1 Introduction to Learnership

For the last eight years, I have been a full-time consultant, workshop leader, conference speaker, and author, building on 30 years of teaching and leading in education. I have had the privilege of working with thousands of educators throughout the United States and beyond, and my respect for my colleagues has only grown stronger. However, I have noticed something peculiar: The conversations about students, schools, and our work as educators often omit the topic of learning! I know that, were I to ask, educators would universally claim learning as the result they sought, yet in day-to-day practice and conversation we are often distracted by other matters, such as testing, behavior management, committee work, and the politics of education.

With this insight, I paid even closer attention and recognized that some of the problems we face as educators are *caused* by the lack of attention to learning. For instance, some students' lack of engagement in school may result from the fact that they are not learning anything of relevance and no one seems to notice. Some teachers' panic about upcoming required tests may lie in the fact that they really don't know what their students have learned up until that point. The chronic failure of certain students may result from their teachers' attention to what they have not yet learned rather than what they have and are learning. And the failure of many leaders' attempts to implement professional learning teams (PLTs) in their schools sometimes comes from the fact that little teacher learning occurs in those PLTs.

I am always cautious about any claim to have *the* answer for the woes that afflict the field of education, and I don't want to fall into that trap myself. More attention to learning won't solve *all* the problems facing *all* educators. However, it will help with many. Moreover, attention to learning will address a problem that may be the biggest obstacle to addressing the others: It will help teachers and principals focus on what matters once again.

Putting the focus on learning is different than putting a focus on instruction. Instruction is how teachers behave; learning is how students are changed. Instruction is about performance; learning is about shifts in students' makeup. Instruction emphasizes what we do; learning emphasizes what we know and who we are.

When the emphasis is on learning, the goal of principals is no longer to be instructional leaders but rather to be learning leaders. Principals who are instructional leaders look at what can be observed in teachers' behaviors; principals who are learning leaders focus on the changes in teachers and students as a result of what they have learned. As instructional leaders, principals are expected to apply one common understanding of "best practice" to situations across the school; as learning leaders, principals are open to myriad efforts that promote learning. When instruction is the focus, teachers sometimes "go through the motions" to please their principals; when learning is the focus, teachers routinely engage in efforts to support student learning and welcome the principal's participation.

When test scores are low and the emphasis is on instruction, teachers are told to change instructional practices; when test scores are low and the emphasis is on learning, teachers are told to ask questions and look more closely at other signs of student learning. When principals meet with teachers about low test scores in an instruction-focused environment, principals are expected to come up with better practices for teachers or to send those teachers to workshops where they will learn better practices; when principals and teachers in a learning-focused environment meet to discuss test scores, they inquire into the learning that is reflected by test scores and the learning that is not reflected by those scores.

Schools that focus on instruction as the key to success seek out the *program* that will solve all instructional problems; schools that focus on learning seek out *teachers* who are effective in influencing student learning. Schools focused on instruction look for practices to be implemented uniformly across classroom settings; schools focused on learning seek ever-expanding possibilities for how to influence learning more significantly. Schools that attend to instruction focus on test scores as significant

markers of instructional effectiveness; schools attending to learning focus on myriad signs that learning is taking place, with test scores considered as *one* of those signs.

When teachers, principals, and district administrators focus on learning as the center of their work, they exhibit *learnership.* Learnership is leadership that is learning focused. The term means that those involved are reflective about how they are learners themselves and that they attend to the learning of others as their primary duty. Here are two stories that will illustrate what learnership is and isn't.

FELICIA ROBERTSON, WASHINGTON INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL

The teachers and principal of Washington Intermediate School focus on learnership. As a language arts teacher there, Felicia Robertson is constantly noting what her students have learned and are learning. Now, in November, she is aware that five of her fifth-grade students are struggling as writers. Felicia tunes in more closely to understand those students' learning even further, using several tactics. First, she takes an even closer look at these students' work and asks another language arts teacher to help her do so. Together, they examine writing samples of the students, using a district rubric as a tool for gauging whether the samples reflect increased writing proficiency. This process helps Felicia see that two of the five students are indeed learning more as writers, but the learning seems less significant than she would like it to be. Felicia perceives that the writing of the other three has shown little change over time.

