



## **A Teaching For Understanding Approach to Professional Development: Faculty Study Groups to Support Student Understanding**

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### **Preamble**

#### ***My Background***

When I attended the 2001 Summer Institute on Teaching For Understanding, presented by Project Zero, I had just completed my third year as Assistant Head at The San Francisco School [SFS]. Three colleagues from The San Francisco School attended the Summer Institute with me: a preschool, first and second grade teacher.

#### ***My Beliefs***

As a teacher and leader of teachers, I believe that two of the most important jobs educators have are: (1) to determine what to teach and (2) to make sure that all students understand what is being taught. On the surface, these seem like obvious and straightforward tasks. However, my experience, both in the classroom and working with other teachers, and my experience with The Teaching For Understanding framework, have shown me just how complex and difficult these two tasks are. These tasks are difficult because in any subject area discipline hard choices need to be made about what to teach and, therefore, what not to teach. Also, every classroom has a range of learners and presenting material to different learners so that these different learners can understand and use the ideas, processes and skills that are being taught is challenging. Furthermore, in most schools little or no time is set aside during the school day or year for teachers to do this important and time-consuming work of planning curriculum. Because these thinking and planning tasks are complex, they are best done in collaboration with colleagues and, they are best done over time so that teachers can reflect on student progress over time.

#### ***My Summer Institute Experience***

From the opening seminar of the workshop, an introduction to the dimensions of understanding, I found myself beginning to think about how the Teaching for Understanding framework could inform and guide the planning and implementation of our professional development program at school. I thought that the TFU framework could help me to design a collaborative structure in which the teachers at our school could examine the kind of learning that is taking place in their classrooms. So, I began to think about how I could use the TFU framework and the structure of the institute, itself, as a model for our professional development program. How do we know if we are teaching for understanding became the central question that drove my inquiry and project work all year. (See Exhibit 1 for the TFU Professional Development Unit that I designed for The SFS Faculty.)

### **Getting Started**

#### ***Faculty Study Groups to Support Student Understanding***

I decided to launch a faculty study group program with the goal of supporting student understanding. At the beginning, I knew that I wanted the TFU framework to guide me in constructing the purpose and practices of these faculty study group meetings, but I did not know how the actual study group work would unfold. Over

the summer, I had lots of questions about the direction this project should and could take, in addition to lots of enthusiasm for these study groups. Some of my questions were:

- How do I get started? How do I lead the faculty through this change?
- What do we want to preserve from our current cycle of professional development activities?
- Who should work together in these study groups? What are ways to group teachers together? (Groupings I was considering included: faculty interested in exploring understanding in a particular subject area and faculty interested in exploring the same essential question about student learning.)
- When will these faculty study groups meet? How often? What will these meetings replace?
- Will study groups remain the same all year?
- What organizing structures—housekeeping, management and thinking routines—should be in place to assist the group’s work?
- How will the groups share what they discover with the rest of the faculty?
- What relationship does this work have to the scope and sequence task we set for ourselves for the ‘01-’02 school year?
- Does this model of professional development honor and respond to the recent June feedback about the professional development experiences?
- Who should participate?

I brought these questions to a late June meeting with our Head of School and three faculty members representing the preschool, elementary and middle school divisions. The elementary teacher had also attended the PZ Summer Institute. I described my burgeoning ideas about these faculty study groups to them this way:

**June 22, 2001**  
*Ruminations on improving  
 our professional development program*

**What:** teaching to ensure student understanding – at grade level, within a discipline and across grade levels. A professional development structure that enables teachers to think imaginatively and deeply about how to teach more effectively.

