

Supporting Teacher Performance

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Introduction:

One of the biggest problems facing teachers within the educational environment is their level of isolation once they step inside the classroom. Teachers are generally very smart and resourceful, outgoing people. Yet they often find themselves stressed due to the demands of teaching and running a classroom, and find themselves with little time to juggle the roles of planning lessons, finding resources, handling classroom management issues, communicating with students, parents, and the community, and participating in school activities outside of teaching and learning endeavors. The questions that begs to be asked is why is this so? Why is supporting one's performance on the job so difficult, and time-consuming, when schools abound with resources and experts in all subject areas? The business world has developed fairly effective tools for knowledge and information management and performance support, so why are teachers still so isolated when they enter the classroom? How can the lessons learned from the business community be applied to enhance the performance of teachers on the job? Answering

these questions requires a look at exactly what is involved in the job performance of teachers, what types of tools, people and resources teachers rely upon to perform effectively, and what existing and possible resources could help to create an ideal environment for teachers to work in. Analyzing these factors creates a framework for discussing how educators can adapt principles that have been adopted by business.

Teacher Performance on the Job:

It is impossible to define the performance or duties of all teachers. Teachers' jobs are as varied as the number of teachers currently working. However, there are many similar types of duties performed by all teachers. From my own experience as a English Language Arts classroom teacher, those duties or performances can be broken down into a number of distinct primary categories, including lesson planning, finding learning resources, testing and exam creation, evaluation, classroom management, and maintaining a personal web site. Each of these primary categories can be broken down into more specific sub-categories, describing exactly what is usually involved in my performance as a teacher.

Lesson planning, one of the most time-consuming areas of my performance as a classroom teacher, particularly considering that I am fairly new to the profession, involves a number of subcategories (Kemp, Morrison, and Ross, 1998; Shuell, 1986). Planning lessons involves working with curriculum objectives, learning outcomes and Essential Graduation Learnings (*APEF*, 2000). It also involves thought and planning to insure that lessons encompass such things as multiple intelligence, and learning and teaching styles (*Adult Multiple Intelligences*, 2000; Campbell and Campbell, 1993; Disney, 2003; Driscoll, 1994; Haywood, *n.d.*). Finally, considering the current work environment into which my students will eventually

graduate, the integration of constructivist learning theory, and constructivist learning activities, must be taken into account (Kemp, Morrison, and Ross, 1998; Shuell, 1986).

Once lessons are planned, and oftentimes before the planning process even begins, learning resources must be either found or developed. This category of my teaching job performance can be further broken down into sub-categories such as supplementing students' textbooks with hardcopy or online materials, and finding or developing online and offline learning activities. Finding learning resources can also be broken down into such sub-categories as locating and acquiring such resources as computer labs, TV's and VCR's, overhead projectors, tape recorders and players, and such.

My teaching performance goes beyond simply planning learning activities. It also involves testing and exam creation. This performance category can be sub-divided into such tasks as formatting tests and exams, and finding or developing test items such as questions, or unseen reading passages.

As an extension of testing and exam creation, my teaching performance includes the category of evaluation. This category can be sub-divided into tasks including the development of course and unit marking schemes, finding or developing evaluation rubrics, and collecting and evaluating students' tests and assignments.

As with all teachers, part of my job performance includes classroom management. This is often a time-consuming and daunting task, especially for newer, less experienced teachers. This task can be sub-divided into two distinct categories, including finding, developing and implementing proactive classroom management strategies, and the reactive task of dealing with discipline issues.

The final task category, which I have included amongst my teaching performance, is maintaining a personal web site. This is not a category that applies to all teachers. However, I consider it to be an essential element of my job performance, providing me with a means of communicating with parents and students outside of class time or personal meetings, and providing my students with round-the-clock access to learning resources, assignments, and important course information. This job performance category can be sub-divided as well, with specific tasks including designing and developing my personal web site, and maintaining the site with current and accurate information and resources.

Performance Support on the Job:

While teachers are relatively isolated once they step inside the classroom, and oftentimes during their endeavors outside of class hours, they are not without resources upon which they rely in order to perform their teaching tasks. These resources include data, information and knowledge, as well as the tools and people they turn to for help on a regular basis. Describing and understanding these resources is essential before discussing what resources could be used, and how business-tried practices could be adapted to help make performance support for teachers more effective.

