

Reframing Professional Learning

by [Bradley A. Ermeling](#) & [Genevieve Graff-Ermeling](#) — November 08, 2016

Research and observations suggest that many collaborative teacher teams in the United States are constrained by existing images of practice. One promising way to counteract these persistent images is to provide educators with a compelling new image or metaphor that helps to “reset” or “reframe” the activity.

It's Tuesday afternoon, 5th period biology. Researchers, teachers, administrators, district, and government officials crowd the border of a high school classroom while students work in teams to investigate effects of light and color on the retina. Each observer holds a copy of a detailed lesson plan provided by the school science department. They reference the lesson as a guide, focus attention on two or three students, and carefully jot down notes while tracing the development of students' thinking. Some observers quietly weave between aisles to get a closer look at a particular group. Others kneel down to listen, snap photos, or respectfully peer over a student's shoulder to read answers recorded on the lab worksheet. An ordinary routineness characterizes the room—teachers and students seemingly oblivious to the crowd of onlookers. Immediately following the lesson, guest observers and members of the school science department reconvene in a separate location and conduct a tightly structured debrief of the lesson outcomes. A district official facilitates the discussion, beginning with comments from the teacher and followed by comments and questions from observers. The tone of the meeting is the same as the observation—serious, inquisitive, and respectful. A rich discussion unfolds with numerous insights and suggestions, all grounded in specific evidence from observations. Participants share a common goal and a joint interest in the study and improvement of practice. The focus is on *teaching and learning*, not the teacher.

The description above highlights our perspective as new teachers engaged in a routine episode of professional learning in Japan. Over twenty years ago, after completing our teacher preparation coursework in the United States, we accepted positions at a Japanese national school about 25 miles north of Tokyo. During this time, we participated regularly in Japanese lesson study, a rigorous form of teacher collaborative inquiry practiced widely throughout the Japanese K-12 system. The central feature of lesson study is the observation and analysis of live classroom research lessons collaboratively planned by a group of teachers. We like to say we were “raised as educators” in Japan. For seven years we were immersed in this culture and system quite different from our own—a culture where teachers were continuously engaged in collaboration, observation, and the systematic improvement of practice.

Depth and Detail Lost in Translation

Returning to America, we were struck by the contrast of how US schools approach the profession. We encountered a culture that forgets teachers are also learners. We entered a world consumed by results and disinterested in process. We joined a system more focused on evaluation than improvement and more concerned about testing than teaching and learning.

Troubled by this lack of opportunity for continuous improvement of teaching, we began working with colleagues at UCLA to conduct several extensive research projects and develop processes that change the way US teachers engage in the study of their craft.

Over the last decade, while terms such as *collaborative inquiry*, *lesson study*, and *reflective practice* have grown in popularity, we've also observed how the depth and detail are "lost in translation." Many schools and districts adopt superficial aspects of these ideas, but at a deep level of school culture, they remain devalued and misunderstood. The underlying concepts and processes remain so loosely defined and broadly interpreted they rarely produce intended results. Instead, they function as buzz words that conceal depth and promise of powerful improvement activities.

In dozens of schools we visited across the nation we observed teachers engaged in collaborative settings, but their efforts were constrained by existing images of practice. Many settings labeled as "learning communities" had reduced collaboration to compliance-driven work, operational tasks, or loosely structured discussions, rather than meaningful learning opportunities to study and improve teaching. Some schools referred to "lesson study" and "inquiry teams" as grade-level or subject area meetings where teachers casually exchanged ideas and materials, but no time was spent intentionally planning or observing lessons to gather evidence of student learning.

Reframing Key Principles

One promising way to counteract these persistent images of practice is to move beyond "words" and provide educators with a compelling image or metaphor that helps to "reset" or "reframe" the activity. As Gallimore and Stigler explain, "Seeing that something can be completely different is one of the most effective ways of opening eyes to the ubiquity of cultural practices and creating the circumstances for change" (Gallimore & Stigler, 2003, p.27).