Felicia decides to focus first on the three whose writing growth seems stalled. She asks her colleague to help her brainstorm hypotheses about what might be going on for those three and to think of ways to gather information to test those hypotheses (Stephens & Story, 1999). One of the students has an individual education plan (IEP) for a learning disability, leading to a hypothesis that her writing struggles are related. Two of the students are boys, causing Felicia to speculate that gender might be interfering with their writing success. For all three students, Felicia has several hypotheses, including, they just don't like to write, past negative writing experiences are interfering, the writing workshop format is difficult for these students, and these students do not benefit from minilessons she provides.

Felicia and her colleague develop ideas for how these hypotheses could be tested, such as interviews, analysis of writing samples from previous

years, review of the students' cumulative folders, conversation with the special education resource teacher, conversations with the students' parents, class observation during writing workshop, and focused conversations with these students immediately after minilessons.

Over the next two weeks, Felicia collects evidence and tests hypotheses. She takes her findings to a meeting of her PLT, and the members of that team help her make sense of what she has learned. At about the same time, she has her bimonthly meeting with Janelle Chesterfield, the building principal. Janelle regularly asks Felicia what she is learning about her students and how it is making a difference in relation to student learning, so this is a perfect opportunity for Felicia to think about these three students with Janelle as well. As a result of her conversations with the PLT and with Janelle, Felicia develops a plan of action, as outlined in Figure 1.1.

Felicia uses this chart to steer her efforts toward helping the three students in question. In fact, she even shares the chart with the students themselves and asks them to think about whether it will help them learn more successfully. In addition, Felicia and her PLT discuss her efforts at the next meeting; the team gives her encouragement and suggestions for tweaking one of her tactics. And when Felicia meets in January with Janelle for her next principal-teacher conversation, Felicia discusses the improved learning of these three students. Meanwhile, she adds to her focus the two students whose writing is moving along slowly. In these ways, she engages the process of continuous improvement in both her learning and her support of her students' learning.

Figure 1.1 Felicia's Plan for Improving the Writing Success of Three Students

Task	*Desired Outcome*	*Tools to Assess Learning*
Provide guided writing group for all three students	Students will learn concepts introduced in minilessons	Student writing assignments will show improvement in 50% of guided writing topic areas
Develop a guys-only writing club with Bob Findley, parent and writer for local paper	Students 2 and 3 will join club and develop enthusiasm for writing	Survey of students' writing attitudes will show ratings of four or above on a five-point scale
Offer these three students a quieter space for writing during workshop time	Students will focus more on their writing	Writing rubric will score students' work as three or four in identified areas

GORDON FIELDING, CENTERVILLE HIGH SCHOOL

Gordon Fielding is respected as a successful history teacher with 20 years' experience at Centerville High. For the last three years, the staff at Centerville has focused its attention on data-driven decision making and writing across the curriculum. Toward this end, each department meets monthly to review data about the students and every staff professional development day is devoted to strategies for writing in all classrooms. Gordon now has his students write something for every chapter in the textbook; sometimes they write summaries, sometimes an extended answer to one of the end-of-chapter questions, sometimes something creative such as a diary entry or letter by a historical figure. Gordon uses the writing samples as well as end-of-unit test scores as his data with which he makes decisions about his instruction. At the monthly department meetings, he and his colleagues share ideas about what they might do differently. For instance, Gordon's students scored low on the end-of-unit test on the Industrial Revolution, and he picked up an idea from a colleague that next year when he teaches this topic, he might show a particular video on the era, available in the school library.

Gordon receives positive reviews on the principal's evaluations. Gordon likes to provide a dynamic lecture on the day when the principal comes in; Gordon's lively discussion of the particular historic era, supplemented by his corny history teacher jokes, amuses the principal. In addition, Gordon always has the students engage in small-group discussion when the principal is there; he knows that student interaction is prized by the principal. The principal also lauds Gordon for having students write something for every chapter in the textbook, given that this effort shows compliance with the school goal.

Over the years, Gordon has noted that kids care less and less about U.S. history. Given that 50% of the students at Centerville High are college bound, Gordon can get enough of his students to aim for good grades, so his students do well enough overall. However, the kids rarely read the textbook on their own, so Gordon has to provide more and more clever ways to tell them what is in the book. In addition, the 50% of students who are not college bound seem less and less motivated to pay attention or to do the writing assignments. Gordon increasingly asks his colleagues for ideas about how to get the kids to write; lately he has had them write in pairs and has put increased emphasis on creativity rather than historic accuracy.

