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INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP: THE ART OF ASKING QUESTIONS TO PROMOTE TEACHING EFFECTIVENESS

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There is a growing body of literature that highlights the ways to support professional conversations on the part of leadership through processes and protocols. However, there are few opportunities for instructional leaders to engage in professional learning, which strengthens their skills in asking questions as part of those protocols and processes. Our goal in this paper will be to share how a partnership between a rural school division and an independent, charitable organization that consists of thought-leading educators have developed professional learning to support instructional leaders in their understanding of teaching effectiveness and the art of asking questions around authentic task design.

Keywords: teaching effectiveness; instructional leadership; professional learning; asking questions

A growing body of literature recognizes the importance of teaching quality, leading teacher learning and its relationship to student achievement. (Robinson, 2011; Timperley, 2011; Wiliam, 2016). Inherent in any instructional leader's work is that of promoting and engaging in what Timperley (2015) refers to as professional conversations to strengthen teaching quality. As part of the social construct of building new knowledge, professionals draw upon the collective wisdom of the individuals that are present in those conversations as well as the research informed practices of effective teaching. A key element of those conversations is the art of asking questions to promote

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reflection around effective teaching practices. It is the goal in this paper to highlight the importance of supporting instructional leaders in strengthening teaching quality through effective professional learning. Specifically, we would like to highlight the role of ensuring instructional leaders have opportunities to deepen their understanding of effective teaching practices through the use of case studies. As well, we would like to emphasize the necessity for providing deliberate practice of asking questions to support those leaders in engaging their colleagues in effective professional conversations.

TEXTURING AN UNDERSTANDING OF EFFECTIVE TEACHING PRACTICES

First and foremost for any leader to effectively ask questions regarding teaching quality, they need to be well versed in effective teaching practices. Drawing upon the Teaching Effectiveness Framework (TEF) of Friesen (2009), instructional leaders are provided a knowledge input that strongly supports their ability to engage colleagues in these types of conversations. The framework itself is not enough for individuals to have a clear understanding of what it means in practice. Thus, there is a need for leaders to texture their understanding of the five effective teaching principles. Due to the difficulty of having instructional leaders visit numerous classrooms and teaching spaces, it has become clear to us that the use of case studies provides the most effective use of time and resources to help leaders deepen their understanding of effective teaching.

In practice what does it look like to deepen the understanding of participants in the principles of effective teaching? Case studies can come in a number of forms. Firstly, there are a variety of video sources to draw upon. The Galileo Educational Network in the Werklund School of Education at the University of Calgary has numerous video examples online ranging from kindergarten to grade twelve across all disciplines. Additionally, case studies of effective lessons, created using the “Rubric for Discipline-Based and Interdisciplinary Inquiry Studies” (Galileo Educational Network,

2000- 2016), are drawn upon to help engage participants in these conversations. These written examples are intentionally created in a manner that mirrors the ways of knowing within a discipline. They are directly connected to the program of studies and clearly articulate the subtasks that students would be engaged in. Both what the teacher would be doing and what the students would be doing are highlighted for each of those subtasks as part of the instructional design for an authentic learning experience.

The question then arises as to how one uses these case studies to help instructional leaders texture their understanding of effective teaching practices? For the purposes of this article, we would like to draw upon the experience of the partnership between a rural school jurisdiction and an independent, charitable organization that consists of thought-leading educators as an example of how this might occur. As part of the professional learning that was being provided for instructional leaders we began with deepening their understanding of effective teaching practices. Initially, participants were introduced to an overview of the five principles of effective teaching. As participants were seated in small groups of four to five individuals, they were provided short (one to three minute) video clips of what each principle might look like in a school setting. Participants were provided with questions, which they reflected upon in relation to the video examples. These questions were designed to help participants articulate the evidence they see in the video clips. For example, a question such as: “In what ways has your school or grade team built capacity around this principle?” was used. Upon completion of the five video clips and their reflections, the participants were invited to build their collective understanding of the principles by engaging in a discussion with the colleagues with whom they were sitting.

To help ensure that participants fully understood effective teaching, a second round of case studies were used. In this round, participants were divided up, selecting one of the five different principles

of effective teaching to use as a lens to watch a case study. While watching a full video case study (five to ten minutes in length), the participants were asked to record any evidence they saw in the video that they felt was related to their chosen principle. After the video had been watched participants then combined the information with one another, articulating what they saw in the video. Finally, in a third round, the participants were then asked to watch a final case study from a different perspective choosing a different principle the previous one. In this way, they furthered their understanding as they pooled their ideas for a second time.

We have found that using video case studies is not the only way to help instructional leaders texture their understanding of effective teaching practices. Written examples also can provide a great way for people to reflect about authentic task design and ways to help support the strengthening of those designs. As a way to make visible teaching practices and instructional design, we drew upon the Galileo Educational Network, which uses a variety of heuristics, templates and design tools. One such design tool is a “Task Design Arrow” (Galileo Educational Network, 2016). At the end of the arrow, a designer would write the learning intentions they had for their overall task. This becomes the target for their students learning. Along the top of the arrow the designer would include subtasks that students would engage in as they work towards completing an overall task. The teacher needs to think intentionally about the scaffolding that they are going to provide for their students. The underside of the arrow is used to weave formative assessment strategies. This purposely draws the designer’s attention to the importance of supporting students throughout the learning process, helping them move forward in their learning. Specifically, designers are asked to consider Dylan Wiliam’s (2011) five key formative assessment strategies as part of the design. The simplicity of this tool understates the impact it has in prompting reflection around effective teaching practices.

