday morning arrives, and we go back to our existing practices. What happened? We were inspired during the training. We can list the names of the new strategies. But, we teach just like we always did.

OUR BRAINS ARE THE PROBLEM

Actually, it's not that we don't want to try new things, but our human brain is stopping us. It's a design problem. Our brain can store lots of information. We can remember events from our entire lifetime. We can recognize virtually every single item in a huge department store. All of this information is stored in our huge long-term memory. But our conscious memory (our working memory) is an eensy teensy memory capable of holding only 3 to 7 items at once.

So, how can we function with such a small working memory? Well, our brain developed a trick to get around this. It's called habits. We do the same thing over and over; our brain remembers it, and our sub-conscious does it for us. Driving to work is a good example.

Do you drive the same route to work or school every day? Eventually, we don't need to think about it at all. It's as if the car drives us to work. For some reason, our car changes lanes at exactly the correct time when we need to make a turn. Our brain has created a habit of how to drive to work. Now we don't need to use any of our small working memory to drive. We can think about other things.

But habits are hard to break. We don't think about pushing the brake pedal to stop our car. Our foot just does it automatically. The braking habit is so strong that our foot stomps on the brake even when we're in the passenger seat with no brake pedal available.

TEACHING PRACTICES ARE HABITS TOO

Over time as we teach, we turn our own teaching processes into habits. We stand in a certain part of the room. We use certain phrases, questioning techniques, and mannerisms with our students over and over. Our small working memory is focusing on the content being taught, not the teaching methods.

Now, we can see why new teaching strategies are so hard to implement. When we stand up to teach, our habits switch on, and our subconscious starts teaching. We're not even aware of it.

REPETITION BUILDS NEW HABITS

When we repeat something enough times it becomes a new habit, even replacing old habits. In the classroom a common estimate is that students need 16 to 24 repetitions to learn new concepts and skills. Behavioral habits may start to develop after 25 repetitions, but 50 to 60 repetitions may be needed to solidify a habit to the point where we don't even remember using it. And that's the goal for new teaching strategies, to use them effortlessly.

How do we change
current teaching habits
into new, improved
teaching habits?

----> Turn page for solution

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Professional development is not as effective as it could be because most trainings provide awareness of new strategies, but don't follow up with enough repetitions for the new strategies to become habits to use effortlessly.

Here is a quick summary of steps necessary to ensure implementation, and step 4 is critical.

STEPS TO ENSURE IMPLEMENTATION



Professional development starts with a **presentation** of new strategies. Generally, a trainer uses a PowerPoint presentation that describes the new strategies. **Observation** of the new strategies begins during the training as the teachers observe the trainer and videos showing the strategies. Initial controlled practice is also done during the training with teachers practicing in small groups at their tables. Often teachers come up to the front of the group to use the strategies while the other teachers act as students.

PD now moves to the classroom. Teacher teams observe the trainer teaching lesson demonstrations using the new strategies with real students. This clarifies the strategies and shows how adjustments are made while teaching, depending on student interaction.

Professional Development - **THE SOLUTION**

Now, teachers are ready for **controlled practice** in the classroom. Here is an easy method. Immediately after watching the trainer's demonstration lesson, the teacher team goes to another classroom and teaches the same lesson to another class of students. The lesson can be divided among three teachers to allow more teachers to participate and to reduce the pressure on each teacher to do an entire lesson.

Now comes a critical technique. Since the brain wants to use its old habits, someone must be with the teacher at the front of the class reminding, cueing, and prompting to use the new strategies at every opportunity.

After this controlled practice, teachers return to their classrooms and practice the strategies on their own. Teachers still need someone to observe, cue, and prompt for the new strategies. As the **correct repetitions** continue, the new strategies become habits of their own that can be done effortlessly without any conscious effort.

So, the secret to successful Professional Development implementation is including a structure where teachers get enough correct repetitions to turn new strategies into habits, to develop automaticity, to rewire their brains.



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John Hollingsworth is the president and co-founder of DataWORKS Educational Research. He works to make classroom instruction more effective and efficient. He and his wife, Dr. Silvia Ybarra, co-authored best-sellers ***Explicit Direct Instruction: The Power of the Well-Crafted, Well-Taught Lesson*** (Corwin press, 2009, 2017) and ***Explicit Direct Instruction for English Learners*** (Corwin Press, 2013) He has trained teachers and taught demonstration lessons across the USA and around the world.