



# professional LEARNING

February 2010

## Teaching “With·It·ness”

By Cynthia L. Carver, PhD, MSDC Board Member, Assistant Professor of Teacher Education, Michigan State University

In my work with teacher candidates and their mentors, I have ample opportunity to talk about the “stuff” that characterizes and defines good teaching. The usual topics animate these conversations, e.g. knowledge of subject matter and of teaching, relationships with students and their families, sound professional ethics and a commitment to one’s ongoing learning. These are important conversations for all teachers, but they often lead to compartmentalized thinking. Time and time again, I am reminded that good teaching is more than an accumulation of academic knowledge and skill that can be ticked off a master checklist. Good teachers have a special quality that I often refer to as “withitness,” which I describe as teachers’ ability to see, read, and react to unpredictable classroom situations in timely and appropriate ways.

When I mention the idea of withitness to experienced teachers, I get a knowing smile and a slight shake of the head. I often suspect that behind the smile is one of two images: the colleague who intuitively understands and responds to the needs and interests of her students as learners, or the colleague who goes through the motions without ever connecting students to subject. Although few of

“*Withitness,*” is a teacher’s ability to see, read, and react to unpredictable classroom situations in timely and appropriate ways.

us are believe that good teachers are only born and never made, we also know that some teachers are more withit than others. Difficult to teach and develop, we tend to see withitness as a natural, god-given trait. Either you’ve got it, or you don’t. As I thought more deeply about this idea, I realized that my own understanding of the concept was vague. As a mentor and coach, I began to wonder: What exactly is withitness, and more importantly, how do we help teachers develop it?

The idea of withitness was first introduced by Jacob Kounin (1970), an educational researcher who studied the difference between effective and ineffective classroom managers. His research found that effective classroom managers reduced the frequency of disruptions through the

use of techniques that prevented problem behavior from occurring. The label of withitness was used to describe teachers who quickly and accurately identified problem behavior, and who responded in ways that effectively managed the problem. Ultimately, his work suggested that what teachers did to manage student misbehavior was less important than their tendency to notice and respond to problem behavior.

More recently, researchers at the University of Virginia have expanded on this idea by studying the ways in which teachers distinguish between student actions that predict increased engagement, and student actions that hint toward misbehavior (Gladwell, 2009). As this research team argues, correctly identifying and responding

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# Education and Innovation

By Paul Kimmelman, Ed.D., Senior Advisor, Learning Point Associates

Hardly a day goes by when you don't read something about the need for more innovation in education in the United States. A general message is that the basic education model in this country has not undergone much change over time. With the new global, technology-based society that spans the world, the need for education leaders to think innovatively or face consequences for not improving their schools is becoming more evident. Such change will necessitate creating innovative ideas that bring real change to meet the needs of 21st century learners.

Approximately two years ago, Learning Point Associates CEO Gina Burkhardt discussed the notion that despite having to comply with challenging federal laws like NCLB, effective education leaders still needed to build a culture of innovation in their schools if they were going to be successful in the rapidly changing 21st century world. These leaders would need to implement innovative ideas to succeed because the current practices were not achieving acceptable results. As a result of Burkhardt's thoughts, I wrote a book on compliance, leadership, and innovation, titled *The School Leadership Triangle: From Compliance to Innovation* to be released by Corwin Press in March 2010. The book includes interviews with members of Congress and education experts. One chapter of the book is devoted to innovation. In this article, I briefly summarize what I learned about innovation when writing the book and offer some suggestions to educators regarding how to implement an innovation process in their schools and beyond.

## What Is Innovation?

With so much being written about innovation, it would seem intuitive that there would be a simple definition of it to inform innovative school work.

*Innovation can be a simple or complex solution to a problem that makes everyday work less complicated.*

Unfortunately, there are numerous definitions. I suggest that *innovation can be a simple or complex solution to a problem that makes everyday work less complicated*. For example, many years ago, an inventor named Bernard Sadow combined a suitcase with wheels and transformed the luggage industry. His product is an example of a simple innovation. An example of a complex innovation is a smart phone that can be used for e-mail, Web searches, and telephone calls; over time, the designers of phones have continued to combine them with new applications, making them more convenient and useful. Another example can be found in medicine, where eye surgery to correct vision has transformed from using a scalpel to a laser with much better results; the laser is an innovation that came from building on a body of knowledge over time and ultimately changed a surgical practice through innovative ideas.

Although educators are more likely to create simple innovations, the results could be dramatic in much the same way the suitcase with wheels was. Whether simple or complex, the process of innovation is intense and involves creative work. It is not the type of work that educators have had much of an opportunity to do in the traditional culture of American education. But with the stimulus funding through the American

Recovery and Reinvestment Act and the call for innovation by Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, educators have a great opportunity and impetus to think about how to use what has worked well for them and combine

it with new and different products, programs, and practices that will lead to innovative approaches to the most challenging problems confronting them.

