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**Best Practices/Tom W. Many, Ed.D.**

## It Depends on the Time of the Day

**What do a package courier, water inspector, and copier repairman tell us about the importance of the sharing of teachers' craft knowledge in a professional learning community?**

Scott Thurm recounts a conversation he had with a package delivery courier in the elevator of a large, multi-story building in downtown San Francisco. He asked the courier if it was "...more efficient to start at the top of the building and work down or start at the bottom of the building and work up?" The courier replied, "It depends on the time of day."

The courier had learned some useful information about the elevator patterns of the office building. That knowledge—unique to his particular assignment—was learned through repeated attempts to be more effective and efficient. Thurm wondered, "What would happen when the courier moved to a different route? Would the next courier have the same knowledge about the elevators? If not, how long would it take to learn the same information? Would the productivity of the package delivery company decline until his successor learned the same lessons?"

Thurm tells another story about water inspectors in London. Managers sought to improve efficiency by giving the inspectors handheld computers and allowing them to take their trucks home thus eliminating the need to gather each morning at a central dispatch office. The expectation

was that the new system would save time and increase efficiency, but it turned out the dispatch office was far more than a place for the inspectors to "change clothes and pick up their trucks." The dispatch office was actually a place for colleagues to share information and learn vital "tricks of the trade." As Thurm explained, "The need of the inspectors to meet and share their ideas was so great that they began to meet on their own at a local restaurant; jotting down tips, solutions, and new ideas in a notebook they stashed behind the lunch counter to be referenced at a later date."

Similarly, Thurm described how a major company was attempting to increase the efficiency of the technicians who repaired their copiers. Despite the fact that the company supplied each technician with intensive training and a detailed reference manual, the technicians found they relied more on practical tips gleaned from talking with one another about solutions. The expected increase in productivity did not materialize until the company began using hand held radios to allow the copier technicians to confer with each other when they were working on repair jobs. Through their conversations, technicians were able to benefit from the collective experience of others.



Thurm's stories of the package courier, water inspector, and copier repairman provide the context for one of our most challenging problems: *How can principals encourage the collaborative sharing of craft knowledge between and among teachers?*

**“Norms of isolation are replaced with norms of collaboration.”** (Thomas Sergiovanni, *Strengthening the Heartbeat*, p.119)

In the best schools, teachers learn from one another, yet most schools are not structured in ways that allow experienced teachers to pass on their craft knowledge to beginning teachers. Likewise, there are few mechanisms in which beginning teachers can share new and innovative ideas they have learned with veteran colleagues. In ways that are not unlike the package courier, water inspectors, and copier repairmen, many teachers struggle with finding opportunities to share their craft knowledge in meaningful ways.

Too many teachers work in schools in which extreme isolation is the rule rather than the exception. Sergiovanni described this when he observed, “In most schools teaching is regarded as an individual act. Thirty teachers working in the same school are thought of as a collection of 30 individual practices.” Or as DuFour has labeled this phenomenon, “a group of independent contractors united by a single parking lot.” (Thomas Sergiovanni, *Strengthening the Heartbeat*, p.117)

Such conditions would certainly create questions Thurm could relate to: How do teachers share important information about teaching and learning with one another? When and where do teachers learn how to improve their craft? Should the acquisition of such knowledge be left to chance or was there a more conscious way to pass along what teachers have learned? The answer to these questions lies in creating schools that support collaborative teams as the fundamental work group for teachers.

Over time, our most tenured teachers acquire craft knowledge that is invaluable in helping all students learn. Teachers build on their craft knowledge every day as they reflect on the success or failure of each lesson. In the lonely world of traditional schools, most teachers are left to determine the relative success of their daily work by themselves, and as a result, rely on two equally weighted criteria that are typically asked while engaged in RWWOTD (Reflection While Walking out the Door). First, were my students engaged? And second, did I finish the lesson? If one or both of the answers is yes, the lesson is generally regarded as a success. The reality is that while students may have been engaged and the teacher may have finished the lesson, learning may or may not have been the result.

In contrast, schools working as professional learning communities encourage collaborative teacher teams to meet together regularly to determine the effectiveness of their instruction. These teams work to reach agreement on essential outcomes, reflect on the results of common assessments, make adjustments to their instruction, and develop systematic interventions for students who need more time and support. Teachers in professional learning communities “share their best practices, successful approaches, failures – which sometimes teach more than successes – and even more new ideas.” (Thomas Sergiovanni, *Strengthening the Heartbeat*, p.138.)

**“Learning Communities have faith in the craft knowledge and wisdom of those closest to the classroom.”** (Thomas Sergiovanni, *Strengthening the Heartbeat*, p.131)

The insights a teacher gains about student learning are typically the result of reflecting on their experiences, but in traditional schools most teachers engage in this reflection by themselves. It's only by working on collaborative teams that teachers can overcome the extreme isolation so prevalent in traditional schools, maximize their own learning and positively impact student learning as a result. The value of the craft knowledge shared between and among teachers while working in collaborative teams is priceless.

Like the package courier who found ways to manage the office building elevators to make his work productive and efficient, individual teachers learn from each lesson and successful schools understand that they cannot afford to leave the sharing of that craft knowledge to chance. The challenge for principals is to create collaborative communities of practice where teachers can engage in the intentional sharing of the results of their practice and find ways to meet, share, and collectively build on their craft knowledge together. ■

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*During the course of a career spanning more than 30 years, Dr. Tom W. Many has served as a classroom teacher, principal and superintendent—all at the elementary level.*

## References

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