Understanding How Teachers Plan: Strategies for Successful Instructional Partnerships

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Instructional consultation is a function that has been widely endorsed but not widely practiced. School library media specialists may be only marginally involved in the instructional process because they lack an understanding of how teachers plan. Teacher planning is characterized by different types and styles of planning, the lack of written plans, and reliance on published curriculum materials. Teachers do not plan as prescribed by linear planning models. With the current emphasis on information literacy, lifelong learning, and critical thinking, planning partnerships become paramount. The author describes teacher planning and offers research-based strategies for effective collaborative planning.

Recent literature concerning the role of school library media programs in the "information age" reverberates with several themes: information literacy, lifelong learning, critical thinking, and resource-based learning. These themes emphasize the changing role of the school library media specialist—one that is characterized as an instructional partnership between teachers and the school library media specialist. The call for a more proactive role in the instructional process is not new, however. Direct and active involvement in the school's instructional program has been widely advocated in the professional literature of the field for several decades. In 1988, instructional consultation was firmly established as one of the three essential roles of the school library media specialist in *Information Power*.(1)

Today, however, the rapid expansion of technologies for information and instruction, together with the movement toward school restructuring, add a new urgency to the role of the school library media specialist. The information-rich era demands that the profession move beyond the traditional library functions to encompass a broader range of responsibilities in the teaching learning process. It is well past the time to embrace the "second revolution" envisioned by David Loertscher more than a decade ago.(2)

Instructional Consultation

The second revolution of which Loertscher spoke casts school library media specialists in the role of partner with teachers because of their knowledge of a wide variety of media and their function in the instructional process. Turner and Zsiray refer to this concept as instructional consultation, "a helping role in which the [school library media specialist] helps the teacher to be more effective and efficient in the teaching process."(3) As outlined in *Information Power*, the

school library media specialist in an instructional consult action role is responsible for the following:

- participating in school, district, departmental, and grade level curriculum design and assessment projects,
- helping teachers develop instructional activities,
- providing expertise in the selection, evaluation, and use of materials and emerging technologies for the delivery of information and instruction, and
- translating curriculum needs into school library media program goals and objectives. (4)

Simply put, functioning as an instructional consultant, the school library media specialist forms planning partnerships with teachers.

Though the instructional consultation role has been widely espoused, there remains a gap between the theory and its practice. Studies have consistently reached the same conclusion: With few exceptions, school library media specialists are not involved in instructional planning. As recently as 1991, for example, Miller and Shontz(5) found that while school library media specialists at all levels reported participating in informal, spur-of-the-moment planning, there was little involvement in formal planning with teachers. They concluded that library media specialists "have not yet adjusted their concept of integration of library resources into the curriculum to include the need for formal planning with teacher colleagues."(6)

Why have school library media specialists and teachers failed to plan collaboratively? What's keeping school library media specialists from direct and active involvement in the instructional process? Blame can be found in the attitudes and perceptions held among teachers, administrators, and school library media specialists themselves. For example, Kerr(7) found school library media specialists to be disinterested in instructional consultation at the same time that teachers were indifferent, if not resistant, to having them involved. Hodges(8) reported that teachers and administrators do not consider an active role in curriculum and instructional planning an appropriate one for the school library media specialist. Other factors that interfere with fulfilling an instructional consultation function include lack of time, training, and administrative support.(9)

Perhaps there is another, more fundamental reason why instructional consultation has yet to reach fruition. It is more than likely that neither school library media specialists nor teachers understand the nature of instructional planning. Planning instruction is an activity in which all teachers engage but few may articulate or reflect upon. The nature of how teachers think about and go about planning instruction may be as unfamiliar to school library media specialists as it is to teachers themselves. Even those who advocate that school library media specialists become more involved in instructional consulting may not fully understand the nature of instructional planning as practiced by classroom teachers.

The purpose of this article is to provide school library media specialists with an understanding of how teachers plan instruction. The article describes the phenomenon known as teacher planning, summarizes related research, and suggests strategies for incorporating research on teacher

planning into the practice of instructional consulting. Understanding the process by which teachers approach and structure instruction is central to working in partnership with teachers.

