

Why Art Teachers Need Content Specific Professional Development

By Jessica Balsley

Too often teachers in specialized areas such as Art, Physical Education and Music do not have the opportunity to participate in professional development that relates to their specific content area. They are often required to participate in meetings or in-services with grade level teachers with topics that focus on math or reading. The topics covered offer very little learning for these teachers about their specialized area. As a result, specialist teachers are left feeling as though their content area is not valued and become un-motivated to participate in professional development opportunities.

Research supports the idea of specialized professional development for art teachers. Lind (2007) concluded that professional development should involve opportunities for art teachers collaborate and share ideas with each other. By doing this, they can share specific ideas about their content area.

As an Elementary Art Teacher and the Facilitator and Professional Development Coordinator for my district, was curious to know how attitudes would change when teachers we able to move from a generalized model of professional development to a content specific model.

How would Content Specific Professional Development Impact Art Teacher Attitudes?

Participants discussed the comparison between previous years of professional development and the current system. Lisa, a newer teacher to the district commented on the previous year's professional development. She stated, "You feel like you are on the

island of misfit toys when you are in a meeting with teachers who do not teach the same subject as you.” Participant Kelly, agreed with Lisa’s ideas, stating her feelings towards past staff developments, when the learning revolved around math or reading. “They could have been speaking Portuguese and I would not have understood.”

Researchers agree that attendance does not ensure learning when it comes to professional development. SeaTilon, Gallego, Duran, Reyes (2005) found that many times what teachers learn may not be meaningfully applied in their classroom practice. In fact, teachers may consider staff development to be of little help. Kelly summed her up feelings on the changes in professional development, “This year, when I meet with the other art teachers I feel there is a purpose to what I do. Our time is enriching, exciting and a confirmation of my own teaching plans.” Teacher attitudes about professional development increased dramatically, from a 50% positivity rate to a nearly perfect 100% positivity rate, all by simply being given the opportunity to participate in content specific professional development.

One may stop and think: Why is attitude so important? I argue that attitude is the most important factor when getting any group of educators to feel motivated about a new initiative in education. Without a good attitude, the teacher will not take the learning back and apply it. Passion and positivity are two things that are underrated when looking at the efficacy of educators in today’s changing world. Based on this data, we already know that art teachers treasured the ability to collaborate. I wanted to dig deeper into the exact activities teachers valued participating in, in order to effectively plan their professional development for the coming year.

Which Professional Development Activities Impacted Teacher Attitudes the Most?

All teachers have the need to talk with other teachers who share common experiences as them. According to Lind (2007), Conversations emerged as one of the most important components of professional development. It was simple. The teachers truly treasured the opportunity to collaborate with other teachers in the same discipline. The arts teachers had a shared set of ideas and a vocabulary that allowed them to understand one another.

Teachers noted that simply sharing ideas, lesson plans, and best practice strategies was the most helpful part of professional development. One teacher passionately exclaimed, “Idea sharing is mind expanding and helps me think in a new way about my specific profession. It becomes exciting. I can tweak other ideas and make them my own. I can formulate a concept that is appropriate for my classroom.” Ava, a fourth year teacher and new mom commented on the benefits of idea sharing. “There was a relief that someone had tried it and it worked. I can focus my energy on something else and not work harder. It lightens the load.”

Future Implications

Teachers in today’s world want to know that something works. They want to feel a sense of security from a group of like-minded professionals, and they want to bring the joy and passion back into their teaching. Content specific professional development provides this and more for art educators. Attitudes Matter! I feel empowered that simple changes in school districts can make huge impacts on the attitudes and continuing education of teachers in all disciplines. In the end, it is the students will benefit the most

from a teacher who is well educated and enters the classroom with a positive attitude.

This research has inspired me as a professional and has lit a fire inside myself to explore expanding my own career in a way that can positively change professional development for art teachers. My journey has not ended here.

REFERENCES

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