Congratulations, you’re a teacher leader…. Now what?

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Introduction

Congratulations!

Through some process, you’ve advanced. You are no longer exclusively the fabulous, masterful classroom teacher you once were. Whether you’ve applied for the job, were hand-picked by administration or elected by your peers, you have a new role: teacher leader.

Depending on the position, your district, or your school, your new responsibilities may include coaching your peers, facilitating classes for adults, mentoring a new teacher, creating curriculum or planning and presenting professional development. In short, you are now playing a major part in delivering professional learning experiences to teachers. You are flattered, excited, motivated...like a brand new teacher who has just been hired for a tenure track position!

If your new leadership role is in the building in which you’ve been teaching, you’ll be surprised by how many questions you have about a place with which you are seemingly so familiar. Even if your new role as leader takes you to new buildings, you will most likely have many of the same questions:

- Will teachers regard you as a “real” leader? (If you’ve stepped out of the “rank and file” to assume your new position, teacher reaction may be mixed—some may be pleased and inspired to see you advance, others may become jealous and resentful, and others may not care at all.)

- Who are the other teacher leaders? (Keep in mind--not all teacher leaders have official titles, nor do they all function in a formal capacity—these influential educators in your school may or may not use their “influence” to align their followers with your goals as professional developer, instructional coach, department chair, etc.)

- What has professional learning really been like in the past? (Paradoxically, if professional development has been sporadic at best, faculty may be hungry to learn and eager for a change in the status quo. If professional learning has been robust, teachers may resist new efforts and initiatives—they know this stuff already.)
How will you put teachers’ expertise at the heart of instructional improvement? (As a teacher leader, you may be able to foster relationships among teachers so that they can share their best practices with each other.)

How will you design meaningful, engaging experiences that will support genuine, deep learning for teachers? (As an experienced teacher you know that real, lasting learning depends on the learners’ investment in relevant, engaging, authentic work.)

How will you know if your work is successful and effective? (When assessing professional learning remember that deep changes in mindset, instruction and curriculum take time—sometimes years.)

These questions are similar to the questions you asked yourself years ago when you were first hired and were excited to help your students learn. And, like that time when you were a first-year teacher, your enthusiasm can give way quickly to fear—of the unknown!

New Role, New Concerns

Starting anything new is challenging. Recall the nervous anticipation before the first day of school as a student, as a first-year teacher, as a seasoned teacher. Fears and insecurities are real, but certainly you’ve managed them before. If you have been appointed as a teacher leader in the school where you have been working, you may wonder if the teachers you’ll be leading will find you qualified and credible, especially if those teachers have years - sometimes decades - more classroom experience than you.

Don’t fret. And certainly don’t try to catalog all the reasons why you’re qualified to lead them.

Instead, demonstrate sincere appreciation for the expertise of the teachers you work with; acknowledge their accomplishments—did Mr. O’Mally’s students succeed with flying colors on the district assessment? Yes! Do Mrs. Wheaton’s ELL students come back to visit her long after they’ve graduated? Indeed! Do Ms. Garcia’s students use peer review in a scholarly way to improve their writing? They sure do! Use your rich knowledge of the teachers you are working with to show these teachers that you are qualified to lead them because you recognize what works and value their effective practice. Mr. O’Mally, Mrs. Wheaton and Ms. Garcia are certainly doing something right—by acknowledging their accomplishments instead of touting your own, you will win over skeptics and build credibility.

Maybe your official role as teacher leader has been a gradual advancement and you’ve built credibility incrementally as you’ve taken on projects, collaborated with others and demonstrated mastery in the classroom. Whatever the case, be confident that the decision-makers in your organization have identified you as a potential leader based on your proven skills, so don’t try too hard to prove yourself.
Think about your past experience with teacher leaders. Maybe your experiences have been rewarding and inspiring and you’d like to emulate those leaders who have changed your instructional practice for the better. Certainly those inspiring leaders demonstrated a balance of humility and confidence.

