

The **dynamic duo** of professional learning = **collaboration** and **technology**



While education policy pushes toward more rigorous teacher evaluations — without full teacher input — teacher learning will likely be led by collaboration and technology.

By **Barnett Berry**

When National Board Certified Teacher Rachel Evans visited schools in high-performing Shanghai, she noticed a key distinction: “In America, teachers’ professional learning is about going to external trainings, but in Shanghai, it’s about a system of peer-to-peer support.” Evans, teaching in the Seattle Public Schools and serving as a teacherpreneur with the Center for Teaching Quality (CTQ), marveled at the flexibility of Shanghai’s professional feedback system. She noted especially its emphasis on spreading teacher expertise and its responsiveness to the varying needs of students and individual practitioners.

I am hopeful that, in the next decade or so, American teachers like Evans will lead the fully realized profession that students deserve.

Some would call me Pollyanna. After all, many indicators suggest that teaching remains the semi-profession I experienced as an inner-city high school teacher in the 1980s before launching my career as

a researcher and later an advocate. Shortcuts into teaching still prevail — devaluing the pedagogical knowledge all new recruits should master before entering a classroom. The idea of a teaching profession whose own practitioners have the authority to safeguard its quality and advance its excellence may seem a distant dream.

With the recent Race to the Top mandates, evaluation systems may be more rigorous than ever, though they often judge teachers by a rigidly and often inaccurate value-added measure of their effectiveness in raising test scores (Özek & Xu, 2015; Raudenbush, 2015). These systems tend to shortchange ongoing improvement, neglecting to provide the feedback and follow-up support to help all teachers refine their practice. A recent report commissioned by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation revealed that teachers’ learning is being tamped down by evaluators of their practice, administrators, and coaches who have never taught the new student standards. For example, in one Florida district, merely 35% of teachers reported that the new evaluation system identifies their strengths and weaknesses, and only 45% affirmed that they receive support to implement the changes suggested by feedback they receive.

Meanwhile, most American teachers have little say when it comes to their professional development, an \$18 billion enterprise that focuses on external consultants and vendors rather than peer-to-peer support. Fewer than one in three American teachers get to choose their professional development, only 50%

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BARNETT BERRY (bberry@teachingquality.org) is founder, partner, and CEO of Center for Teaching Quality, Carrboro, N.C.

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report receiving any coaching (on an annual basis), and a mere 7% of teachers claim that their schools have strong collaboration models (Boston Consulting Group, 2014). Most professional learning communities (PLCs), while well-intended, obsess over data and spreadsheets of student test scores and ignore “the social nature of learning” among teachers (Talbert, 2010).

At the same time, teachers seem to be the most vilified source of the ills of public schooling, and “the more they defend themselves, the more recalcitrant they seem” in the eyes of the mass media (Kolker, 2010). No wonder a recent Gallup poll revealed that 70% of our nation’s teachers are not engaged with their work and rank dead last among the occupational groups surveyed on whether “their opinions count at work” (Gallup, 2014). Less than 40% of America’s teachers are “very satisfied” with their jobs, with a 23-point drop since 2008 (MetLife, 2013).

So how in the world can I be so optimistic about the future of the teaching profession? Three related trends suggest encouraging developments:

- #1. Proliferation of empirical evidence of how teachers learn;
- #2. Increased visibility of teacher learning in top-performing nations; and
- #3. The emergence of teacher networking.

More and more players in the education space — from policy makers to school reformers to teachers themselves — are on the verge of a critical realization: This profession is ripe for continuous improvement led by its own practitioners. It is time to encourage and systematize the spread of teacher expertise in high-quality feedback systems.

How teachers learn

While the definition of high-quality teacher preparation remains a source of significant debate, there is growing consensus among researchers about how teachers learn to improve their practice — and these findings are beginning to seep into the policy mainstream.

Collaboration among educators stands out as a route for improvement. Economists using sophisticated statistical methods have found that students score higher on achievement tests when their teachers have opportunities to work with colleagues over a longer period of time and share their expertise with one another (Jackson & Bruegmann, 2009). Other researchers have found that teachers improve their practice at greater rates when they work in schools with better quality collaboration and that joint work on assessments is significantly predictive of achievement gains across math and reading (Ronfeldt et al., 2015).

In addition, scholars have begun to document the precise features of high-quality learning opportuni-

ties for teachers. Wiliam (2014) has uncovered how professional learning systems can engineer effective situations, activities, and tasks that elicit teacher learning; provide specific feedback that moves teaching practice forward; trigger situations for teachers to serve as resources for one another; and activate teacher ownership of their own learning. Specifically, he found that observations of teaching by a coach or assessor will be most beneficial when teachers are able to select the lesson to be critiqued, as high-quality feedback elicits thinking not emotions. Teachers learn from those administrators and colleagues who help them take risks and embrace their weaknesses rather than hiding from them. Finally, he points out how new tools can help teachers learn from themselves as well as one another. The improvement of professional learning needs to focus on changing habits of mind and not just acquiring new teaching knowledge.