**Why:** teaching for student understanding is a mission of the school Darling-Hammond research on effective professional development models

**Who:** faculty (including specialists and teaching assistants?)

**How:** collaborative work groups whose purpose is to explore ways to increase the level of student understanding in their classrooms; meet regularly (weekly or every other week); examine student work (the things that students make and do in school), teacher-constructed learning experiences, understanding goals and assessments

## What drove my inquiry in June, July and August?

The ideas represented in the TFU framework were compelling to me. I knew that The SFS benefited from a group of faculty that was dedicated to effective teaching. I thought that the success of the collaborative professional development work we had done over the past three years made my project a natural extension of what was already in progress. Indeed, I thought we had a unique opportunity at SFS to engage the entire faculty in this project. Not acting upon this rare opportunity was almost unthinkable to me.

## Professional Development Work that Provided a Foundation for Faculty Study Groups

At SFS, teachers were used to working in small groups during the school year to think about their teaching. The teachers had participated in a three year cycle of activities that involved them in the following activities: visiting each other's classrooms, visiting other schools and developing an essential question about their own teaching and conducting classroom research on that question. For each of these cycles of professional development, faculty would meet in the same small groups during the year to ask each other questions and to talk about what they were doing and learning. Faculty groups used conversation protocols (many of these were taken from Project Zero and from the Coalition of Essential Schools) to help their conversations stay focused. Teachers also learned how to conduct action research in their classrooms and many had already had the experience of sharing their classroom research with their colleagues at the end of the year.

On the whole, teachers had found this cycle of professional development valuable. I knew that teachers were accustomed to talking in meaningful ways with each other about their own teaching. The faculty study group project I had in mind would build on these past experiences, but I wanted to shift the focus of the faculty conversation from teacher-oriented questions to learner-oriented questions. Teachers would be asked to think about their teaching by focusing their attention on student understanding.

## Description of My Project: What Did I Do?

### August

- Summer reading book, *Yardsticks*: developed thinking and discussion questions about summer reading for faculty that focused on questions of student understanding; discussion took place during the August professional development days.
- Half-day faculty workshop: "What are the dimensions of understanding?" I modeled this workshop after the opening presentation that Lois, David and Ron lead at the 2001 summer institute.

### September

- Faculty analyzed data that I collected (evidence) about student understanding at SFS. Data included: teachers' first week of school assessments, ERB scores, CAIS self-study recommendations, June 2001 reflections on student needs, SST findings and high school placement results.
- Curriculum Mapping Project introduced to faculty: Scope and Sequence-related questions are heavily influenced by TFU framework.
- Presentation on *The Dimensions of Understanding and Faculty Professional Development Work* given to Parents at Fall Corporation Meeting (9/21/01)

### October

- Faculty Study Groups begin meeting: the configuration of the groups and the purpose and nature of the faculty work is determined. Groups scheduled to meet every other week in place of traditional Wednesday Faculty Meetings.
- Collected feedback from teachers after initial meeting. Teachers were excited.
- Head of School (Terry) and I visited groups and took responsibility for "coaching" the various faculty study groups.

**November – December**

- Groups continued to meet. Terry and I continue to "sit-in" on teacher discussions and meetings.
- I provide formal written feedback to faculty about the nature of the study group meetings.
- I write an article for the school's weekly parent publication describing the reflective conversations that teachers are having in their study group meetings.
- Using the Inside/Outside circle Lois shared at Fellows Meeting, teachers hear from each other about the nature of the work happening in the various faculty study groups.
- Teachers complete a written reflection for me in which I ask: What do you think the purpose of the faculty study group meetings is?

**January – April**

- Faculty study group meetings continue to meet every other week. Terry and I continue "to sit-in" and offer feedback or join in the conversations.
- I enroll in an online PZ course: *Teaching For Understanding 2*.
- I begin to experiment with providing more written feedback to the different groups.
- I begin to experiment with offering discussion questions or protocols for conversation (such as *the ladder of feedback*) to study groups. I suggest that these may be helpful, but do not require that groups use them.
- Teachers become actively involved in curriculum mapping project which asks that they consider TFU questions about student understanding. Teachers are asked to articulate subject area understanding goals. Some grade level teams begin to engage in conversation about overarching grade-level understanding goals (i.e. throughlines).

