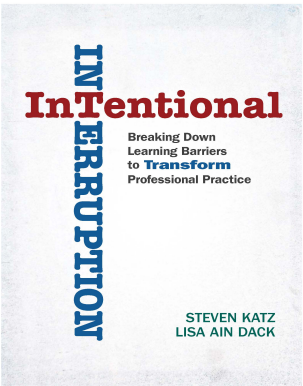**The Role of Learning Leader and Lead Learner: Intentional Interruption**

Steven Katz, Ph.D

Applied Psychology & Human Development/University of Toronto

aporiaconsultingltd@gmail.com

Aporia Consulting Ltd.

www.aporia.ca

3219 Yonge St., Suite # 240, Toronto, ON. M4N 3S1 | tel 416-686-2279 |

InTentional

INTERRUPTION

Breaking Down Learning Barriers to **Transform** Professional Practice

STEVEN KATZ
LISA AIN DACK

Aporia Consu…

The path of school improvement

Student learning and achievement ← Changes in thinking and practice ← Professional development and learning

Aporia Consulting Ltd.

The big driver

- The quality of classroom practice that a child encounters has unmatched potential with respect to influencing student learning and achievement. What teachers are doing in classes with students on a daily basis has the greatest potential to influence the academic outcome for students. The more challenged students are in "asset" terms, the more true this is.

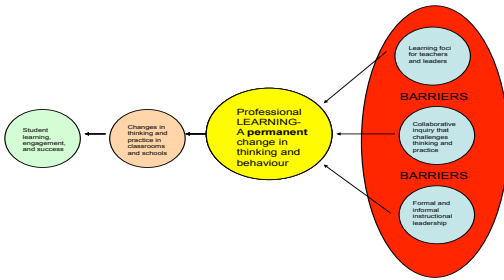(Katz & Dack, 2013)

Aporia Consulting Ltd.

3

And…

- Principal leadership is second to only classroom teaching in terms of impact on student learning and achievement

- The "asset" context holds here as well with "principal effects on teacher outcomes being greater in disadvantaged schools"

(Leithwood et al.; Grissom)

Aporia Consulting Ltd.

4

The path of school improvement

Student learning and achievement ← Changes in thinking and practice ← Professional development and learning

Aporia Consulting Ltd.

Building capacity for focused professional learning

What is Learning?

- If "learning" is at the centre, we should make sure we know what it is!

- What is the definition of learning?

A psychological (and my) definition of learning

- Learning is the process through which experience causes _permanent_ change in knowledge or behaviour

- A new "status quo" of thinking and practice

- How does this compare with your definition?

- The test? Transfer!

Permanent Learning is VERY hard!

- Avoid/Assimilate/Accommodate
- The Shape Sorter
- Goal: To be each other's shape sorters

Reflect and Discuss #1

- Using the definition of learning as a _permanent_ change in knowledge/behaviour, can you think of a time when you thought that you and/or those you were working with had learned something, but now you realize you/they may not have?

- Can you think of an example of a "shape-sorter" type of learning experience from your own life, one where there was push-back on your thinking in a way that felt uncomfortable but ultimately resulted in new understanding?

The problem with professional learning

- Problem identification: Why care?
- Professional Development (PD) as the vehicle of choice

The path of school improvement
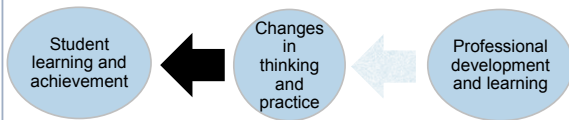
Student learning and achievement ← Changes in thinking and practice ← Professional development and learning

---

The problem with professional learning

- Problem identification: Why care?
- Professional Development (PD) as the vehicle of choice
- Vertical capacity building and the challenge of getting "from the ballroom to the classroom"
- Just-in-time? Job-embedded? Needs-based?

The challenge with alternate forms of PD

- Modeling and the use of "walkthroughs"
  - What's often missing? The "why" behind the observable
- The case of the purple exercise ball
- Practice as the visible face of understanding
- Transporting the "high yield" strategies
- PLCs to the rescue! .... Not so fast!

What does it mean to be part of a PLC? …Pretty much everything and that's the problem!

- "We read and share professional articles and books in our team meetings."

- "A community of learners, especially in this school, means that we speak the same language."

- "A community of learners is, first of all, empowering people to have a sense of parity within the system where they will have equal input into that process."

- "Continuous, continuous, continuous contact, continuous involvement, continuous dialogue, continuous problem-solving, continuous identifying strengths and weaknesses. It is continuity of effort."

