Teacher Learning with a Purpose

I am often caught by the incongruity when leaders (including myself) miss the opportunity to model the model….when we forget to "walk the talk" ….when our behavior with staff doesn't mirror the behaviors we are recommending they use with students.

(The administrators who give a lecture on why lecturing is an ineffective instructional process. The school that requires all 100 staff to complete the same course on the value of differentiating instruction.)

Staff development is an area where I often find an incongruity between what educators say is important with what they do.

Lots of districts promote teachers providing a clear understanding of what students are to learn as a valuable instructional strategy.

The Leander, Texas district's student behaviors, discussed in earlier blogs, list this as their first behavior:

1. Learning Objective: *Students articulate the learning objective/target and find meaning in their learning.*

Robyn Jackson, writing in Never Work Harder Than Your Students & Other Principles of Great Teaching , states, *"By making goals concrete for both you and your students, you make it more likely that students will understand and ultimately achieve the learning goals, and you build in mechanisms that help you track their progress towards mastery ".*

So, I am quite surprised when I am asked to present a workshop to teachers or administrators and no one from the school or district provides an introduction as to the learning expectations. Teachers are left to their own decision as to whether or not to focus or engage.

In a blog post called Learning with a Purpose, Raymond A. Talke, Jr., President of Minds in Action, Inc., states, ***"Many organizations have education or training functions whose purpose is to create facilitated learning activities, usually in the form of classes. Yet, it is disheartening to note that many of these organizations do not adequately incorporate the purpose of the learning into their learning activities.***

Unwittingly, these organizations are creating "Learning without a Purpose."

Talke lists a set of symptoms that indicate a training department will miss the mark in providing "**learning with a purpose**". One of the symptoms often appears in systems where I consult. (I'd encourage staff developers to check his entire list.)

The training department's success is measured by number of students, number of class days, student reactions, or anything other than the measurable contribution the training provides in meeting the goals of the business.

Recently I have worked with several district-wide and building leadership teams, planning professional development aligned with increasing student achievement. I have suggested that we share with teachers at the outset, the connection between the professional development and the desired student outcome.

We can communicate that by illustrating the change in teacher behaviors that the training is designed to initiate, the change in student behavior that would be generated by the teachers' changes, and finally the learning outcome being sought. These changes may be simplistic in early stages and then grow in complexity.

As an example, a leadership team shared that they were offering "thinking map training" to their staff to increase students' strategies for learning to improve achievement as measured by district assessments.

Here are some questions I explored as I facilitated their discussion:

What would teacher practice with thinking maps (TMs) look like in early stages? How would it change as teachers and students learned the strategies?

What would student behaviors with TMs look like in early and later implementation? Moving from teacher guided use, to teacher suggested use, to independent use?

When and with what assessments would we use to look for improvement in student achievement?

By what date should teachers invite an observer to provide feedback on their initial work with TMs? What dates would you be looking for more complex use to be demonstrated and student behaviors to be occurring? At what date would we predict that uninvited observations could appropriately be looking for

teacher and student use of TMs?
I believe all of the above should be shared with staff before the professional development and coaching activities around TMs begin. Some staff already using their own version of TMs may request an observation with feedback before they attend the training.
Knowing the expectations (the accountability) before the learning activities begin can provide motivation and understanding for increased teacher learning.