Teacher Planning

Teacher planning is a concept that can be described as both a psychology process and a practical activity. In the former context, planning is a "process in which a person visualizes the future, inventories means and ends, and constructs a framework to guide his or her future action."(10) As a practical activity, planning is less precisely defined as "the things that teachers do when they say that they are planning."(11)

The latter definition of planning represents the aspect of professional practice that Schon refers to as "knowing-in-action . . . the characteristic mode of ordinary practical knowledge."(12) He explains the implicit nature of this knowledge that underlies our actions in both our personal and professional lives:

Our knowing is ordinarily tacit, implicit in our patterns of action and in our feel for the stuff with which we are dealing. It seems right to say that our knowing is in our action. Similarly, the workaday life of the professional depends on tacit knowing-in-action. Every competent practitioner can recognize phenomena . . . for which he cannot give a reasonably accurate or complete description. In his day-to-day practice, he makes innumerable judgments of quality for which he cannot state rules and procedures. Even when he makes conscious use of research-based theories and techniques, he is dependent on tacit recognition's, judgments, and skillful performances.(13)

The study of teacher planning is a relatively recent focus of research. As pan of the larger body of research concerned with teachers' thought processes, research on teacher planning has focused on that of experienced elementary teachers. Research on teacher planning is concerned with teachers' preactive and postactive thoughts—i.e., those thoughts about teaching occurring prior to and following interaction with students, respectively. The growing body of teacher planning research is beginning to paint a picture of how teachers plan. The following summarizes some of the major findings.

- Teachers plan for different reasons. Clark and Yinger(14) found a number of reasons for planning; among them, teachers planned 1) to satisfy immediate psychological needs, such as increasing one's sense of security, reoccurring anxiety, or building confidence; 2) to prepare themselves and materials for instruction; and 3) to create a framework that will guide the interactive phase of instruction. To this list, McCutcheon(15) added a very programmatic reason: some teachers plan because they are required by administrators to submit written plans on a regular basis.
- There are different types and styles of planning. Clark and Yinger(16) identified eight types of planning in which teachers engage: weekly, daily, unit, lesson, long-range, short-range, yearly, and term planning. Teachers undirected that unit planning was the most important type of planning. Lesson planning was of lesser importance, particularly among experienced teachers.

Through their research, Clark and Yinger further described two styles of planning. First, "incremental planning" is characterized by a short problem-finding stage, brief unit planning, and reliance on trying out activities in the classroom. In the second style of planning, "comprehensive planners" gave more attention to the unit as a whole and to specifying plans thoroughly prior to teaching.

- Planning is a mental activity. Little of what teachers plan is committed to paper, (17,18) those plans that are written are typically limited to an outline or a list of topics. Rather, teachers form mental images of the lesson or unit plan; (19,20,21) plans consist of images "nested" or embedded in other, more comprehensive planning images. Planning produces routines or sets of procedures that guide the behavior of both teacher and students in instruction. (22)
- *Teachers' planning is nonlinear.* Most teacher education programs advocate the use of a linear model for planning instruction. The widely prescribed model proposed by Tyler,(23) for example, prescribes the following steps: 1) specify objectives, 2) select learning activities, 3) organize learning activities, and 4) specify evaluation procedures. However, studies show with considerable consistency that the linear planning model does not represent experienced teachers' planning practice.

Rather, teacher planning appears to be a cyclical process that Yinger(24) described as successively recursive, and in which different types of planning are nested and interact. Subject matter and activities figure prominently in planning;(25,26,27) evaluation is a minor consideration.(28,29) Likewise, objectives appear to play a minor role in planning;(30,31,32) however, Shavelson concludes that "while objectives are not part of their [teachers'] verbal reports about lesson plans, they are part of the teachers' mental image or plan."(33) Context, including the physical environment and social system of the classroom, is a principal concern when planning;(34) especially early in the school year.(35)

• Planning is influenced by published curriculum materials. Clark and Elmore,(36) and Smith and Sendelbach(37) found that teachers depend heavily on published curriculum and teachers' guides for content and methods. Oberg(38) reports that teachers plan around materials they have on hand.