In effort to reset and reframe the depth and purpose of powerful ideas such as lesson study and collaborative inquiry, we collected and refined a series of seven instructive metaphors that illuminate the details for what that work can and should look like. Each metaphor teaches an essential principle of professional learning such as "balancing urgency with intentionality" or "matching bold ideas with an equal investment in details" (Ermeling & Graff-Ermeling, 2016, p. 3).

For example, a compelling image we learned for explaining the value of deeply planning, observing and reflecting on individual "research lessons" is the comparison to a rich drop of food coloring gradually diffusing through a container of water.

When an ordinary drop of colorless water is released into a container there is a momentary ripple effect but no lasting or discernible change in the water's properties or appearance. If multiple drops of ordinary, colorless water are added, the ripple effect lasts a few seconds longer and the volume of water increases, but there is still no lasting or significant change. By contrast, when a single drop of food



Photograph by high school student artist, Josh Carpenter, 2013. ©2015 Brad & Genevieve Ermeling.

coloring is added to the water, there is an observable change—a pervasive effect, that gradually spreads through the entire container. Over time, as additional drops are added, the water adopts a lasting, rich, indelible color.

A comparison of professional learning activities for teachers offers the same contrast of options. Like a container of water consisting of a vast quantity of water molecules, teaching involves an expansive range of knowledge and skills across a broad curriculum of standards and topics. In the United States, training events and activities aimed at helping teachers master this complex responsibility have traditionally focused on sporadic episodes of generic information and ideas which have a short-lived, superficial ripple-effect. With little opportunity for collaboration and no deliberate plan for application or follow-up, these events leave teachers with more resources and materials piled up on their shelves or filed away in hard drives, but seldom lead to substantial changes or improvements in teaching.

By contrast, the biology research lesson we described at the beginning of this article provides an example of a distinctly different approach used by Japanese educators to engage in collaborative, job-embedded reflection and inquiry. This kind of focused investigation requires a steady, concentrated effort on few key problems and lessons over time. Japanese teachers we worked with spent multiple years investigating a single research theme and worked persistently to revise and improve each research lesson through several iterations of planning and reflection. They worked for long hours, celebrated small improvements, and measured progress by what they learned, not by how quickly they achieved results. The end result, like the rich drop of food coloring, was a deep, pervasive knowledge that profoundly shaped our practice and had a lasting effect on decisions about teaching and learning.



Painting by high school student artist, Chelsea Madden, 2013. ©2015 Brad & Genevieve Ermeling.

Igniting Shared Vision

When carefully interleaved with direct experience or examples and combined with ongoing implementation support, instructive metaphors, such as the “rich drop of food coloring,” have proved to be invaluable teaching tools that help anchor underlying principles of continuous learning. They can be used at the building level or adapted for system-level leaders working to effect change at the building level. Possible use cases include: professional development seminars, faculty meetings, leadership team meetings, principal training events, teacher team meetings, university courses, and teacher induction settings.

Over time, we’ve also recruited several talented student artists to help us illustrate the metaphors and bring the images to life. One example from the “rich drop of food coloring” is included here. The student artist combined the image of food coloring with the image of a lightbulb to capture the underlying message of how steady, concentrated effort over time yields powerful “insight and inspiration.” The artwork both

extends and enriches the concept through vivid colors and symbolic representation. When displayed repeatedly over time in digital or printed form, it also stimulates memory of underlying key principles, igniting and sustaining shared vision across the school community.

Conclusion

When teaching writing, instructors often emphasize the importance of *showing* rather than *telling*--providing rich examples and details that clearly illustrate a key point, rather than simply stating the point and assuming the reader will connect the dots. The same axiom applies in teaching principles of professional learning unfamiliar to our culture. When combined with thoughtful leadership and well-designed models of implementation, metaphors help communities look beyond traditional models and broaden horizons of practice. They reframe our understanding of collaborative inquiry and present an alternative image of what schools might strive to become.

References

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