It’s likely though that you’ve sat through many PD sessions that offered little new material that could expand your expertise. You’ve shelved binders full of material you were excited to hear about, but never used. You’ve seen colleagues grade homework during presentations. You’ve imagined the scene back in your classroom…was the substitute teacher actually delivering your contingency plans? Or were the paper airplanes flying?

As a new teacher leader, you may worry that you may become that boring presenter dryly delivering important, but ultimately useless information to groups of fidgety, disengaged teachers.

Recall these common faculty room complaints: “All these initiatives are overwhelming!” “Another presentation?” “It’s just one more fad that will fade.” “That facilitator doesn’t care about us/our district/our problems…” “These new standards won’t impact me.” Many of these complaints are legitimate. Implementation of new programs can overwhelm teachers. Losing instructional time with our students to be mere audience members is frustrating. Many districts begin initiatives that peter out. When facilitators present new information without engaging their audience, precious time is wasted.

Remember - part of your new role involves helping other teachers navigate the rough seas of change. You now have the chance to play a more direct role in addressing teachers’ misconceptions, providing teachers with valuable learning opportunities and engaging them in meaningful work that will help prepare their students for the challenges of the world beyond school.

So, use your experience as a teacher to build credibility and to avoid the pitfalls of boring, ineffective professional development. Capitalize on your classroom expertise to guide your decisions as you take on your new responsibilities. You know that people who are engaged in relevant work learn best. In your new role, do what you do best – be a teacher … of teachers!

**Becoming a Teacher of Teachers**

There are four basic steps to preparing for your new role: get informed, set goals, plan, and revise. If this process sounds remarkably similar to preparing to teach students, you’re right.
Get Informed
Getting informed involves a lot of leg work. Meet with building and district leadership teams to align your work with the overarching mission of the school. Gather information from teachers to consider their needs. Examine student assessment data.

Set Goals
Professional learning goals, like student learning goals should be data-driven, standards-based, relevant, attainable, and measurable. Articulate clearly what teachers should know and be able to do and why these skills are important.

You may find that you are “turn-keying” prescribed professional development plans. Even if you are using materials crafted by another developer or organization, be sure to clarify the goals of that material. Knowing where you will be leading your teachers will help ensure your success as a facilitator of their learning.

Plan your Program
Depending on your situation, you may establish a professional learning calendar or you may have to work within predetermined timeframes. If you have flexibility, plan breaks after every sixty to ninety minutes of scheduled work time.

Consider carefully the learning environment you establish. Think about light, air quality, temperature, furniture arrangement, and equipment. You may learn quickly that adult learners can be less patient than younger students when it comes to their environment. (When grown men and women sit in too-small chairs around a low table in a stifling hot second-grade classroom with a broken Smartboard, things will go downhill fast.) If your workplace doesn’t have a room dedicated to professional learning, try to find a place in your building with comfortable, adult-sized chairs and functioning, up-to-date equipment. If you can find a room like that out of the hustle and bustle of everyday school business, teacher participants can focus on the work at hand with minimal distractions.

The learning experiences you design are just as important as the environment you establish. Think carefully about what you know about these teachers and what they can learn from each other. Honor their expertise by planning meaningful collaboration. Use protocols like “Turn and Talk,” “Think, Pair, Share,” and evidence-based conversations around a single relevant text to foster collegial dialogue, build professional connections and support the teachers in meeting the learning goals. Consider whether and how you will group your participants, keeping their grade level experience, instructional expertise, and content knowledge in mind. As you design learning activities ask yourself whether or not vertical groupings make the most sense. Should groups be determined by department? Should you use protocols that randomize participants so grouping is by chance?
Revise and Refine

Once you think you’re ready, bring your plans to other people. Building principals, assistant superintendents, or department chairs can offer feedback about your plans that could help you hone your goals and revise your learning activities. Experienced teacher leaders may also provide meaningful collaboration that could further refine your design (and these colleagues may be more accessible to you during the school day).

Make copies of your hand outs, save your PowerPoint, save it again, set up the room, and send out the invitations—you are ready to get to work with some amazing educators!

