

Driving Classroom Decisions with Data

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Executive Summary

It is with great pleasure that I report to you regarding the success of the July 2005 Staff Development: *Driving Classroom Decisions with Data*. Two sets of twenty-five teachers received two weeks of in-depth staff development. Over the course of the project every teacher developed a new perspective regarding the use of data in the classroom and the use of technology as a tool for timely, effective feedback. The following quote seems to sum the mood:

“Most importantly you have provided me the tools to actually find my weaknesses as a teacher and some strategies for improving student achievement. Everyone should have to take this workshop.” – Sandra Boynton

This workshop was a raving success because of several fundamental components. In the following sections I will describe each component and provide evidence of its success.

Lasting Visualizations

In order to capture the attention of the attendees, we started the project with two activities. The first activity began by showing teachers what they thought was poor performance on some unnamed TAKS test but ended by comparing these results to other comparable schools to illustrate that John Tyler is on the leading edge in at least a few categories. The second activity had the students engage in an activity that was a perfect feedback system, but as it progressed it became an inefficient feedback system. This was intended to illustrate the feeling students have when we do not provide them with adequate information about their progress toward a goal.

These activities played off of the emotions of the attendees and helped them exam their own behaviors in terms of something more tangible. Consider the following two quotes from the attendees:

“It made me feel better to look at our data along with the comparable schools. It gives a more positive outlook, but still shows that we have a long way to go.” – Laura Berns

“I really enjoyed the basketball activity we did as a team today. I learned that in order for our students to be successful, you MUST find out where they are having problems and work with them from there. The more practice they receive with USEFUL FEEDBACK, the more success your students will have.” – Jaton Broach

Transparent Technology

Instead of holding a workshop where we show the teachers how to use the equipment but never give them the practical experience, we decided we would provide opportunities for them to use the technology in a manner similar to the classroom. We simply wanted them to continue doing what they started in the class. Given a classroom activity, technology should expedite the process; it should not be the process. We provided enough training to get them started then we let them experience the application of the equipment. As time progressed, we encouraged them to *discover* (with the technology) ways to improve what they already do in the classroom.

Academic Research

While it is important as a professional to stay current on trends in research, unfortunately few of us actually do. In the course of our staff development we built a knowledge base by providing a series of research articles. In addition, we made it a requirement that each group add to that knowledge base by contributing an article that they found. The following quote is a sample of the conversations that ensued after the reading of the articles:

“This article really hits home. In trying to provide immediate feedback for students, I find I don't always tell them why their paper has "good job" on it, or why it didn't meet the criteria for passing. We must not assume the students will know what is wrong!! Obviously if they wrote about a particular item, they considered it to be what the question was asking.” – Phyllis Hedricks

Online Collaboration

At this point you may be wondering how I have access to all of these quotes. The answer to this is possibly the most critical portion of the project. We employed an online collaborative tool called the *Internet Classroom Assistant*. This free tool allowed us to fill the project with *reflective* time. During this time we maintained a library atmosphere, and took our discussions online. This accomplished two major goals. First it allowed enough space for everyone to talk, because everyone could contribute at the same time. Second it established a record of the conversation that allowed us (the instructors) to reflect on the cognitive processes of the attendees and react accordingly. It also allowed the attendees to revisit the conversation later.

Final Comments

Although many of these things seem new and innovative, they are more accurately a repackaging of old ideas that we all know work. We simply found a way to package them together into a cohesive unit. Mr. McFarland quoted one of the attendees as saying “this was the best staff development I have ever been involved in.” We knew very early in the development stage that we had a plan that could turn into a great opportunity, but I don’t think any of us anticipated just how well things would turn out. Even though it was a tremendous amount of work, I knew it had all been worth while when a participant said: “I have to admit, being nine months pregnant I was really dreading giving up two weeks of my summer for this staff development, but you guys have made it fun and I am glad that I came.”

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all of the people that made this project possible. First and foremost, I need to thank Mr. Michael McFarland for assuming the large financial risk associated with a training of this type. He had the foresight to believe in what we wanted to do and equip us with the tools necessary to make it a reality. I also know that Ms. Venora Jones was more than instrumental in encouraging Mr. McFarland to move in this direction and ensuring him that the investment would reap great rewards.

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