Teachers, such as myself, deal with a wealth of data on an almost daily basis. This data is used to help in virtually all aspects of our task performance. Student grades and attendance records are just two examples of this type of data. Without these data, it would be impossible to effectively evaluate students, keep track of student efforts, or plan effective teaching and learning strategies. These data are also essential for teachers in order to communicate effectively with students' parents, and plan to meet the specific needs of the students we teach.

Teachers also rely on a wide variety of information in order to perform their jobs. Some examples of this information are provincial or regional curriculum guides, course descriptions, and the teachers' manuals that often accompany course textbooks (*APEF*, 2000). Individual Support Services Plans (Department of Education, 2000) and behavior or discipline reports are examples of yet more information that teachers rely upon to effectively meet the needs of individual students. Essential information is often distributed within school departments, such as the English Department, within the entire school, throughout school districts, and even to schools throughout entire provinces. And oftentimes teachers, such as myself, turn to information contained in articles, journals, on the Internet, and in supplementary texts, that can help us to more effectively perform our teaching tasks.

Knowledge is more specific than either data or information (Barclay and Murray, 1997; Eckhouse, 1999; Lindsey-King, 2000), and is essential to effectively performing teaching duties. Teachers rely on knowledge such as best practices for teaching specific subject matter, handling classroom management issues, dealing with individual students, and who exactly to turn to if there is a problem. The knowledge that teachers such as myself rely upon comes in the form of practical personal experience, but can also be found in the advice of colleagues, previously developed lesson plans, and the work and theories of educational researchers.

There are a wide variety of tools that teachers turn to for help in performing their jobs. These tools can range from course textbooks to subject matter books written specifically for teachers, videotapes, overhead projectors, tape recorders and players, photocopiers, computers, the Internet, Internet search engines, online databases, school learning resource centers, and public and university libraries, to name a few.

Finally, one of the most valuable resources that teachers turn to for performance support are people. Teachers often turn to their colleagues, a specifically assigned teaching mentor, school learning resource personnel, computer technicians, school administrators, district specialists, students, and even parents.

An Ideal Environment:

To be fair, a number of resources do exist that have the potential to make it easier to perform the tasks of teachers on the job (Bennett and Metros, 2001; Cisco Systems, Inc., April 2000; Wiley, David A., 2001). Oftentimes, though, these resources are either underutilized by teachers, or are not utilized at all (Murphy and LaFerriere, 2002; St. Arnaud, 2001). One of the reasons for this is a lack of familiarity with the resources themselves (*Ibid*). Another is the difficulty in getting exactly what teachers need to find from these resources, and ensuring that what teachers get from these resources meets their specific needs, and is compatible with their teaching and learning context (*Ibid*). Some of the resources that are currently available can be quite useful, but they are often too broad-based or generalized, and lack a focus on the needs of teachers in specific contexts, subject areas, and school boards (*Ibid*).

Among the resources that I have found, and have used on occasion, are specifically designed teachers' resource web sites. There are a number of these out there, some of which are free to use, others that require paid memberships (Bennett and Metros, 2001; Cisco Systems, Inc., April 2000; Wiley, David A., 2001). These sites often include resources ranging from ready-made lesson plans to web-based learning activities, lists of supplementary resources and information on how to get them, ready-made evaluation rubrics or rubric building tools, and even advice on classroom management issues. Other useful resources that have the potential to make

job performance easier for teachers include software applications such as WinSchool, the web sites or online catalogues for educational resource distributors, shareware web sites, and library databases. One of the more powerful groups tools designed specifically for educators are digital repositories, such as MERLOT, which make it easy to search for and acquire thousands of ready-made digital learning objects in virtually every subject area (*MERLOT*, 2002).

While resources such as these have great potential, they are underutilized for such reasons as their lack of reference to specific school boards and curriculum outcomes, their lack of the best designs for ease-of-use, and the general lack of knowledge of their existence, and power, amongst educators (Murphy and LaFerriere, 2002; St. Arnaud, 2001). They are out there, but they are not readily accessible. Oftentimes teachers who want to avail of such resources have to actually find them before they can search them for the resources that they need to use in their classrooms (*Ibid.*). In an ideal environment for teachers, these resources, along with the expertise of teaching colleagues, and the data, information and knowledge upon which teachers so heavily rely, would be accessible with minimal effort. They would all be tied together in a single online resource, connecting teachers with the knowledge, tools, and people that they need, when they actually need them. Having these things connected by a system that is both easy to access and easy to use could eliminate many of the problems faced by teachers in their efforts to perform their day-to-day activities.