Strategies for Planning in Partnership with Teachers

The research on teacher planning holds numerous implications for school library media specialists in their role as instructional consultants. Applying these research findings to practice is key to forming the instructional partnerships that library media professionals seek with teachers. The following strategies are guides to working in partnership with teachers.

• Together, reflect on teaching and learning. Tapping into teachers' thinking is not an easy task to accomplish. As acknowledged previously, pining is a mental activity. Teachers' knowledge of how they plan and what they do in planning is implicit in their actions and not necessarily a process they can readily articulate. As teachers themselves, library media specialists share considerable common ground with classroom teachers. Let the common-abilities of experience and mutual concerns serve as the basis for an ongoing

dialogue about teaching and learning and about the implications for designing (i.e., planning) instruction.

Occasions for conversations about teaching can be formal or informal. Arrange a meeting to talk specifically about planning instructional units and activities, but also take advantage of less formal, spur-of-the-moment opportunities that present themselves. For example, when a teacher asks for materials depicting colonial living, the library media specialist can take the time to discover the nature of the activity, including its purpose and relationship to broader curriculum objectives.

In the course of reflecting, be open to new ways of looking at teaching and help teachers to do likewise. Addressers the full range of issues that constitute the planning task. Encourage teachers to share their wealth of knowledge about students, content, and methods. With them, explore their goals, and move them to discussions of objectives and evaluation.

Collaborative reflection should reveal the teachers' planning style, the important elements that they consider when planning, and the type of planning in which they engage. Together, teacher and library media specialist can articulate the implicit planting routines and mental images that underlying their actions. Through discussion, both teacher and library media specialist gain a mutual understanding of their interrelated roles.

• Approach the planning process from the teachers' perspective. The assumption among many media professionals has been that teachers approach planning in the way that instructional designers espouse. Turner,(39) for example, advocates an eight-phase approach for instructional consulting that is based on the commonalties among numerous instructional design models. He asserts that "the instructional design approach is based on what many teachers do intuitively."(40) This claim, however, runs counter to the research on teacher planning.

Planning models such as Turner's perpetuate the misconception that a linear, means-end design process is appropriated for instructional consulting with classroom teachers. Planning, as prescribed in numerous instructional design models, is not the same as teacher planning. While the design models may be prescriptive for effective instruction created by instructional designers, they are not descriptive of how classroom teachers approach the process of planning instruction. Teachers have a different perspective.

In light of recent research, those providing instructional consultation would be well advised to set aside linear planning models in favor of an approach that is more reflective of teachers' planning processes. Although there is as yet no definitive model of teacher planning, the following conceptualization, which is research-based, may prove useful as a working model.

Think of planning as a series of increasingly broader-reaching concentric circles radiating out from the central focus—typically the instructional task. Much like the effect of a pebble tossed into a pond, elements such as the dimensions of the content, the characteristics of the students, and the dynamics of the social and cultural environment are encompassed as the circles move outward. In this fashion, the elements identified as essential to effective instruction are taken into

account, but in a process that is recluse and successively elaborate. With a wavelike or rippling action, the consideration of one element affects all the others.

Regardless of the starting point, the library media specialist's role as an instructional consultant is to see that the important elements are considered with respect to the instructional task. Sequence is a minor concern provided that the elements are considered in terms of the whole and revisited with respect to their interaction with one another.

In the tradition of an instructional designer, the library media specialist may find it important to produce written records of planning, but may be frustrated by teachers who do not. If making planning concrete by committing ideas to paper is important, keep documentation simple and to a minimum. Remember that elaborate task analyses and copious lesson plans can be frustrating to classroom teachers whose planning is captured in mental images.

