

Cover Sheet

Article Title: Of Piano Practice and Teacher Professional Development

Author: David McKay Boren

Present Position: Director of Brigham Young University's School Leadership Program

Past Positions: Teacher, Assistant Principal, and Principal in Alpine School District

Mailing Address: 306J MCKB
Brigham Young University
Provo, UT 84602

Telephone: 801-422-0059

Email: david_boren@byu.edu

Of Piano Practice and Teacher Professional Development David McKay Boren

My wife, Sherrie, is a highly-skilled pianist. Recently, as she was telling me about her training, I realized how well it aligned with what we know about adult learning theory. I hope that a description of her experience will serve as a helpful model for schools seeking to improve learning experiences for adults.

Here is what a typical week looked like in her piano performance program.

- 20-24 hours of individual, deliberate practice on her assigned/chosen pieces of music.
- One hour of individualized coaching from an expert piano teacher, receiving targeted feedback, choosing pieces together, working difficult sections, setting difficult yet realistic goals for improvement and identifying the steps needed to reach those goals.
- 2 hours of group seminar performing for, receiving feedback from, and providing feedback to other piano students.
- Attending performances and listening to recordings of concert pianists performing the same pieces she would perform; identifying their strengths and personal interpretations.
- Recording and critiquing her own playing and comparing it with concert pianists' performances.
- Performing once or twice a semester for a live audience or a panel of expert pianists.

When it came time for performance evaluations at the end of each semester, the pianists who had taken full advantage of these opportunities for practice, coaching, and feedback were able to perform with confidence. In addition, their overall skill, independence, and artistry increased dramatically over the course of the four-year program.

Linda Darling-Hammond and colleagues (2017) recently summarized seven principles of effective professional development that we will review here in relation to Sherrie's training as a pianist and our PD efforts in schools.

1. Is content focused & relevant

Imagine if during Sherrie's individual practice time, piano lesson, and group seminar she were asked to play different songs from those she would eventually perform! In a similar vein, it would be ridiculous if the content of PD days, district workshops, coaching, and collaboration had little or nothing to do with teachers' day-to-day work. It's no surprise that adult learning experts have found that adults are most interested in learning when they see that it has immediate relevance and impact on their work and personal lives (Knowles, 1984). While teachers' goals and professional learning opportunities should contribute to the overall school mission and vision, most teachers will learn more "when they are self-directed, building new knowledge upon pre-existing knowledge, and aware of the relevance and personal significance of what they are learning" (Croft et al., 2010, p. 8; Trotter, 2006). *How can we better ensure that our PD days, district trainings, coaching sessions, and collaboration time clearly support our daily work in relevant ways?*

2. Models effective practice

It was extremely helpful for Sherrie to attend performances and listen to recordings of concert pianists performing the same songs that she would perform. Sherrie could then adapt what she learned from the experts and let her unique personality and talents shine through in how she performed. Similarly, it can be extremely helpful for teachers to observe expert teachers in person or online, teaching the same content they will be teaching. In addition, reading about best practice in articles, books, social media, and other outlets can be extremely informative, especially when teachers then take what they have observed and make it their own. As Johnson and colleagues recommend, "...get your teachers out of their own classrooms and into the classrooms of their colleagues" (2017, p. 139), especially colleagues that are effective. This can be helpful for teachers at any stage in their career, not just for new teachers. *How can we improve the opportunities for teachers to learn from other master teachers in the building, in the district, online, and from other sources?*

3. Incorporates active learning utilizing adult learning theory

How much would Sherrie have improved if all she did were observe others performing but never performed herself? She had to engage in loads of consistent, active, deliberate practice, and was expected to perform regularly. Learning that transforms takes time; one review of the research found that it takes up to thirty hours of practice over an extended period in order for teacher learning to stick (Guskey & Yoon, 2009); another review found that fifty hours of PD throughout a school year was associated with a gain in student achievement of 21 percentile points (Yoon et al. 2007). Luckily, teachers have ample opportunities to acquire hours of practice during the regular course of the school day. Unfortunately, just going through the motions "yields no benefit if that time is not used wisely. . . because doing ineffective things longer does not make them any better" (Guskey & Yoon, 2009, p. 497). So what is the difference between effective and ineffective practice? Among other things, setting meaningful goals that are within your zone of proximal development, consistently working on those goals, and receiving targeted feedback on your progress towards those goals are essential to effective practice (Ericcson & Pool, 2016). *How might we help each teacher set meaningful, clear, stretch goals, providing plenty of practice and feedback on their progress towards those goals?*

4. Offers opportunities for feedback and reflection

How much would Sherrie have improved if the only feedback she received from her teacher and others was, "Nice job," "Wow. You're amazing!" or "You need to improve!"? Rather, she had what John Hattie refers to as "dollops of feedback" (Hattie, 1992, p. 9) from a wide variety of sources: her teacher, her team, her self-recordings, and other sources. Not only did she receive a lot of feedback, but that feedback was specific enough to help her answer the following questions:

1. Where do I want to go?
2. Where am I?
3. How do I close that gap between where I am and where I want to go? (see Hattie & Zierer, 2018).

How can we provide teachers and teams with better feedback from a variety of sources that helps them improve on their goals?