The key point is that school-based

innovation teams do not have to create complex innovations to successfully transform their work. They merely have to work collaboratively to come up with bold, new ideas that improve their work.

## Innovation Process

So what might be a process to use for innovation in a school or a district or even a state education agency? I suggest that the process should consist of several elements. First, an innovation team must be created and organized to pose diverse solutions to a problem. For example, suppose that there are too many students in the middle school grades who are not achieving proficiency on the state mathematics assessment. What is critically important for innovation is to create a team that is very diverse and can approach the problem from many different perspectives. That means the team needs to be composed of more than mathematics teachers and include teachers from other disciplines such as music, physical education, or technology applications who might use different approaches with these students that should be considered. For more diverse ideas, consider including parents of these students and people from other sectors (such as doctors, business leaders, sales people, and workers from other professions) who deal with these students. One highly regarded

innovation design firm I worked with while writing the book includes an anthropologist on their teams. The purpose for including an anthropologist is to gain knowledge about the people who will use the product they are designing.

Second, the innovation team must identify the problem and discuss it in detail. It is important to frame the problem so that the team can focus on specific solutions. Using relevant data and teacher input, it is possible to accurately depict the important issues regarding the reasons for the lower achievement of the middle school students in mathematics based on credible evidence.

Third, the administration can create an environment and provide the context that is different for the team members from their typical setting: An innovation room can be set up! Make their work fun and include creative activities for them. Perhaps begin with an activity, such as asking them to design something with Lego pieces and award a prize for the most creative design. Context for the innovation team is important.

Next, the innovation team may break the problem down into different categories at the beginning of their work and organize into smaller groups in order to more carefully analyze each category. Perhaps one of the reasons for the lower mathematics scores in middle schools was an inability to understand problem solving. Another mathematics problem might have been computation. Each group would focus on its assignment and then bring its proposed solutions back to the entire team. As a result of smaller group interactions, the groups can gather in an innovation room, post all of their ideas on the walls, and engage in an open discussion about how they might work. The walls would be filled with diverse ideas that would be considered for new and different approaches to teaching these students.

Subsequently, after discussing the solutions, it is time to “build the prototype” and test it. Innovators build their innovation and implement it to see how it works. The innovation team will build a prototype of their proposed innovative solution and implement this prototype in the context in which it was designed to be used. One example might be using a new product, program, or practice in one of the middle grades classrooms with the target students.

Finally, the team can evaluate the innovation to determine if it is working as well as anticipated. If not, the team can modify its prototype based on what it has learned from implementing it. Innovation does not simply begin and end. It is an ongoing process.

This sample process of an innovation team can work at a school, district, or SEA. Despite the lack of an agreed-upon definition of innovation, it is clear that innovation is about bold, new thinking. It involves new approaches with products, programs, and practices that will be successful when trying to overcome areas that are in need of improvement. It requires education leaders to have a mindset that the innovation team will continue to work on the problem until it is successful meeting its goals. That mindset is similar to the Apollo 13 team thinking that “failure is not an option” when trying to bring back the spacecraft after it had a serious malfunction.

Today, educators have a unique opportunity with the incoming ARRA funding to support bold, new approaches to overcome challenging problems. Using an innovation process to succeed is a new practice that just might bring positive results. Be bold.

This article was contributed and adapted by the Great Lakes East Comprehensive Center at Learning Point Associates and was originally published in the Summer 2009 e-newsletter *News for the Region*. More information at [www.learningpt.org/greatlakeeast/](http://www.learningpt.org/greatlakeeast/)

## Lights! Camera! Teach!

If you're looking for low cost, highly effective, professional development you may find it behind the lens of a Flip Video camera. Principal Detra Fields of Dye Elementary School in the Carman-Ainsworth Community School District near Flint decided to use a camera to capture the expertise that existed within her staff to create her own customized professional development. This approach was practically free and yet produced a significant impact on classroom teaching and student learning.

The K-2 team at Dye had been applying the architecture of a mini-lesson around reading and writing instruction with great success. Ms. Fields and Academic Coach Jonica Fisher were searching for a way to share this success with the 3-5 teachers. They decided to use their Flip Video camera to capture a brief video segment of 2nd grade teacher Brenda Estes delivering reading instruction using the architecture of a mini-lesson. The architecture is composed of:

### Connection

Remind students of what they've learned/been taught yesterday (or recently).

### Teach

Explicitly tell them what you are going to teach them and demonstrate what they are going to do on your own work or a shared text, such as the class read-aloud

### Active Involvement

Scaffold the learning by providing an opportunity for students to do what you modeled, either by themselves, or with a partner.

### Link

Make an association to the ongoing work they've done and remind them how they should use or try what you taught them in their independent work.

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For more of this article, visit [MSDC's website...](#)

# “With·It·ness”

...Continued from front cover

to student behavior is not only important to controlling classrooms, but to actively engaging students in learning. Ultimately, their work is seeking a balance between how teachers demonstrate “regard for student perspective” and control over the classroom.