Top-performing nations

Top-performing nations like Finland and Singapore have built their success on teacher development and leadership — specifically by intentionally creating policies and programs so that classroom practitioners can learn from each other and spread their expertise in teaching (Darling-Hammond, 2014). Both countries invest heavily in preservice preparation in order for teachers to have knowledge and skill to lead and share their insights with colleagues, administrators, and policy leaders. America has opted for inexpensive teachers and more administrators to supervise them, while countries with the best student results have invested more heavily in teachers’ ongoing improvement of their practice (Tucker, 2013a).

Over the last several years, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which has significant influence in the international business community, has been spreading the lessons learned from top-performing countries. Andreas Schleicher, OECD director of education and skills, recently noted in a major Washington, D.C., address:

In East Asia, where the emphasis on collaboration is strong, you do almost nothing in isolation. In China, they have a platform where you upload lesson plans and the more other teachers use or approve your lesson plans, the more popular you will become in the education system. And when [teachers] are evaluated by your principal, they are thinking about how good you are with your own students, as well as how well you worked with colleagues (Schleicher, 2015).

In these top-performing jurisdictions, teachers only teach students about 17 hours a week, compared to 30 or more in the United States. With more time, teachers co-construct knowledge in PLCs that differ markedly from those typically found in America.

As Evans pointed out after her visit, PLCs in Shanghai focus more on inquiry than on data — with a primary purpose of unpacking the “why” and “how” of effective teaching, not just attending to the “what” (Berry, 2014). Beginning teachers in Shanghai have two mentors — one for general pedagogy and classroom management and the other subject-specific. They engage in training in both their school and another high-performing one, which they can visit up to three times per week. The hallmark of the professional learning system is that teachers learn to conduct action research and go public with their practice.

Singapore’s professional learning system centers on studying why students learn or not and what teams of teachers must do to respond to their needs. Singaporean teachers can lead in their schools and profession in a variety of ways. In contrast to most of the failed career ladders in America, any Singaporean teacher who wants to lead, and demonstrates that he or she can, has the opportunity to do so. Policy makers make trade-offs with other programs to ensure that teachers have time to learn and lead (Jensen, 2014).

Teachers and administrators from other nations are beginning to engage with their U.S. counterparts. For example, this past year with support from both the Gates Foundation and the Sutton Trust (UK), 75 educators from nine countries worked together in a virtual community (part of the Center for Teaching Quality Collaboratory) to identify practical tools to help teachers improve the core business of their practice. I’ll offer just a few examples:

- Paul Browning of Australia created enthusiasm among network members with his tools to assess an administrator’s ability to establish trust in schools so teachers will readily take risks with each other and their teaching.
- Beth Hocking of Wales engaged a subset of teaching colleagues from Hong Kong and the U.S. in Teaching Triplets, an intricate strategy for small teams of teachers to perform each of the three roles — teacher, coach, and observer — and engage with one another over several years to reduce variation in teaching quality.
- Jaraux Washington of Florida demonstrated how virtual communities help teachers learn about best practices from teaching colleagues they trust and respect, regardless of time and geography.

Such international examples — increasingly visible in blogs, books, magazines, and social media posts — have begun to change the reform narrative in the U.S. by moving emphasis from the teachers to the teaching. As teachers like Evans encounter

Coming to America

Barnett Berry



The author’s father, Joe, sitting on his father’s lap. About 1924.

My immigration story is a grateful one, captured in part by the storied journeys of my grandfathers, Barnett Baranisky of Lachowicz (Russia) and Sam Friedman of Grajewo (Poland). Both came to America over a century ago as part of a large wave of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, seeking economic opportunity and a more just life. Barney, speaking only Yiddish with three pennies to his name, was befriended by a man named Grossman who helped him move from New York City to Columbia, S.C., where he became a shoemaker and merchant. Later, my grandfather changed his name from Baranisky to Berzin to Berry, becoming a U.S. citizen in 1906. Barney taught my dad, Joe, born in 1916, how to be tough and kind, and work *very hard*. Joe took over Barney’s business during the Great Depression, where he learned to be creative and entrepreneurial but also to take care of his employees as if they were family.

Sam never really wanted to own a *Jew Store*, as Stella Suberman so poignantly described in her 1998 book. He was an intense intellectual who would have preferred to go into law or left-wing politics, but he had to support my grandmother and four daughters. He became a naturalized citizen in 1925, proudly, in the same courthouse where my first cousin Richard Gergel presides today as a federal district judge.

My grandfathers’ legacies and America’s openness to them have shaped my own life, richly filled with family and friends and a lifetime of work to advance a teaching profession that fuels both social justice and teacherpreneurism.

real-life examples of professional feedback systems in other nations, they are beginning to take things into their own hands.