**May**

- Study group members share their year's work with each other in a display that makes their group's thinking visible to others. I ask teachers to consider: What changes or subtle shifts in your teaching did you make this year as a result of your participation in faculty study groups? What do you think you have understood more deeply this year? Why?
- Teachers reflect in writing about their experience and about what they believe their students have gained a deeper understanding of this year.

**Why these Steps?**

I believe that continuous professional development that centers on teachers reflecting on their practice by examining student work is an essential ingredient in producing excellent teaching. I believe that good professional development is stimulating, keeps teachers excited about their profession, provides models for learning and teaching to teachers, and is a regular part of the school week. This also happens to be the part of my job that I most love.

I tried to design the sort of professional development that I wanted as a teacher. And, I believed that it was possible to replace weekly faculty meetings that focus on scheduling events and other non-teaching based activities with meetings that are entirely focused on what is happening in the classroom. It seemed to me that if teaching and learning is what schools are about, then the majority of faculty meeting time should be spent discussing teaching and learning.

**What was the process of development? How did I get where I am?**

I began this process by developing a vision of what I wanted teachers to learn about their students and themselves as teachers. Then, I began to plan backwards to make sure that I could achieve this end result. I knew that I wanted teachers to work together. I knew that I wanted looking at student work to be a part of what teachers did together. I also wanted to engage teachers in a continuous cycle of planning, doing, reflecting and acting.

I thought that if I continued to explain the purpose of what we were doing, one step at a time, to the teachers they would be willing to go along with the process. [Terry thought the force of my enthusiasm for the project would bring the faculty along.] As I began to put the faculty study groups into place at school, I tried to model the "plan-do-reflect-act" concept to the faculty. I frequently stopped to ask the faculty (and especially the three teachers who were involved in providing feedback to me initially) how they thought the study groups were going, whether changes were needed and so on.

The unwavering support that I received from Terry Edeli, the Head of School, was instrumental not only in the success of the project but in my attitude toward this project along the way. I had great fun collaborating with Terry on this work; we learned from each other and the end result of the work faculty did in their groups was better for his involvement.

Borrowing ideas from the summer institute and from the work we did in our fellows meetings helped me enormously too. Every time we would meet as a fellows group, I would look for ways to incorporate the ideas or activities that I was exposed to in our fellows meetings with teachers at SFS. I also found that taking the Project Zero online course provided me with lots of ideas and resources for supporting the teachers' thinking about student learning.

Finally, keeping in mind that I was conducting an experiment was a useful stance to take, especially at the beginning. I told the faculty that the faculty study groups were an experiment too, albeit an experiment that I believed was well-worth conducting, but nonetheless an experiment. This gave me a sense of freedom to try new ideas; it made me acutely aware that I had to observe what was happening and respond to my observations by making changes or adjustments along the way.

### Reflection on the work/project

I tried, with only sporadic success, to reflect on how my project was unfolding along the way. Here's a sampling of what I was thinking and how I was feeling during the process:

#### **September 25, 2001**

*The Fellows Meeting on Friday made me realize that I need to give more time and attention to my own reflection on my work throughout this process. Thus, I am committing to weekly journal writing (I did not do this) and creating a binder of how I got started and how the faculty study groups develop (I did create this binder). ...pushing my own understanding—as with preparing and giving the talk to parents on "Understanding"—has helped me better lead teachers through this process.*

#### **October 2, 2001**

*I'd like groups to keep track of what members bring – plans, student work, assessment designs—the artifacts that each person brings to the meetings should chronicle a journey in their own thinking about teaching for understanding. But, how can I make this work less cumbersome for teachers?*

*Will groups need guiding questions ... such as ...*

- *What do you want students to understand from this lesson?*
- *How will you know if students are understanding?*
- *How are you planning to engage all the different types of learners in the class?*
- *What do you anticipate might be difficult for students to understand? Why? What will the problem be?*
- *What could you do to make this understanding more accessible?*
- *Should I suggest using these questions throughout the year?*

