

Creating Tech Savvy Teachers
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- Can and should a media specialist and a school media program have a significant role in staff development for teachers?
- Can a professional development program in technology have a positive impact on student and staff use of information and technology?

Our experience in a 10 building, 4400 student district is an unqualified yes. We attribute our success to several factors.

1. **A let's do it, grassroots approach** is key to technology staff development in our schools. We set up our middle school's first computer lab in the media center in the 1980's. Early adopters were eager to begin. An enthusiastic teacher started sharing ideas for exciting things we could do. Clearly there was a job that needed to be done. The immediate need was to introduce the concept of a lab and the possibilities for curriculum application to a largely veteran staff. The principal was supportive of change and with his support, a social studies teacher and I and planned held our first staff development session; within weeks we offered more classes including hands-on exploration of curriculum application software and productivity tools. The following summer we offered the first of more than a dozen summer technology-training opportunities.

The summer academies originally established for our middle school became district wide in 1994 and later became regional as other districts saw the need for training and recognized our success. With lots of experience in putting together these academies, I can now put one together with just a few phone calls and emails.

Our grass roots approach - using our own staff as trainers, using our own equipment and our own facilities - keeps costs low. The only significant costs to the district are instructor and staff salaries and snacks (an essential in any training session!) Typical after school classes cost less than \$5.00 per attendee. Last year's summer academy cost the district less than \$40.00 per attendee who each attended two or three 3-hour classes.

The organizational and technology skills that go with being a media specialist prove useful as I work with my media center staff and a core group of teachers and area educators to organize and implement this training.

2. **Peer support and expertise is the second significant component of our staff development program.** I've lost count of the classes we've offered throughout the years, but I've *haven't* lost count of the times we've brought in outside experts. That total is fewer than ten. Our training is provided by our own local experts—the teacher next door, occasionally technology support staff, the principal, or, even the superintendent. Business education teachers typically teach *Microsoft Office* classes; a creative sixth grade teacher has taught others the logistics of implementing a multimedia project; and an industrial technology teacher shows others how to work with *iMovie*. I have taught a full range of classes—including beginning email use, using primary sources in student research, and “I Wish I'd Known That. . .” a mixture of tech tips and curriculum integration ideas.

We've found teachers prefer to learn from their peers, people they know and trust. Teachers like to share anecdotes of success and failure and share teaching ideas and materials. When teachers see their peers having fun and growing in their role as staff developers they learn that they too can help. Three veteran staff who had never taught a class volunteered to teach an electronic grade book refresher class and a server access at a district-wide technology staff development day which I coordinated.

At our middle school we have formalized peer support with our Tech Contact group, teachers who represent their teaching team or department. The group meets a few times each year to answer questions and convey information to the groups they represent. The group helps with minor day-to-day tech support, helps colleagues learn new software, and shares ideas. Tech contacts receive a small stipend out of building staff development funds for their efforts and are the core instructors for our classes. As media specialist, my role is to facilitate meetings, disseminate

information, and help create a broad group of teachers who can help our school move forward with curriculum integration and teacher productivity.

- 2. Ongoing, consistent, varied and just in time opportunities keep the momentum going.** I've heard more than one administrator say, "We've done that," or "we had someone come to our school *last year*." Others say, "The teachers don't use the technology we have." Staff development must be ongoing and consistent. There is always room for growth and improvement. There are always new teachers and staff that are newly ready to learning. Often one training experience is not enough, sometimes not even two.

Staff development must be varied. We offer classes before school, after school, at night, during the school day, and during the summer. Since 1995 I have chaired "Celebrating Success with Technology," a district wide summer technology academy for educators. Each August 25-30 classes are offered over three days. We offer a balance between software application training (spreadsheets, PowerPoint) applicable curriculum integration (Inspiration), and something new (~~wireless networking~~ PDAs) to keep the momentum going. If the district is implementing something new, that training is part of CST. The focus is not limited to information technologies or technology associated with a media center, but on the variety technologies used in education such as using the new online attendance system or training for office staff on administrative software.

The need for "just-in-time" training always exists. When my principal asked teachers to submit lesson plans electronically, I organized classes to show them how; when another group began to show interest in adding content to the web site I organized informal and formal classes. When a teacher became excited about *Inspiration* we invited her teaching team to a brief hands-on session during their planning period the next day. The next day 160 language arts students created concept maps to begin their writing. It's easy for me as the media specialist to recognize the need for "just-in-time" training during collaborative planning and by listening to frequent questions and suggestions when teachers bring their classes to the media center.