- "Teachers get a chance to share ideas through their work – best practices, instructional practices."

Supovitz, 2006

Aporia Consulting Ltd.

The Power of a PLC

- The power of the idea of a PLC is that members of the group… engage together in challenges of practice so that their understanding of those challenges grows deeper and is more unified. Through their investigations, proposed solutions emerge that are then tested to see if they help… Through such a repeated process, practice grows more sophisticated and powerful and the group develops a tighter sense of camaraderie and common purpose. As a result, they can construct common understanding, share knowledge and experience, and develop common goals.

Adapted from Supovitz, 2006

Aporia Consulting Ltd.

The reality

- Research finds that this form of learning community is largely absent from districts, and the examples that practitioners do provide are too diffused and unfocused to have a strong influence on practice. Activities like book talks and in-school professional development sessions are usually too sparse and diffused to fulfill the particular goals promised by PLCs.

Aporia Consulting Ltd.

From professional development to professional learning
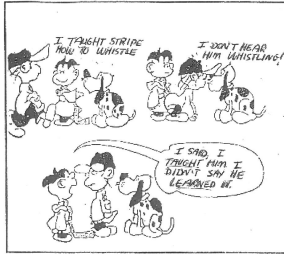
Reflect and Discuss #2

- If professional development is not professional learning unless it changes the way you think and behave, reflecting on your recent professional development experiences, which of them would you consider professional learning? Why?

Professional Development isn't Professional Learning
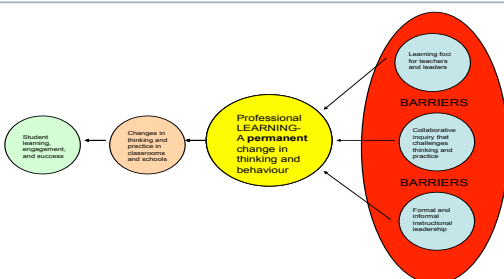
Creating the conditions for focused professional learning

- Focus
- Collaborative inquiry that challenges thinking and practice
- Instructional leadership

Creating the conditions for focused professional learning

WHAT?

Focus (getting the right inch!)

"Establishing a learning focus means identifying an urgent student learning need (based on evidence) and recognizing that this student learning need indicates a *teacher* learning need."

MIND THE GAP

Everybody has a class… with a needs-based learning focus!

Levels of Learning

Community Learning
Leader Learning
Teacher Learning
Student Learning

- What do teachers need to learn to support what students need to learn?

- What do leaders need to learn to support what teachers need to learn to support what students need to learn?

Aporia Consulting Ltd.

25

Creating the conditions for focused professional learning

HOW?

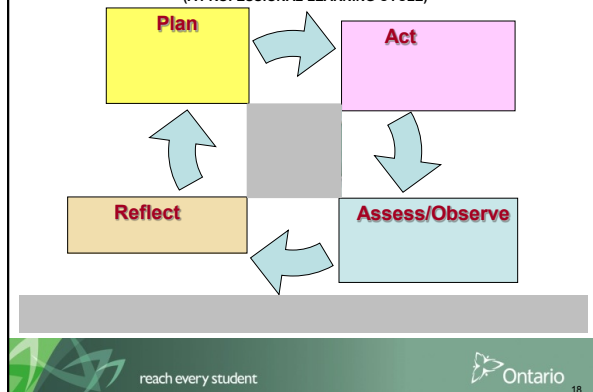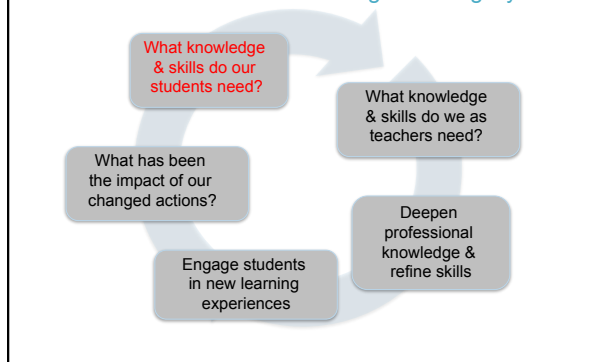Collaborative inquiry that challenges thinking and practice

Aporia Consulting Ltd.

26

Collaborative Inquiry

- The power of the idea of a LC (PLC/PLT) is that members of the group… engage together in challenges of practice so that their understanding of those challenges grows deeper and is more unified. Through their investigations, proposed solutions emerge that are then tested to see if they help… Through such a repeated process, practice grows more sophisticated and powerful and the group develops a tighter sense of camaraderie and common purpose. As a result, they can construct common understanding, share knowledge and experience, and develop common goals.