Knowledge Management, Performance-Centered Design, Performance Support Systems, and Supporting Teachers' Performance on the Job:

Creating the ideal wellspring of resources to help teachers improve their on-the-job performance sounds like a daunting task. But it need not be. The types of systems that could

make this possible have already been developed, and are already in use in the business sector (Barclay and Murray, 1997; Dickelman, n.d., 1995, 1996; Eckhouse, 1999; Gery, 1998; Lindsey-King, 2000; Marion 1997; Raybould, 1995; Sherry and Wilson 1996; Slater, 1998; Turban, 1993). These systems incorporate the concepts of knowledge management and performance-centered design, and the principles of performance support systems.

Knowledge management is a concept developed as a result of the rapid growth and spread of information technology, and the need for businesses to become more competitive in an information age (Barclay and Murray, 1997; Lindsey-King, 2000; Slater, 1998). The concept of knowledge management involves developing systems to control and distribute knowledge capital within an organization. This knowledge capital goes beyond just data and information resources, and incorporates the explicit, tacit and cultural knowledge within an organization, such as a business or a school. Knowledge management tries to acquire, organize and distribute knowledge, so as to help individuals and the organization as a whole to have better access to the specific knowledge that they need, thus improving both the individuals' and the organizations' overall performance (*Ibid.*). In short, it seeks to make sense out of the ever-expanding wealth of knowledge that is available. Such an ever-expanding wealth of knowledge is as much a reality in the field of education as it is in the business sector.

Knowledge management was adopted by the business sector to help improve the performance of individuals who were once isolated from the wealth of appropriate knowledge that is now at their easy disposal (*Ibid.*). Adopting the concept of knowledge management could help to make life a lot easier for teachers, as well. Many teachers are currently isolated once they step inside the classroom, lacking access to the invaluable tacit and cultural knowledge held by their more experienced peers. Too often teachers waste valuable time 're-inventing the wheel'

when it comes to such things as lesson planning, finding resources, evaluation, and classroom management. Why should teachers be burdened with such re-invention when that knowledge has already been gained, and refined, by countless of their peers? Acquiring such knowledge from teachers who have already met with success would be the start of a process towards providing an easily accessible resource that any teacher could use to reduce stress, and increase productivity in the performance of day-to-day tasks. This knowledge should include the best explicit, tacit and cultural knowledge available covering all of the categories of job performance that teachers are involved with (*Ibid.*).

Acquiring, organizing, and distributing this knowledge may appear to be an overwhelming endeavor, but knowledge management practitioners from the business sector have already laid the groundwork for success in the field of education (*Ibid.*). One key to successfully providing such a resource is to look at the successes of the business sector, and to adapt their concepts and methods to meet the particular needs of educators (*Ibid.*). Another key to success is to consider the concept of performance-centered design.

As previously notes, there are a number of good resources already at the disposal of teachers. Many of these are not used to their potential, however, because they lack the accessibility and design needed to make them efficient and convenient to use (Murphy and LaFerriere, 2002). Performance-centered design is a concept developed within the business sector that espouses designing technology, particularly computer software applications, that could be put to effective use from day one, without requiring users to undergo extensive previous training (Dickelman, n.d., 1995, 1996; Gery, 1998; Marion 1997). In fact, the preference is for the knowledge management system to be designed in such a way that the users require no prior training at all (*Ibid.*). The secret to achieving this is to incorporate software designs from the

end-user's perspective, rather than basing the design on technical requirements (*Ibid.*). The user's interface should resemble the actual task at hand, so that completing that task is enhanced, or made easier, rather than hindered by using the software (*Ibid.*). The idea is that the software is a tool to enable performance, and the ability to use the software should not be counted amongst the tasks to be performed (*Ibid.*).

