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An Edu-nerd's Heaven: Rethinking Professional Development for the 21st Century

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To say that my first year of teaching was a struggle would be the professional understatement of my career. Perhaps you can relate? If it wasn't the lack of sleep, trying to overcome imposter syndrome, or keeping up with a bottomless inbox, then surely that maniacal photocopier would be the end of me. But these pesky nuisances were nothing compared to the reality of learning how to teach my students in a manner different from what I was taught. The lifesaver tossed to me was a professional development program called Cohort 21 that puts teachers into the role of inquirers and transforms classrooms into laboratories.

When I was growing up, it was completely unheard of to have a teacher use student interest to guide a project or allow a student's questions to drive an inquiry unit. Not surprisingly, the professors who were training me to become a teacher demonstrated more of the same: for the most part they ironically lectured their students on the merits of inquiry education, all while we took notes and then wrote papers in response. It wasn't until I was in my own classroom in an inquiry-based school that I felt the depths of my deficits in this department. To teach

in a manner that was so dramatically different from my own education was like trying to write a novel in a language that I was still trying to decode, with my feet, suspended upside down from a tree. Shocking to nobody, I was not alone. Falk and Blumenreich (2005) address this all too common challenge teachers face when they write, “If we as teachers want to be able to help our students rediscover this desire, we ourselves need to relearn how to investigate, inquire, experiment, and explore. Only by experiencing such learning personally can we come to know and appreciate the challenges, fears, risks, and joys that generating and pursuing meaningful questions can bring” (p. 2). But how can teachers be expected to implement meaningful inquiries or in-depth projects, when we have not been exposed to this learning when we were students?

One of the best learning experiences I was exposed to happened in that very vulnerable and formative first year with my own classroom. I joke with my family that the sole reason I became a teacher was to find a way to make a living from learning. So naturally when I heard about a new initiative, Cohort 21, starting in my province’s independent school board, I excitedly signed up without fully understanding what I was getting involved with. Little did I know at the time, but this professional development experience would be how I learned how to delve into meaningful inquiry work and in turn, offer this mode of learning to my students. While Cohort 21 is unique to the school board that I belong to (Conference of Independent Schools of Ontario), the good news is that it is completely replicable on a small or grand scale and could be the future of meaningful teacher professional learning.

So what is it? Cohort 21 was started by two educators in Toronto, Justin Medved and Garth Nichols. They saw the same gap in professional learning that I felt in my first year in the trenches and thought they could do more to support rich, authentic teacher learning. As Feiman-Nemster (2012) confirms, “beginning teachers are not finished products and still have much to learn...private unreflective experience does not automatically produce growth. All teachers need to learn throughout their careers; the problem is that schools are not organized to support teacher learning” (p. 10). So Nichols and Medved rounded up about thirty educators from different schools and invited us to meet one early October Saturday morning in a school library. The coffee was flowing and the croissants were still warm (obviously the only way to make sense of an 8:00am start on a Saturday) as we

settled into our first “Face to Face (F2F) Meeting.” This first session we were taught the basics of a “ 21st century teacher toolkit” which consisted of Twitter, Wordpress, Diigo, and Google tools (Hangouts, Chrome, Google+, Gmail, Google Docs to start). These tools served as the foundation for our self-driven inquiry through the year, which we called our “Action Plans.” We would find like-minded professionals to follow on Twitter and Google+, share and annotate teaching articles using Diigo, and reflect on our practices and findings using our blog. We were in a connected educator’s bootcamp and I found myself overwhelmed and out of breath, but my endorphins were firing and I knew that something exciting was happening.

As I fumbled through figuring out what the @ sign does on Twitter and how to change my Wordpress Blog banner to reflect my teaching personality, I seriously wondered how was I going to find the time to Tweet about teaching? I barely had the time to go to the bathroom during the day! But deep breath by deep breath, I navigated these tools and developed some considerable empathy for my own students when they start a new year, a new unit, or learn a new concept. This is so good for me, I realized during that first F2F meeting, because putting myself out of my comfort zone helps me remember what it feels like for my students.

Throughout the year, we met a total of four times. Between F2F sessions, there were informal Twitter Chats, Google Hangouts scheduled, and the expectation to blog about our teaching practice, our observations, questions, challenges, and dilemmas. These observations soon evolved into developing a question that I would explore over the course of the year with my own action research. My students would be my little mice (none were harmed in my experiments, of course), my classroom my lab (but with much better decor), and I would don a (metaphoric) lab coat and study my teaching experience as a researcher. I was in a edu-nerd’s heaven!

That first year, my challenges and observations grew into a project about learning how to flip my classroom—a teaching method that asks students to view instructional videos independently, often at home, and come to school to practice the skill in the classroom with teacher support. I saw that it was an epic waste of expertise to use my time during literacy lessons to read out word lists or deliver the same comma lesson eighteen times. So I started pre-recording some lessons

and using this as a way to leverage my skills to work with small groups of students, while others were working with the flipped videos. While certainly not groundbreaking, for me, having a question (“how might I use my time with my students more efficiently?”), researching it, and then experimenting with it, actually taught me one model for how to implement an effective inquiry unit.