Aporia Consulting Ltd.

27

(A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING CYCLE)

Plan

Act

Reflect

Assess/Observe

reach every student

Ontario

18

Teacher Inquiry and Knowledge-Building Cycle

What knowledge & skills do our students need?

What knowledge & skills do we as teachers need?

What has been the impact of our changed actions?

Deepen professional knowledge & refine skills

Engage students in new learning experiences

Together is not always better!

- Need to ensure:

  - Diversity of opinion (rather than groupthink)

  - Shared responsibility (rather than diffusion of responsibility)

  - Quality control (rather than spread of anything)

Aporia Consulting Ltd.
30

Reflect and Discuss #3

- Look again at the inquiry cycle. Which, if any, components of this cycle are evident in your professional learning environment, and which are missing?

- Think about your most recent "challenge of professional practice". How did you respond to this challenge? Did you engage in appropriate "problem analysis" before implementing your response? Did your response work? How do you know?

Aporia Consulting Ltd.

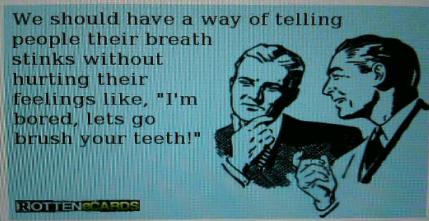## Creating the conditions for focused professional learning

WHO?

Instructional leaders

Aporia Consulting Ltd.
32

Leadership is the exercise of influence on organizational members… toward the identification and achievement of the organization's visions and goals

(The Ontario Leadership Framework)

Leadership as "influence": Leadership challenges of practice are often about influence
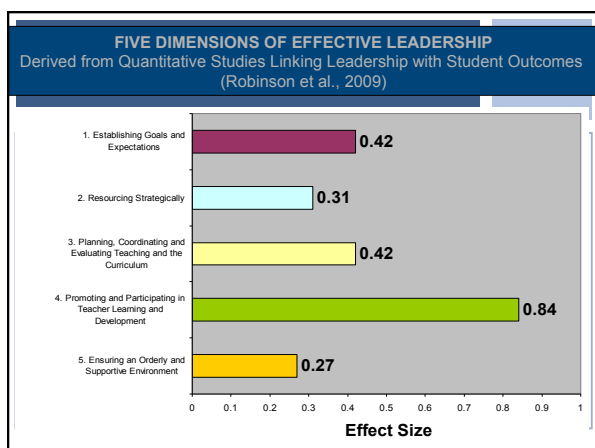
FIVE DIMENSIONS OF EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP
Derived from Quantitative Studies Linking Leadership with Student Outcomes
(Robinson et al., 2009)

Dimension	Effect Size
1. Establishing Goals and Expectations	0.42
2. Resourcing Strategically	0.31
3. Planning, Coordinating and Evaluating Teaching and the Curriculum	0.42
4. Promoting and Participating in Teacher Learning and Development	0.84
5. Ensuring an Orderly and Supportive Environment	0.27

Effect Size

Impactful Leadership Dimensions
(Robinson, 2007)

- **Promoting and participating in teacher learning and development (ES=0.84)**
  - Leadership that not only promotes but directly participates with teachers in formal and informal professional learning.

- Principals as Co-learners: Supporting the Promise of Collaborative Inquiry (August 2014 Monograph)

Aporia Consulting Ltd.

From lead knower to lead learner

DILBERT

THE CEO OF APPLE SAYS A LEADER SHOULD ADMIT WHEN HE'S WRONG.

THAT WON'T WORK FOR ME BECAUSE I'M NEVER WRONG. THE BEST I CAN DO IS ADMIT WHEN OTHER PEOPLE ARE WRONG.

THAT SORT OF MISSES THE POINT.

WELL, I HUMBLY ADMIT YOU'RE WRONG.

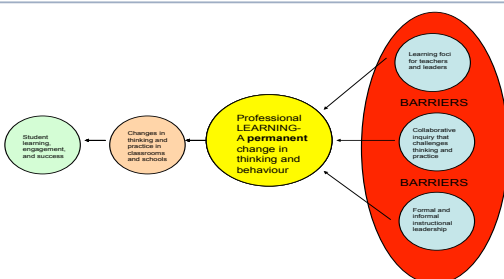Aporia Consulting Ltd.

Reflect and Discuss #4

- Do you consider yourself to be a lead learner? Why or why not? What does (or might) being a lead learner look like in your context? Be specific.

Aporia Consulting Ltd.