First Time Jitters: Presenting to Teachers

Most likely, you are feeling nervous, like you did before your first day teaching students years ago. Think about your rituals around planning and preparing for school and capitalize on your experience with and enthusiasm for working with students. Do you rehearse what you’ll say so you don’t read from a script or sound too stiff? Are your questions carefully planned and designed to foster deep thought? Are you mindful of the needs of all the different learners in your room? Remember that adult learners will appreciate and respond to your preparedness and passion, just as your students did.

At the start of a professional development session, do what you did as a classroom teacher: make eye contact and welcome each teacher participant. If it’s appropriate in your building, make provisions for coffee, tea, snacks, and bottled water.

Establish routines and procedures early on. By reminding participants politely to silence cell phones, and by emphasizing professional norms, you will foster a productive environment. Providing a brief agenda and sticking to the break times demonstrates that you respect the participants’ needs to process and reenergize.

Post clearly articulated, relevant learning goals focused on improving learning. Throughout the session, connect the work you’re doing directly to those goals. Be sure your activities align with these goals and monitor participants’ engagement and understanding of the principles of good instruction.

As a classroom teacher, you have a repertoire of ways to keep your students on task that may backfire with adult learners. Ask strategic questions to keep conversations on target. If you demand compliance, you risk mutiny! Remember that your role as professional developer isn’t simply delivering strategies; your work involves fostering relationships among educators so our classrooms, schools and districts improve. This brokering of relationships requires finesse in facilitating professional dialogue.
A Note About Parking (Sidebar)

Be sure to provide structured opportunities for the teachers to talk to each other about the new information as they relate it to their own experience. Turn and talk protocols and text-based conversations provide frameworks for teacher participants to talk about the material they’re learning in the context of rigorous, evidence-based collegial conversation. As facilitator, you need to keep these conversations on track.

An invaluable tool for teacher leaders is the “Parking Lot.” At the beginning of sessions, identify a “Parking Lot”—usually a labeled piece of chart paper posted in the workspace. Explain that the “Parking Lot” is the place to record important issues that come up in conversation, but that are not relevant to the work of that day’s session or are beyond the scope of your job as teacher leader. Teachers ask tough questions and raise important concerns. (A teacher may ask “Why does our contract not include paid maternity leave?” Another may comment, “I think the drug problem among our student athletes is troublesome.”) While it’s important for the teachers to air their concerns, your role is to keep the group focused on the learning at hand. Record these concerns in the “Parking Lot” and move on. After the session, be sure to bring the teachers’ “Parking Lot” concerns to the appropriate people in your organization and follow up with the teachers, letting them know their concerns have been brought to the right folks.

Reflection and Evaluation

Well-designed professional development offers teachers the opportunity to reflect on their practice. Be sure to provide reflective questions and quiet time to ponder them. (What aspects of today’s conversation surprised you? How do you plan on using today’s information?) Also, be sure to provide evaluations so participants may give you feedback. Then, acknowledge and respond to that feedback! When you meet again, say, “At the end of last session, several of you suggested we spend more time on X, so today, we’ll work on X...”.

This response to participant feedback demonstrates that you respect and respond to your learners’ needs, builds your credibility and makes you... a TEACHER LEADER. Congratulations!

About the Author

Amanda Barney is an English Teacher/Professional Developer at Mattituck Jr.-Sr. High School, and is a Fellow in Communities for Learning: leading lasting change®, a non-profit educational research organization that shares Learner-Centered Initiatives’ commitment to sustainable school improvement.
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- If you are a teacher leader like Amanda, or if you facilitate the learning of adults, you may find LCI’s Checklist for Quality Program Design and our rubric for Quality of Feedback provided to professional colleagues helpful.
- If you support the work of teacher leaders or others who facilitate adult learners, you may be interested in learning more about our Adult Learning programs and services.

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For many years, Communities for Learning and LCI have collaborated in their work around sustainable school improvement. Beginning in 2013, Communities for Learning shifted its focus and energies entirely to the realm of research and is now actively engaging in studies related to leadership, school improvement and best practices in teaching and learning. LCI and Communities for Learning will continue to work with each other in a strong strategic partnership grounded in a shared desire to improve learning and the educational organizations that support it.