This concept is perfectly suited to the needs of teachers with regards to a knowledge management, or performance support system. Teachers often lack the time needed for training in how to use a new software system, and many are reluctant to participate in such training on account of more pressing needs. If teachers are willing to give such new systems a try, they do not have the time to be burdened with figuring out exactly where to find the information or resources that they need (*Ibid.*). The actual demands of their job – the tasks that they must perform – are of such a nature that they cannot be distracted or burdened down by an unnecessarily complicated software system (*Ibid.*). In other words, they will simply find what they need elsewhere, or come up with yet another new solution on their own. However, if the system incorporates performance-centered design, any teacher who accesses the system will be able to look at the interface and know exactly what they have to do to accomplish a task (*Ibid.*). It would mirror how they already perform their job, and thus be self-explanatory (*Ibid.*). And it would put them instantly in touch with any knowledge, or other resources, that they would need for the types of tasks that they normally perform in the run of a teaching day (*Ibid.*). In addition, performance-centered design provides easy to understand, easy to access help (*Ibid.*). One of the benefits of well-utilized performance-centered design is that such help rarely needs to be accessed, because of the simplicity and logic in the design of the system – however, the help is

there if needed (*Ibid.*). The system would intuitively know the right place to look to find an answer for the teacher, or the right person to put the teacher in contact with.

What is needed to enhance the performance of teachers in their tasks is a performance support system (Eckhouse, 1999; Gery, 1998; Raybould, 1995; Sherry and Wilson 1996; Slater, 1998; Turban, 1993). Performance support systems have been developed within the business community as a means to achieve the aims of knowledge and resource management, and incorporate the principles of performance-centered design, allowing individuals and entire organizations to improve their productivity (*Ibid.*). Such systems require no training before use. They draw upon the task-specific knowledge of the user, so that they act as tools enabling users to perform their tasks without hindrance (*Ibid.*). They also provide users with access to the right data, information, knowledge, tools, and help, exactly when they need it (*Ibid.*). Performance support systems are not just knowledge management tools – they put users in touch with the right tools, resources, colleagues, and expert help (*Ibid.*). Performance support systems, ideally, should include such criteria as immediate accessibility, no need for further training, accurate depiction of the task at hand through tools and artifacts that mirror the real-world expectations of the user, user-appropriate support, when needed, minimal but adequate information, and simplicity or transparency of use (*Ibid.*). Again, these criteria would make such a system ideal for helping teachers to perform their day-to-day tasks. Teachers, if they are going to utilize such a resource, do not have time to fool around with it. They need their information and resources right away. They need access to the right resources, and the right help, exactly when they need it. The system must be easy to use, and based on what teachers would naturally expect to encounter in the performance of their tasks (*Ibid.*). And using the system should be not only simple – it should become transparent (*Ibid.*). They just use the resource, without thinking about

it, the same way that they would pick up a piece of chalk and use it exactly when needed. The added bonus to using a performance support system that integrates performance-centered design and the principles of knowledge management, is that such a system would not only be convenient – it would be self-expanding (*Ibid.*). Users could easily input their own new knowledge and resources, allowing other teachers to avail of their expertise. The end result would be an end to the isolation of teachers within their classrooms, and to the practice of constantly ‘re-inventing the wheel.’

Conclusion

Isolation once teachers step inside the classroom has been a problem for educators for far too long. Teachers are generally very smart, resourceful and outgoing people. So why do they not share their knowledge, wisdom, and resources more freely? Resources have been developed to help teachers do just that, but oftentimes these resources have not really met the needs of professional educators. The result is that many teachers continue to duplicate the efforts, and ignore the expertise of so many of their colleagues. This is a problem that was long ago recognized within the business sector, and concepts and systems were developed to overcome it (Barclay and Murray, 1997; Dickelman, n.d., 1995, 1996; Eckhouse, 1999; Gery, 1998; Lindsey-King, 2000; Marion 1997; Raybould, 1995; Sherry and Wilson 1996; Slater, 1998; Turban, 1993). The idea of knowledge management was recognized as essential to insure competitiveness (Barclay and Murray, 1997; Lindsey-King, 2000; Slater, 1998). Performance-centered design was embraced as essential to improving individual and organizational performance from day one (Dickelman, n.d., 1995, 1996; Gery, 1998; Marion 1997). And performance support systems have been developed to provide individuals with everything they

need to perform their daily tasks, and access the right resources and help at exactly the right moment (Eckhouse, 1999; Gery, 1998; Raybould, 1995; Sherry and Wilson 1996; Slater, 1998; Turban, 1993). These concepts could be adapted for the field of education, helping teachers to overcome the barriers to sharing knowledge, wisdom and resources, allowing them to utilize these resources with minimal effort, and allowing them to contribute to the success of the colleagues everywhere by helping to build the system itself, through their own contributions.

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