- 3. Everyone is welcome.** Schools are learning communities; people learn and work together. Teachers attend some classes while office staff may attend others, but most often there is a mix. We occasionally offer training for groups of employees such the paraprofessionals, who work with teachers and students. Last fall, for example, I taught server access classes to paraprofessionals and web site development classes to building secretaries who are responsible for adding content to building web sites.
- 4. There is administrative support behind our efforts.** Winona Middle School Principal, Dr. Scott Hannon is very supportive. ~~Both his~~ His confidence in me to "just do it" and his understanding that staff development is essential are vital to the success of our efforts. I routinely keep him informed of staff development needs. Dr. Hannon claims he gets more information from me than any other staff member. I consider that a compliment! Most of our conversations are informal and revolve around how people are doing (or not doing) with technology, ideas for a classes we should offer, or a request for training time.

A little nudge from him now and then helps move our staff forward. He encourages (and sometimes requires) staff to improve their skills. Teachers who were expected who use a new lab received a letter from him asking them to attend 20 hours of training. This model continues to be used to encourage attendance as it did last fall when the district implemented new servers and teachers needed to know how to save to them. It was imperative that all staff begin the school year with these skills in place. Dr. Hannon sent out "the letter." It was my job to recruit instructors to assist, organize the schedule and keep track of attendance for continuing education renewal certificates.

I also keep staff development needs in the forefront at district technology meetings, in conversations with other administrators, and in annual media program reports to the school board. Ongoing communication, effectiveness, efficiency, and accurate record keeping help build staff development support at both the building and district level. If Dr. Hannon or a district administrator asks for information about what we've done, I can readily provide it.

Lessons learned as a media specialist actively involved in staff development activities

- Staff development comes with the territory of being a school media specialist. Our job to proactively reach out to others. Opportunities for learning are lost and resources underutilized when staff are uncomfortable with technology We need to replenish their own skills through professional reading, networking, and continually

seeking to improve and stretch. I regularly attend technology conferences and just this past year I took an online Excel class.

- Our staff have high expectations of training and accepts the need for it. We are no sooner finished offering one round of classes and there are requests for more. I attribute the continuing demand to our grass roots, no heavy-handed-mandate approach. Work with the living!
- Staff development is more than just formal, planned classes. Some of the most effective staff development is informal, occurring during a teacher/media specialist planning session or as part of casual conversations. A social studies teacher and I continually share ideas for improving a major multimedia project. As we plan, we both learn and the teaching and learning activities improve. Just this past year, we began utilizing online bibliography templates so young students will achieve success in an often difficult task. One-on-one collaboration with industrial technology teachers has resulted in dramatically different and improved curriculum as we moved from “shop” to industrial technology and then shifted again towards an information technology approach.
- As the media specialist, I can teach teachers at the same time I teach the kids. The instruction I provide students when they begin a project does not go unheard by the teachers who are always with their students in the media center and labs. Staff may not recognize the need to attend classes on some topics, but we can “sneak” in staff training through the back door. This most notably happens as we teach students how to search the district’s databases or use other information technologies. This approach helps keep the full range of information literacy skills needed to complete a project in the forefront.
- Staff development can occur with limited funding. Our annual budget is less than the national average of 8% of a district’s technology budget, but our grassroots efforts reach nearly all our staff. Our middle school staff scored above average on a self-assessment of technology skills and curriculum integration. This did not go unnoticed by our school board.
- Good staff development can cut down on tech support costs and media specialist workload. As teachers acquire skills they help each other and can increasingly solve their own problems. This in turn frees a media specialist up to spend more time working collaboratively with teachers or reaching out to other teachers.
- Training without access and immediate application is usually worthless. However, it’s also important to provide opportunities for exploring new technologies and curricular potential that meet the needs of people who do want to move forward.
- Never assume. It’s always interesting what people don’t know about using a piece of hardware or an application. Many teachers know how to “do,” but not how to integrate. Teachers everywhere are eager for practical, curriculum related ideas. As media specialists, we can share those ideas informally or through formal classes.
- Success with technology energizes many staff; that often translates to improved motivation in classroom. I celebrate the successes of those teachers who are moving forward through compliments and recognition in media program newsletters, on the school web site, or other public relations endeavors. A middle school teacher has evolved from a traditional career teacher in a self-contained classroom to one provides a variety of technology based, constructivist learning experiences for her students. She is excited about the capabilities technology offers and she knows a mix of resources, formats, and opportunities is the best way to meet diverse learning styles and needs. I’m pleased that our collaboration and her attendance at staff development classes had a role in the dramatic shift.
- The need for staff development of all types isn’t going away any time soon. There is almost always a small step backward when technologies change. However, with a foundation in place, change now occurs as a faster pace.
- A small effort that is a sustained effort can have an influence. Our grass roots efforts pay off every day; the technology in our technology-rich school is, in demand and well used. Staff development is a big factor in promoting higher-level thinking and better assignments in a seamless information environment.

Do 100% of our staff provide exciting, meaningful learning situations that take advantage of technology? Of course not, but a high percent of staff members do and all students have equitable opportunities to use technology as a regular part of the learning environment. As media specialist, I’m confident my proactive, ongoing staff development role has been a large part of our success.

You too, can make a difference!