*A frustration is that I am not able to plan at school or do any thinking work. My time is all face time with the teachers—problem-solving and trouble shooting.*

#### **October 10, 2001**

*I described [study group] guidelines and process to teachers – folks seemed receptive and quietly, they seemed to*

*like the idea of a structure to help their discussions stay focused.  
Maintaining a sense of purpose in the study group discussions may be hard.*

**November 6, 2001**

*As I have been having goal setting conferences with teachers, I have been struck by how several teachers are getting at the essence of what it means to teach their subject matter for high level student understanding as they set their goals.*

*Teacher 1: What are the concepts and skills I most want students to understand from my planned science units?*

*Teacher 2: How do I know if students are learning and meaningfully engaged in project time units? What do I really want students to learn from these project time units.*

*Teacher 3: How can I deepen students' understanding of Spanish and increase their oral language production?*

**November 26, 2001**

*One group went to the Exploratorium today to look at an exhibit together to think and plan how to use the ideas in it in their classes.*

*Another group examined student reading notes and a quiz on the reading. Thoughtful questions directed at student understanding of how to take notes effectively and of how to make sense of dense, non-fiction reading were asked. Note-taking strategies were shared among the teachers and student work was examined for evidence of student understanding.*

*Another group shared curriculum and examples of ongoing assessments in the realm of reading comprehension.*

*I gave groups a list of guiding questions, but I don't know if anyone used or read them...I am wondering about several teachers who did not attend their study group meetings today—is this par for the course? Is there a way that I could better engage these teachers? I wonder.*

**December 3, 2001**

*In my work with teachers, I am puzzling over how to make their study group conversations more about teaching for understanding – it is difficult to keep the focus of the group on this topic long enough for teachers to explore what it means to teach students to understand deeply, how to organize curriculum/instruction so that they will have the best chance of achieving success with students understanding more and how to assess the depth of student understanding. This is a slippery slope of ideas or questions and even the most thoughtful, reflective and confident teachers have trouble staying engaged in these questions for too long.*

*I am also puzzling over how best to introduce various aspects of the TFU framework that seem especially pertinent or useful to others. Some groups seem a long ways away from TFU thinking – and managing, facilitating and overseeing so many groups is a struggle too.*

**February 7, 2002**

- *How can I provide meaningful, actionable feedback to teachers? All my feedback feels casual and informal.*
- *What are new ways that I can assess the teachers' understanding?*
- *How can I provide closure to this process at the end of the year?*

*I also collected feedback from faculty participants along the way. Here is a smattering of what teachers were thinking and feeling about the faculty study groups.*

**October 18, 2001**

- *"Our group was fun. We've got some really good teachers."*
- *"I hope that it keeps on being as stimulating as it was yesterday."*
- *"Ann's checking in was helpful."*
- *"It was the push I needed. I got my [tests] scored that had been sitting in my closet."*

- *"I'm looking forward to having time to do the planning and thinking during school that normally we have to do on the weekend and outside of school."*

**November 14, 2001**

- *"If you're teaching anything, then it is worth having solid understanding of it."*

**December 12, 2001**

- *"I love the chance to hear what other teachers are doing and to learn from them...Just being forced to take time during the week to reflect has helped me to make it more of my routine. I find my car rides home on Wednesdays help me to digest the strengths and weaknesses of my week of teaching."*
- *"Talking with other teachers interested in the same question is hugely helpful...Looking at reading comprehension in a structured, continuous way has also provided a catalyst for me to do additional professional development stuff."*
- *"It has been inspiring..."*
- *"Discussions focus thinking on specific aspects of understanding; set aside time for this thinking; troubleshooting."*
- *"The meetings help me think at a higher level about what is worth teaching and how to teach it."*