After that first year, I was hooked and I have come back year after year as a facilitator of this learning experience. I support teachers as they learn Twitter, host Google Hangouts to fine tune action plans, I reflect on my own blog, and I comb through the blogs of fellow teachers, sharing my personal experiences and anecdotes to support their learning. What strikes me year after year of facilitating Cohort 21, is how equally empowering and challenging it is for teachers to learn in this new way. This model of professional development does not believe that all teachers need to learn the same thing at the same time in the same way. Allowing teachers to navigate their own paths actually requires them to ask questions about what is working well in their classrooms and what might they want to change. It gives the power back to educators to allow them to decide what they need to learn in a given year and the tools for how to do that learning. And while teachers are still accountable (we share our findings at the final F2F), our learning outcomes are different and reflect the amount of time, effort, and reflection that we put into our action research. This is certainly not new in terms of how students are learning in 21st century schools, but to experience this as a teacher felt revelatory.

While Cohort 21 is unique, it is also completely replicable. Whether implemented school-wide, across an entire board, or just with a small tribe of committed teachers, the principles of this professional development model could translate to any context, as long as you have questions and an internet connection. Below are a selection of ways that you can replicate, or “make a copy,” of Cohort 21 for your own professional development or school context:

How to “Make a Copy” of Cohort 21

- **Find your PLN (Professional Learning Network):** this network does not need to be based in your school, in your city, or even your country. With Twitter, Google+, and fellow

teacher bloggers, it is beyond easy to round up a handful of keen teachers that are doing work that you are interested in. The best on-demand professional development that I know of is Twitter. I carefully curate who I follow so that almost everyone is Tweeting about education. I find that a quick scroll through my feed each morning is enough to get a few shots of inspiration flowing through my veins with my first cup of coffee. Or you could take it to the next level and participate in a Twitter chat on an education topic that you are passionate about and learn from your fellow teachers around the world in real time. There are many Twitter chats on a variety of educational topics that happen on a regular basis. A basic Google search for “Twitter Chats in Education” can lead you in the right direction. Once you have your chat time and day, simply login to Twitter and follow the appropriate hashtag, respond to the questions posed by the chat moderator, and scroll through the comments from your fellow educators.

- **Start a Blog:** The act of writing about my teaching forces me to think more carefully and deeply about what I am doing in my classroom. It was awkward the first few times I started this practice, but the benefit of sharing my findings and challenges with others and getting the ideas and feedback from my fellow teachers far outweighs that awkwardness. Moreover, it’s important for our students to see their teachers as fellow learners. Allowing my students and parents to read my blog (<http://cohort21.com/ckirsh/>) gives them insight into my choices as a teacher and helps them see that writing, inquiry, and research extend far beyond their time as a student. I have actually had my students comment on my blog and discuss it with me in class the next day—they provide me with important insight into how they see these projects unfold, while reading my writing about our work together helps them see me as a reflective adult and gives insight into the why and how of our projects.
- **Meet Face to Face with your Tribe:** While Cohort 21 is all about the tech-tools, we know that the power of seeing people in real time can’t be replaced by Twitter or a blog. While you might not have 30 some odd teachers in your “tribe” like the

folks in Cohort 21, schedule a regular meeting with a few fellow teachers that you are inspired by. Meet for coffee and croissants on a Saturday and watch a few inspiring TED Talks together, discuss an article you read about the profession, or share your questions about your teaching and offer ideas for experimentation. Bryan Goodwin (2009) suggests smaller groups of three are ideal (p. 82). Make this a regular date in your calendar (four times a year, perhaps?) and commit to showing up for each other. A few of my teacher friends, who are not part of Cohort 21, decided that we wanted to see each other more outside of school. So we scheduled a monthly educational documentary viewing. Including wine, dinner, and treats certainly helped motivate us to make time for the learning, while the documentary viewing nourished our intellectual curiosity.

- **Put on Your Lab Coat:** Great teachers are always asking questions. Begin your year by observing what is going well and what you are challenged by. Personally, using tools like the Design Thinking for Educators Handbook has changed how I think about my inquiry work. The Handbook scaffolds for teachers how to ask questions that begin with “how might I...?” and redesign how we approach or solve our classroom problems. Having a guiding question for my professional learning through year helps to filter the articles I read, the folks I follow, and the PD sessions I attend. Take it to the next level and use your question as the guiding focus for fellow teachers observing your class. Asking observers: “how well does my flipped learning approach engage students?” or “how could I better manage these small groups?” or “what classroom management strategies could work best when I’m not the centre of my students’ attention?” leverages the vast expertise already surrounding you in your school.

As I experienced in my first year of teaching, there is little time in our professional lives to take a bathroom break, let alone hone our ability to teach in an unfamiliar style. We know how pivotal it is for students to allow their own questions, passions, and interests to guide their learning. In order for teachers to effectively implement a project-based or inquiry-based pedagogy, “we ourselves need to relearn how to investigate, inquire, experiment, and explore” (Falk and Blumenreich,

2005, p.2). While the Cohort 21 model was the door opener for me, in this new open-source world, the principles of this professional development experience can without a doubt, be copied and borrowed for any teacher's learning.

References

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