Armed with this basic understanding, how is it that teachers develop withitness? The research on effective approaches to classroom management suggests a set of key teacher traits that translate into easily observed actions (e.g. Berliner, 1986; Brophy & Good, 2000; Kounin, 1970; Marzano, 2003). In talking with novice teachers and their mentors, I have found it helpful to share the following as first steps in developing withitness.

1. Withit teachers have a pulse on what’s happening in the classroom at all times. Teachers do this by positioning themselves to see all students and then making a conscious effort to frequently scan the room, even when working with individuals or with small groups.
2. Withit teachers communicate to students, through their actions, that they know what’s going on. Teachers do this by noticing signs of misbehavior early, correctly identifying the student(s) responsible for the misbehavior, and responding to that misbehavior in a timely way.
3. Withit teachers regularly move in and among students. Teachers do this by getting away from their desks and moving around the room. When working with the whole group, teachers should make a conscious effort to circulate around the room. When working individually or with small groups, teachers should offer just enough guidance to get students working independently.

4. With-it teachers are tuned into their students. Teachers do this by getting to know students and their interests, and by using those interests to make learning more relevant. Teachers also do when they focus on learning activities that are authentic.
5. With-it teachers know themselves. Teachers do this by reflecting frequently on their beliefs and assumptions about teaching and learning, and making sure that those beliefs are aligned with their actions.

Although the term withitness stems from the research on classroom management, similar ideas can be found in the work of leading educational philosophers, including John Dewey, Maxine Greene and Nel Noddings. Whether described as being fully present in the classroom, or having the quality of wide-awakeness or mindfulness, these teachers are alert and responsive to students and their needs (Rogers & Raider-Roth, 2006).

As I think about the new NSDC definition for professional learning (2009), I think about the opportunities before us to reinforce the little things that matter so much. Regular and ongoing opportunities for teacher learning open the door to meaningful and sustained conversations about teaching. Withitness is one of those things that might just make the difference between real change, and no change. It’s not the stuff of school reform packages, or instructional improvement models. But it does represent the stuff that makes those initiatives work on the ground, in today’s classrooms.



## Group to Team

By Ginny V. Lee

*This article is shared with permission of NSDC.*

It is a Saturday morning, and I am sitting with a group of 15 new and aspiring school site administrators. As part of their work toward an MS in educational leadership, this group of experienced educators is enrolled in an elective course, “Group Facilitation for School Leaders.” The 12 women and three men are all experienced K-12 teachers. Collectively, they have led and served on numerous committees and work groups at their sites and in their districts.

We are discussing the concept of teams and communities in school settings. I ask the group, “In your view, what is the difference between a group and a team?” They think for a minute. How IS a team different from a group? They toss around some ideas: Is one made up of volunteers and the other not? Does one have a formal affiliation and the other not? As they postulate and discard ideas, their thinking becomes clearer, and they decide that the most important ways that a team differs from a group are these:

- Teams share a common purpose and goal.
- Team members are interdependent; they understand that they need to work well as a unit in order to complete their task.

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[To read the remainder of this article, please follow it online from the MSDC site under News...](#)

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"MSDC advocates for quality research-based professional development policies and practices to increase the capacity of those who work to improve student learning."

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## 21st Century MSDC

By Dr. Steve Hecker, MSDC Board Member

Can technology enhance the professional development experience? Your MSDC Board has been working on this question and has moved forward in several ways:

1. **Providing a web site for the MSDC** – an online resource to promote high-quality professional learning in Michigan. Visit [www.msdconline.org](http://www.msdconline.org) to see for yourself and provide us with your comments.
2. **Examining the role wikis can play in professional communication** –

both at the Board and membership levels. We have launched and are just beginning to use the Board wiki, and soon will move forward on the member wiki

3. **Exploring video clips** – the TeacherTube phenomenon – as a way of sharing professional knowledge. Hand-held high-definition video may be a great way to demonstrate power and elegance in our work. Note the article and video clip mentioned elsewhere in this newsletter.

In these times of increased use of technology and decreased financial resources, the need for high-quality professional learning is unchanged – we can all learn new ways of teaching and interacting. Stay tuned to your MSDC!

## Connecting Across Curricula

### 3rd Annual Michigan Joint Education Conference

MSDC members earn a discount on registration for this year's Joint Education Conference, June 23, 2010, at Thurston High School, Redford Michigan.

The Michigan Joint Education Conference was created to establish an opportunity for teachers and administrators to experience sessions integrating highly relevant instruction from several curriculums.



Sessions will focus on:

- Implementing Best Practices
- Integrating Technology
- Enhancing Instructional Leadership
- Maximizing Student Achievement

**Registration deadline is June 4, 2010.**

For registration form and further details, visit MSDC's website at [www.msdconline.org](http://www.msdconline.org).