Accommodate various types and styles of planning. Planning is a solitary activity for
teachers. Planning in concert with the school library media specialist may be unwelcome
because it is unfamiliar. Until teachers have come to expect such a collaborative
relationship, school library media specialists may be charting new territory in forging
planning partnerships. In providing instructional consultation services, select strategies
that complement teachers' approach to planning.

Begin by identifying the reasons for planning. Are teachers planning because they need to feel well prepared, to provide a structure, or to fulfill a requirement? Their motivation determines the library media specialist's actions; appeal to their needs. For example, the teacher is reworking a unit to maximize students' interest in an essential but timeworn topic, talk about ways of grabbing students' attention and making the instruction more timely and relevant.

Unit planning is made to order for teacher and school library media specialist planning. This typical type of planning begs for collaboration and is an entree to whole-language and resource-based learning. For example, if a fourth-grade teacher wants to do a unit on Native American foods in connection with Thanksgiving, begin by providing appropriate materials, then suggest a variety of learning activities, especially those that would involve the use of the library media center facilities and its resources. Also take this opportunity to integrate instructional goals related to the development of information literacy skills into the instruction.

Identify both comprehensive and incremental planners among the faculty. Thoroughly plan units of instruction with the comprehensive planners; help them to work out the details and lay out the "big picture." Support incremental planners by accommodating their less detailed and more immediate planning. Encourage experimentation with techniques and materials; debrief and plan revised lessons with them. Customize planning to fit the teacher. Create models based on the approaches of individual teachers. There may be a number of models—as many as there are teachers.

• *Provide the leadership*. Fulfilling an instructional consultation function requires that library media specialists be proactive in their role. Teachers' training and experiences are such that many teachers have limited expectations of the library media specialist and the

library media program. Further, many may lack experience with appropriate role models. Library media specialists need to be active in raising expectations about their involvement in the development of curriculum and instruction. Leadership begins with accepting and asserting the library media specialist's legitimate role in planning instruction.

Don't wait to be asked; assume partnerships and look for opportunities to plan with teachers. With a grounding in teaching, a wealth of knowledge about the collection, and an understanding of the curriculum, students, and methods, the school library media specialist is in the ideal position to initiate collaborative planning. David Loertscher's(42) taxonomy of eleven levels of involvement outlines successively greater degrees of instructional consultation. He emphasizes that the amount of involvement will vary among teachers—or even with the same teacher—depending on the nature of the instructional activity. Assess the comfort level of each teacher and suggest appropriate collaborative activities. Carol-Ann Haycock(43) offers concrete suggestions for a developmental approach to program planning through which the library media specialist can function as an initiator rather than a reactor.

Use curriculum and teachers' guides as a springboard to greater involvement in planning. Teachers may rely on curriculum guides not from a lack of creativity, but from a lack of time or familiarity with available resources. Capitalize on this aspect of the library media specialist's role, one with which teachers are most familiar and accepting. As the information specialist, provide them with the best resources; expose the treasures of the collection and the world of resources beyond it. Pull together a wide variety of media and offer suggestions for their use and integration.

Conclusions

Loertscher calls library media professionals to muster for the second revolution with the following challenge: "Library media centers are being asked to make a measurable difference in public education or else face extinction." (44) If recent history is an indicator, library media programs have begun to resemble a threatened species. Indeed, library media programs of the past decade have been characterized by decreasing funding, aging collections, and a marginal role in the instructional program of schools. At the same time, however, the demands on library media programs have increased in response to the challenges of an information age. Making a measurable difference has never been more important, nor the danger of extinction greater.

Living up to the challenge requires that library media professionals realize the full dimension of their role: information specialist, teacher, *and* instructional consultant. Library media specialists must assume a more proactive and involved role in planning curriculum and instruction; they must work in partnership with teachers. A successful instructional partnership hinges on the library media specialist's understanding of the planning process as *teachers* see and practice it. Collaborative planning is the library media specialist's survival skill—a skill that becomes even more important as the concepts of information literacy, lifelong learning, and resource-based learning propel us into a third revolution.

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