Spreading teacher expertise

As Evans aptly noted, American teachers' professional learning is all too often delivered to them by external sources rather than being driven by and for practitioners. A 2014 survey of 100,000 teachers from 34 nations revealed that *one-half of all American teachers* have never seen a colleague teach, far exceeding percentages found in top-performing jurisdictions across the globe. On a related note, American evaluation systems do little to tap teacher expertise. On average, teachers in other countries are twice as likely to be evaluated by peers as U.S. teachers (OECD, 2014). In America, teachers are more likely to be assessed solely by principals who are "hard-pressed for time to be instructional leaders" (Maxwell, 2014).

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But the recent explosion of teachers who are participating in networks and online communities promises to increase the pace of change and the agency for it among those who teach. In spite of the highly bureaucratic schools in which teachers work, they are beginning to break down long-standing barriers of isolation. New online teacher communities surface daily on Pinterest, Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. Nearly 6 in 10 teachers are now using technology to work with teaching colleagues they "would not otherwise know" (Scholastic, 2015).

A variety of other opportunities that create avenues for classroom experts to spread their pedagogical knowledge and learn from one another are thriving. The long-standing National Writing Project, for example, has now expanded to more than 200 locales. New tools help deprivatize teaching practice (a major impediment to the profession in the past) and save time by enabling teachers to share ideas about teaching to the new student standards in place in many states. For example, Literacy Design Collaborative has created a research-based framework for teachers to develop for themselves literacy-rich classroom assignments and courses across content areas. In a similar vein, LearnZillion's e-platform invites teachers to curate and share exceptional lessons for the new student standards; by mid-2015, the company had registered about 850,000 teachers (adding 8,000 to 10,000 new teachers every week) to

reach about 1.4 million students.

And the free, participatory unconferences of Ed Camps — organized by teachers for teachers — have focuses as varied as how to teach quantum physics with dance or how to engage in public/private school partnerships (Swanson, 2014).

Our own virtual community, the Center for Teaching Quality (CTQ) Collaboratory, has grown from 200 to 10,000 members in two years, creating unique opportunities for teachers to learn about policy and practice from one another and to go public with their ideas. Our organization and others are learning a great deal about how online communities, effectively facilitated, are rapidly breaking down teacher isolation and equipping teachers to take a more active role in shaping the public image of their profession.

The ways forward

I see three practical ways in which the spread of powerful research evidence, the visibility of effective professional learning systems, and the exploding possibilities of teacher networking will fuel teacher professionalism:

- #1. School administrators will soon learn to use tools, now under development, to restructure time and space for teachers to lead their own learning, including those being created by Learning First in Australia, the National Center on Education and the Economy in the U.S., and the Teacher Powered Schools initiative, a partnership between CTQ and Education Evolving.
- #2. Policy makers will begin to jettison the archaic system of awarding teachers continuing education credits and modest salary bumps for attending externally driven workshops and will turn to Digital Promise and its partners in creating microcredentials that allow teachers to drive their own high-quality professional learning — and be recognized and rewarded for it.
- #3. Teachers, who now have tools to document their own evidence of how their expertise develops and spreads, will be more visible to policy makers and the public — and will have the credibility they always have deserved as well as the autonomy to lead their professional learning.

Prudent but optimistic

I am cautious about the prospects for the future of teaching in America. Powerful forces will continue to push back against teachers leading the transformation of their profession. Growing numbers of edu-

cation entrepreneurs view the \$600 billion public school enterprise as an investment target and potential profit source. Trusting classroom experts to make more decisions about teaching and learning will doubtless threaten some school reformers.

However, the public and parents in particular have more trust in classroom teachers than policy makers or business leaders (Gallup, 2013). And some of the most highly respected school reformers are now saying that teaching quality cannot be achieved by “firing the worst” teachers or even “improving the quality” of the new ones, but by “investing in those you already have” (Tucker, 2013b).

Significantly, similar shifts are underway in other sectors as more business leaders — like Tony Hsieh at Zappos — recognize the importance of a flatter, more collaborative school organization — a workplace where no one and everyone is the boss (Noguchi, 2015). Over 300 companies are using holacracy principles, where employees aren’t told how to do their work but are expected to engage in circles to help vet new ideas or problems as well as evaluate and reward each other (Noguchi, 2015). It will take time, but as these 21st-century business practices spread, their effect on how schools are managed — and on the opportunities for teachers to lead their own learning — will be palpable.

As Gates Foundation education executive Vicki Phillips told the large gathering of enthusiastic teachers in Seattle: “You’re in the classroom when it all gets real, you’re the eyewitnesses to what works, and you are the ones who have the most powerful solutions when you work together.” With one in four American teachers “extremely” or “very interested” in serving in a hybrid role as a teacher and leader (MetLife, 2013), I can be very optimistic that before long teachers will reinvent their profession. **K**

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