So why can't we do it?

Aporia Consulting Ltd.

The Barriers: We get in the way of ourselves!

Aporia Consulting Ltd.

Barriers as "cognitive biases"

- At their core, all of the barriers to successfully enabling real professional learning are premised on one fairly simple (yet often hard to believe) fact: *Human beings take mental shortcuts to avoid thinking.*

- All human beings use these mental shortcuts. In fact, humans have evolved to take these shortcuts and to do the least amount of thinking possible.

- We are all "cognitive misers"

The barriers – What we need to "interrupt"

- We don't think through all the possibilities
- We focus on confirming our hypotheses, not challenging them
- We pay too much attention to things that are vivid
- We consider ourselves to be an exception
- We hesitate to take action in a new direction
- We don't want others to see our vulnerabilities
- Coming together in a culture of niceness

The Confirmation Bias

- The human tendency to only look for things that confirm, rather than challenge, our beliefs and practices

- Example: Reading a professional article

- How do you think this might impact on professional learning?
  - Example- You interact with colleagues in a way that ignores disconfirming evidence, so you fail to become aware of the limitations of your understanding

The Vividness Bias

- The tendency to overestimate the likelihood of occurrence of something that is salient or vivid

- Example- Plane crashes versus car crashes

- How do you think this might impact on professional learning?
  - Example: Choosing a professional learning focus that a few people with "loud voices" think is important, but is not truly representative of a learning need for the school

Illusory Superiority

- People's tendency to overestimate their strengths and underestimate their shortcomings, in comparison to other people (see ourselves as an exception to the general rule)

- Example- Failing a test

- How do you think this might impact on professional learning?
  - Example- Many people believe they don't need to learn anything new (others do, but not them!)

Hiding our Vulnerability

- People's tendency to present the strongest version of themselves to the outside world (maximizing strengths, minimizing weaknesses)

- The "Imposter Syndrome"

- Example- 1) Privatize practice 2) Defensive

- How do might this impact on professional learning?
  - Example: Being afraid to make mistakes, which makes you risk-averse

Culture of "Niceness"

- Beliefs, ideas, and practices are superficially validated (at least publicly), and opportunities for critical challenge that lead to deep understanding are rare. We call this being "superfice".

- Person and practice are confounded

- Problematic because it preserves the status quo

Reflect and Discuss #5

- Can you think of a time when you have fallen prey to the confirmation bias in your work? What were the implications of this?

- What is the culture around mistakes in your school or in the schools that you work with? What is your own view on making mistakes?

A key role-
Intentional Interruption!

Strategies for "Intentional Interruption"

- Use protocols
- Make preconceptions explicit
- Ensure that activities and interventions are rooted in "problems of professional practice"
- Recruit contradictory evidence
- View mistakes as learning opportunities
- Encourage a growth (rather than a fixed) mindset
- Ensure that problems of practice are *questions* that people are curious about
- Give people autonomy in time and task

Using Protocols

- Structured sets of guidelines to promote effective and efficient communication and problem solving

- Help to mitigate some of the barriers to learning by providing a structure that forces people to do what they don't do naturally
    - Example: Separating person from practice (which are confounded in the culture of "niceness")

Recruiting Contradictory Evidence

- An important strategy for interrupting the confirmation bias

- So many ways to do it!- a few examples:
  - 2 different coloured highlighters!
  - A new way of "brainstorming"
  - Using "critical friends" and "agree before you disagree"

Viewing Mistakes as Learning Opportunities

- Important strategy to encourage risk-taking

- Thinking of mistakes as "mis-takes"

- We have the potential to learn more from failed initiatives than from successful ones… assuming we know we failed!
  - So we must monitor the success/failure of initiatives and "label the learning" (see next slide)

Example Questions for Monitoring the Success/Failure of Initiatives

1. What is the purpose of the activity or initiative?
2. What are our hypotheses about how engaging in this activity/initiative will change teacher thinking and practice in our area of focus, and subsequently impact on student achievement?
3. What are the success criteria? How will we know?
4. What evidence will speak to the success criteria?
5. What happened? What did we learn from looking at the evidence?
6. Based on what we've learned, what will we do next?

Strategies for "Intentional Interruption"

- Use protocols
- Make preconceptions explicit
- Ensure that activities and interventions are rooted in "problems of professional practice"
- Recruit contradictory evidence
- View mistakes as learning opportunities
- Encourage a growth (rather than a fixed) mindset
- Ensure that problems of practice are *questions* that people are curious about
- Give people autonomy in time and task

Aporia Consulting Ltd.

57