Gordon's energy as a teacher is waning. He feels like there are only so many tricks he can use to get his students to write, and he regrets that he does not have many students excited about history in the way he was as a

teenager. Gordon developed his interest in history when listening to his grandfather tell stories about World War II, and this interest was augmented by the fascinating artifacts in Centerville's local history museum, which used to be in the basement of the public library but was closed years ago because of lack of funding. Gordon tries to think of ways to excite his students, always looking for new stories or jokes to tell, but he just doesn't know what he is doing wrong. He can't seem to connect with students any more.

Gordon takes a risk and tells his principal about these frustrations, and the principal responds with reassurances. "Gordon, you are doing great. You give dynamic lessons, you have the kids interact with one another, and you provide writing in the content area. These are all best practices. You are being too hard on yourself. Keep up the good work!"

When Gordon has trouble sleeping, he sometimes thinks about his most struggling students. He sees their faces in the dark as he tosses and turns, each student looking confused or, well, checked out. Some of these kids are English language learners (ELL), from whom he hears hardly a peep; Gordon doesn't want to call on them and embarrass them if their English is not good. These kids don't do well on the writing assignments and their end-of-unit scores are so-so at best. Gordon has no idea what is going on in their minds. Most of the other strugglers are African American males, and Gordon feels even more perplexed, as a European-American, about how to reach these students. He tries to bring the African American experience into his history lessons, but when he does, he cannot read the expressions on the faces of his African American students; are they appreciative or is that resentment in their look? Several of these students are failing history and Gordon doesn't know what to do.

Lately, Gordon has been talking with his neighbor, an insurance agent. On some days, Gordon thinks that a change of career would be a good move.

THE DIFFERENCE

A variety of factors cause teachers, students, and schools to differ. Certainly, personalities come into play, as do variations in school curricula, differences among students' backgrounds, the styles of principals, and many other characteristics that make one school or classroom distinct from another. In the previous two stories, the difference I'd like to focus on is learnership. Felicia Robertson and Janelle Chesterfield practice learnership, as evidenced by these aspects of their story:

- Felicia tunes in to each of her students and learns about each of them as individuals.
- Felicia understands her students' learning by looking closely at learning evidence.
- Felicia and her colleagues learn together in their PLT.
- Janelle focuses on Felicia's learning and the learning of Felicia's students in her meetings with Felicia.
- Felicia seeks evidence of learning by using a variety of tools. Felicia is specific about how learning will be manifested using each tool.
- Felicia includes the students in thinking about their learning and how it might be improved.

On the other hand, Gordon Fielding and his principal do not practice learnership. Their focus is on best practices and trends in the profession. If learnership were at the heart of Gordon's work, he would do the following:

- Tune in and learn in detail about his students, especially the ones about which he feels concern.
- Discuss student learning—not teaching practices—with his colleagues.
- Discuss with his principal what he (Gordon) is learning about his students and how that makes a difference for their learning, rather than getting shallow encouragements when he tries to tell the principal about his concerns.
- Consider how writing might enhance student learning, rather than how writing activities will produce the required quota of assignments.
- Collect a greater variety of evidence of student learning, rather than one writing assignment and one end-of-chapter test.
- Get feedback from department colleagues to help him enhance student learning *now*, rather than receiving a suggestion about next year.

Felicia and Gordon are both teachers who want to succeed in helping students learn, and their principals are doing their best to help them. However, the difference for Felicia is a focus on learning—hers and her students'—and the tools to make a difference. The learnership

practices at Washington Intermediate lead to vastly different experiences and outcomes for Felicia and her colleagues.

Learnership ensures that students learn with greater success because teachers and administrators are learning more. Learnership returns the focus to what this educational enterprise is all about: learning. Learnership puts mandated tests in the proper perspective. Learnership enables principals to accomplish the goals they set out with. Learnership enhances success in schools—success for students, yes, and for teachers and administrators as well. And learnership leaves educators feeling sane and successful, not hopeless and downtrodden.

The tasks of learnership require one to notice learning when it occurs and inquire when it does not. In addition, learnership requires a sound foundation of how learning occurs and how it is influenced by others. Learnership includes using educational coaching and PLTs to enhance teacher learning and benefits from principal leadership focused on learning as well. And learnership requires a perspective on test scores that uses them for what they have to offer and focuses on other measures of learning for a more complete picture.

It's time to begin bringing learnership to your work. Let's jump in!