The task design arrow is a great tool to make our thinking visible in relation to effective instructional design. We used this arrow with participants to help them deepen their understanding of effective teaching practices. To begin, participants were asked to draw an arrow lengthwise across the midline of a piece of chart paper. Participants were then given a handout that contained an overview of a written task including its learning intentions. Each group was then provided an envelope that contained a mixture of ten subtasks and ten formative assessment components all that were in service of the larger overall task. The challenge that was put forward to the groups (ranging in size from three to four individuals) was to come to a consensus about where the subtasks and formative assessment components should be placed on the arrow (subtasks along the top of the arrow and formative assessment components along the bottom). This task was challenging and yet successful. It generated much discussion around scaffolding of learning, the importance of weaving formative assessment throughout the task design and the complexity of creating a well-designed authentic learning experience for students. Upon completion, participants identified that they had a much deeper understanding of effective instructional design as indicated by their responses to the question “What have you come to understand about teaching effectiveness?” as part of a feedback survey.

DELIBERATE PRACTICE: ASKING QUESTIONS TO PROMOTE REFLECTION

At the core of instructional leaders’ work are professional conversations. It is through these professional conversations that they have a unique opportunity to prompt reflection on the part of colleagues with whom they work. Bryk and Schneider (2003) highlight the mutual dependence that stakeholders have in a social exchange and the importance of maintaining trusting relationships as part of those exchanges. Timperley (2015) writes about a number of enablers for professional conversations including: the processes we use to engage in those conversations; the resources in

the form of tools and expertise to help identify effective practice and relevant evidence; and the relationships between the individuals that are based on mutual respect, trust and challenge. Once an instructional leader is armed with the expertise of effective teaching practices they are better prepared to ask colleagues questions in relation to their teaching practice. The subtle nature of asking these questions of colleagues is one that requires thoughtful consideration for a leader. They must maintain that relational trust while still challenging the thinking of the other. How can professional learning effectively support instructional leaders in developing this skill of asking questions?

To start, creating the conditions for this type of learning opportunity requires a focus for the conversation. Prior to coming to the professional learning, participants were requested to bring a piece of evidence from their school that was related to the teaching that was happening in their buildings. The intention of bringing this piece of evidence was twofold: 1. it provides focus to the conversation and 2. the leaders would have a vested interest in the work that they are sharing as it is coming from their school. Drawing upon the evidence, the leaders were asked to prepare for a conversation with their colleagues using question prompts. We have found that providing this individual reflection time for people is an integral step for the preparation of these conversations. The resulting conversations are deeper and more focused when participants are prepared for them compared to when participants are not given this time.

Structure to the conversation is another key component to ensuring that the opportunity is successful. Timperley (2015) identifies clear purpose and structured processes that engage individuals as a core enabler of professional conversations. In our particular example, we had our participants arranged in triads. These individuals were each given roles: recorder, leader of learning and teacher presenter. They would rotate through these roles during the activity to ensure equal

participation and benefit. The role of the teacher presenter was to set the context of the task and respond thoughtfully to any questions that were asked on the part of the leader of learning. The leader of learning was tasked with asking thought provoking questions to prompt the thinking of the teacher. The recorder's job was to record the context of the evidence as well as any questions the leader of learning asked throughout the conversation in an online form that populates a spreadsheet. Each conversation was given a limited amount of time. Upon stopping the conversation, the participants reviewed all the questions that were recorded. They were tasked with selecting and submitting what they thought were the best three questions that were asked. Upon completion of this first round, each participant rotated roles and then repeated the entire process until everyone had had a chance to practice asking questions.

After the three rounds of engaging in questions, participants' attention was brought to the fact that this was not easily done in the spur of the moment. In light of relational trust, knowing the impact that breaking that trust may have, participants were asked to reflect on the implications. It became clear there is a need for instructional leaders to be well prepared for these conversations, specifically in using questions that are highly effective in promoting reflection on the part of their colleagues. Subsequently we discussed elements of effective questions such as: 1. being kind, non-judgemental, assuming a positive intent; 2. specific, grounded in the knowledge of effective teaching practices and 3. helpful, promoting reflection on principles that matter. After having a clear understanding of what effective questions look like we had some final considerations.

The final activity that we engaged participants in during the session was centred on the specific nature of the questions that we use and how they must be grounded in knowledge that is evidence based. To this end, we asked participants to review the spreadsheet that contained all the questions from the day that were selected and submitted as good questions. A final lens was added, that of

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filtering those questions through the principles of effective teaching highlighted in the TEF. Participants were asked specifically to choose or write three questions that they could use in a variety of different situations. These “back pocket” questions then became the final product of the work that we engaged in.

CONCLUSION

The results of this professional learning opportunity were very strong. A synthesis of the feedback highlighted numerous insights on the part of participants. Leaders felt that they had a deeper understanding of teaching effectiveness as well as identifying that using reflective questions is a supportive way to engage their teachers in conversations around teaching effectiveness. Leaders identified that the reflective questioning strategies will be implemented in their own practice, as they lead staff meetings, mentor new teachers and professional development days in their own context. Leaders had new insights about how to develop protocols, structures and processes to have evidence informed conversations around student thinking as well they articulated that having a reflective practice needs to be a part of school culture (developing a scholarship of teaching). Leaders articulated that they appreciated practicing asking reflective questions. Finally, leaders identified that nurturing teacher learning needs to be reflective, not prescriptive or judgmental. An atmosphere of trust is key to having an effective reflective conversation and leaders felt more prepared to focus reflective conversations around the TEF.

Preparing instructional leaders for asking questions as part of professional conversations supports the common good of promoting effective teaching practices. Instructional leaders need to have a strong understanding of these interactions and how they might leverage them to promote teacher learning. If not, conversations that leaders engage in will be more of a social occasion than a professional conversation.

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