## What were the results?

### What I got out of this process

I learned a great deal about how to teach for understanding and about how to lead teachers. As our faculty study groups draw to a close for this school year, I have a better sense of how to make sure that teachers are learning from their participation in the faculty study groups. I have many new ideas now about how to structure the faculty study group meetings next year to increase teachers' understanding of TFU ideas. I would like to make better use of the faculty study group meeting times as an opportunity to model TFU ideas to teachers that they could then use in their classrooms. I would like to take a more directive stance with the teachers and guide teachers in how they look at student work, for example. I would like to do more to make sure that teachers are reflecting on what they are learning. In short, I would think of the faculty study group meetings more as learning experiences that I am constructing for the faculty rather than as time that I am providing to them for their own, self-directed learning. I am afraid that this year, because of the way I structured their meeting time, it was possible for teachers to have participated in the faculty study groups without necessarily furthering their own understanding of how to teach for greater student understanding.

### What teachers got out of this process

Teachers shared their study group experiences with each other in May and reflected upon their experience this year.

When I asked teachers:

- 1) How have you added to your own understanding of what it looks like when your students thoroughly understand what you are teaching? Explain.

Teachers responded:

- *I feel more aware of times when the children express their understanding or lack of...*
- *When my students understand deeply, they ask more questions that branch off into new, related topics, beyond what I have taught directly.*
- *I understand better how I have to teach the same things over and over, presenting new ways for students to show me what they know. I model more. I have students teach more.*

When I asked teachers:

- 2) What changes or subtle shifts in your teaching have you made as a result of your participation in faculty study groups?

Teachers responded:

- *Used students' ideas and words overtly, used more student writing in reflective journals*
- *More deliberate, explicit work with kids about reading as a process.*

- *Thinking, planning, acting with forethought, not just reacting to difficult behaviors.*
- *I have slowed down...*
- *I have thought more carefully about the questions I ask...*
- *I have been much more explicit about how to show thinking, understanding and wondering while reading and after reading. I've expanded the number of ways students can show this.*

When I asked teachers:

3) What do you think that your students have understood more deeply this year? Why?

Teachers responded:

- *What makes buildings and other structures stable because students have linked their hands-on, visceral understanding with their more cerebral, vocabulary-intensive understanding.*
- *Evolution...I presented the information and activities in a clearer fashion.*
- *How to use graphic organizers to take notes; the value and use of margin notes; how to ask and answer explicit and implicit questions.*
- *That there is value in restating a question or an answer in one's own words as a way of assessing one's own knowledge.*

When I asked teachers:

4) What aspects of the faculty study groups would you like to see continue next year?

Teachers responded:

- *Small groups.*
- *Loved it. Please continue.*
- *I liked how often we met.*

When I asked teachers:

5) What aspects of the faculty study groups would you like to see change next year?

Teachers responded:

- *Require every person to bring a project/question to share.*
- *Shorter, more frequent meetings.*
- *Use more student work.*

### What the school got out of this process

We all learned that spending more time talking about teaching and learning within the context of existing school meeting time is possible and desirable.

More stimulating teacher-talk about student understanding is occurring at school now. Many teachers have expressed interest in learning more about the TFU framework and eight teachers are planning to attend the summer institute this June. At least three teachers plan to be Fellows next year.

More teacher to teacher learning occurred. Many teachers regularly used their faculty study group meeting time to consult one another about their teaching, design of lessons or assessment of student learning. They learned a lot from one another. The collegial nature of the teachers' work is taking on life outside of the study group meetings as teachers collaborate on grading papers or developing strategies for teaching skills across grade levels and disciplines.

Student understanding—at least in some teachers' classrooms—increased as a result of the changes teachers made in their own teaching, changes that were inspired by the teachers' participation in faculty study groups.

The curriculum mapping process that is underway at school is aligned with many of these teaching for understanding ideas. As a result, the thinking that teachers are currently doing about their curricula is stimulating new ideas about what is most important for students to understand at different grade levels; what it means to understand these ideas, skills and processes and how best to teach these desired understandings to all students. The process is generating thoughtful conversation and constructive experimentation.

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