5. Provides coaching and expert support

One of Sherrie's best sources of quality feedback came from her weekly piano lesson with an expert coach. Imagine if Sherrie only met with her piano teacher a few times a year and if the feedback in those few sessions was vague and unsupported! Unthinkable. Unfortunately, that may be what is happening in many of our schools. Teachers NEED regular feedback from a coach, whether that be an official instructional coach, an administrator, or other teachers. Many studies of professional development programs have found that when larger trainings are followed up with ongoing coaching and other forms of targeted support, teachers' use of best practice strategies increases dramatically (Joyce & Showers, 1995; Olivero, Bane, & Kopelman, 1997; Killion & Harrison, 2017). Coaching works best when the principal and coach meet regularly to establish a shared vision, define roles, and make a plan to provide quality feedback to teachers. "If teachers are the most significant factor in student success, and principals are second, then coaches are third. All three, working in coordinated teams, will be required to bring about deep change" (Fullan & Knight, 2011, p. 53). This shared vision and approach will help us make the most of each coaching conversation. Elena Aguilar cautions: "I've occasionally heard teachers reflecting on previous experiences with coaches: 'We just sat around and talked,' or 'Every time we met, we talked about something different. I got feedback on every area of teaching.' When coaching is unfocused, or when the purpose for coaching is unclear, both the coach and client can feel unsatisfied" (2013, p. 120). *How can we better coordinate coaching efforts to provide the targeted and timely feedback that teachers and teams need?*

6. Supports collaboration, typically in job-embedded contexts

Sherrie, her classmates, and her piano teacher had weekly group workshops in which they performed for each other. Initially, Sherrie was uncomfortable performing for her peers and felt equally awkward sharing and receiving helpful feedback. Over time, she found that learning with and from others was extremely valuable. Good teaching and learning are team endeavors, and are "not just about how creative or smart or driven you are, but how well you are able to connect with, contribute to, and benefit from the ecosystem of people around you" (Achor, 2018, p. 21). Michael Fullan notes: "It is actually very hard for a weak teacher who enters a highly collaborative school to remain there without improving" (Fullan, 2014, p. 72). Currently, much of our PD focuses on building teachers' individual skills as instructors, with very little training on how to collectively leverage those skills as a team. If "transforming teaching from an individual race into a team sport is arguably the single most important goal for principal[s]" (Johnson et al. 2017, p. 138), then at least some of our professional development efforts should be at least partially focused on improving our collective work. Many of us provide consistent time for our teachers to work together as teams. Yet, we all know that "collaboration does not lead to improved results unless people are focused on the right work" (DuFour et al., 2016, p. 12). Have teams and team leaders been trained on how to set effective norms, follow an agenda, follow up on assignments, hold crucial conversations, build candor, trust, and safety, and focus on the right work? *How can we improve how our teachers and teams work together?"*

7. Is of sustained duration

Sherrie's piano abilities were supported by a variety of aligned and focused activities over an extended period of time. She attended large-scale events (such as concerts and expert workshops) as well as smaller-scale events (such as daily practice and weekly lessons). Curry and Killion (2009) advocate the use of a variety of both macro and micro learning opportunities to enhance

teacher learning. Macro learning opportunities generally consist of larger, less frequent events such as conferences, district trainings, institutes, coursework, and full-day trainings. These larger, less frequent opportunities are a great way to raise awareness about new ideas, gain expanded vision, and get excited about improvement. These macro experiences must be followed up by smaller, more consistent, often less-glamorous ongoing supports such as coaching, collaboration, lesson studies, and peer coaching. While teachers need a variety of learning experiences, they do *not* need a variety of initiatives. Initiative fatigue and overload are all-too-common. Unfortunately, “in education we are always looking for the next big thing before we’ve gotten good at the last big thing” (William, 2017). If we really want teachers to improve, we need to “get a few core things right, in concert, and relentlessly pursue and refine them” (Kirtman & Fullan, 2016, p. 77). Real improvement cannot adopt a whimsical, flash-in-the-pan approach. We are in this for the long haul. Teachers “resent going to inservices where someone is going to tell them what to do but not help them follow up. Teachers want someone that’s going to be there, that’s going to help them for the duration, not a fly-by-night program that’s here today gone tomorrow” (Knight, 2007, p. 1). *How can we better provide a variety of aligned learning experiences supporting teachers sustained improvement over time?*

Leading Professional Development

As Mike Mattos is known to have said, “We’re going to work hard anyway, so we may as well be effective.” Our jobs as leaders is to try and support *effective* teacher learning. Most of the principles highlighted in this article are not revolutionary or surprising. We know this stuff. But as the old Italian proverb says, “between saying and doing many a pair of shoes are worn out.” Luckily, we do not have to do this work alone, nor should we. Effective professional development is nested within a school led not just by a principal, but by a leadership team. Effective principals know that “putting together the right coalition of people to lead a change initiative is critical to its success” (Kotter, 2017), and that “leadership brilliance is expressed more in ‘we together’ cooperation than in an ‘I alone’ delusion” (Schein & Schein, 2018, p. 114). Empowering the leadership team to partner with the principal in co-designing best-practice professional learning at the school will provide leadership with the nuanced insight necessary to support the real goals of teachers, and not just the goals teachers think the principal wants them to set (Fullan, 2019). This boots-on-the-ground nuanced leadership will allow the leadership team to remain adaptable and nimble, responding just-in-time to teachers’ real learning needs within a changing environment (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009).

Conclusion

If “the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers” (Barber & Mourshed, 2007, p. 4) then it logically follows that we must go after deeper learning for the adults in our schools. Fortunately, we specialize in learning, so working with our leadership team to design optimal learning experiences in our schools should be right up our alley, and like Sherrie’s experience in piano, should result in effective practice and beautiful performances.

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