



Just for the ASKing!

by Bruce Oliver

November 2004 *Just for the ASKing!* is a monthly column that addresses the needs of instructional leaders, particularly building level administrators. Each month, this column provides information, insights, and suggestions that help administrators as they strive to be instructional leaders in schools. The monthly columns cover a wide array of topics, including: improving achievement for all students, the importance of active learning, establishing and maintaining a collaborative culture, and looking at data beyond the numbers.

**Volume I
Issue II**

Meaningful and Valuable Faculty Meetings



Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop.

As a veteran principal, I clearly understand that a principal's typical day is unpredictable, and filled with multiple stops and starts. It is not uncommon for a principal to check the day's "to-do" list long after everyone has gone home only to find that most items on the list were never addressed. Student issues, stacks of memos and directives, surprise phone calls from the central office or a parent, test data, e-mails, teacher conferences, building problems - these responsibilities often take considerable time. Amid all the interruptions and demands, it is easy for a school leader to lose sight of his or her primary responsibility to be an instructional leader.

As the instructional leader of the school, it is essential for the principal to know as much as possible about what constitutes the best instruction, and to ensure the teaching staff is utilizing proven best practices. The principal must be seen by everyone as knowledgeable, competent, and well-informed.

As a principal, I was responsible for planning faculty meetings that were meaningful and valuable enough to take the time of the teaching staff. Gathering the teachers for a series of administrative announcements that could easily be conveyed in a memo or an e-mail simply was not the best use of a teacher's time.

The challenge I found was to plan well, to model good instructional practices, and to structure meetings that allowed the staff members to actively engage in the learning strategy I was modeling. As I planned my meetings, my goal was to have the teachers transfer the learning activity I was modeling into their teaching.

My goal as a principal was always to be at the forefront of good instructional practices and to promote those practices among the staff. However, I frequently found the "urgent" (interruptions throughout the day) often took over the "important" (instructional leadership) I wanted to address.

I was pleasantly surprised one day to see a copy of Paula Rutherford's *Leading the Learning: A Field Guide for Supervisors, Coaches & Mentors*. The shelves in my office were already filled with educational

publications, so I was leery this would be one more book I might not get to, or that it would be so philosophical and impractical it would not provide me with any substantive ideas I could really use. When I opened Paula's book, I was pleasantly surprised to discover how user friendly it was. In the very first section of the book were two sections entitled "Collaboration and Job-Embedded Learning" and "Masterful and Meaningful Meetings." What followed was a compendium of 18 ideas under the heading of Strategies for Meaningful Meetings. The purposes of the strategies were clearly stated, along with step-by-step directions as to how to address the topic. Each topic was transferable by the teachers to their classrooms.

One of my favorite strategies to get faculty members involved in a meeting was called "Graffiti" (Page 21 describing Graffiti from *Leading the Learning* is at the end of this newsletter) I began by placing sheets of large chart paper around the meeting room with topics identified at the top of each page. I then divided the faculty into small groups of four to five. In their groups, they moved to a chart and responded to the topic by writing a response or two with a marker. After a few minutes, I asked each group to move to the next chart and record their thoughts. As each group moved to the next chart, they were able to read the responses from previous groups and then record their own ideas. After everyone had a chance to read and respond to all topics, they returned to their tables and processed the trends, patterns and implications they saw in the charts. Topics can be varied but may include such ideas as successful discipline strategies, getting students to complete homework, addressing varied learning styles of students, what to do when students do not learn content the first time, and ways to differentiate instruction.

Another strategy that can help to make meetings more meaningful is called "Stir the Faculty." The purpose of the strategy is to access prior knowledge on a topic, to validate current best practices and to promote collegial collaboration. I started by distributing a data collection sheet to each faculty member. The sheet contained spaces for twenty responses. Each faculty member started by writing down three responses to the topic in the first three blanks on the data sheet. At a signal, everyone moved around the room collecting and giving ideas to other faculty members until their sheets are full.

It is important to have participants move around the room and not simply remain in one place. After participants return to their tables, they can compare lists, prioritize the responses, or select two or three ideas they would like to try with their students. The topics for the "Stir the Faculty" activity should be purposeful and add to the teachers' repertoire of teaching strategies. Topics may include such ideas as ways to assign/check homework, strategies for doing pre-assessments, ways to summarize at the end of a lesson, or ideas to promote inclusion of all students in the learning.

As I delved further into *Leading the Learning*, I found many useful and practical ideas. The book was well organized and included suggestions to help teachers plan, implement and assess instruction; ideas to promote the inclusive classroom; multiple methods of data collection as evidence that teaching AND learning had taken place; the power of "walk-through" observations; and suggestions for conferencing with and addressing the varying needs and skills of faculty members. The more I read, the more I liked what I read because the ideas made sense to me. I returned to *Leading the Learning* again and again and I always found some new insight or idea that helped me carry out the responsibilities of my job.

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Graffiti

Purposes

- To capture the thinking and reactions of the staff to multiple ideas or aspects of the same idea
- To have staff members quickly see the opinions, reactions, or concerns of other staff members
- To have staff members process a great deal of information with movement and conversation

Process

- Write quotes, prompts, questions, or areas of concern (one to a chart) on large sheets of chart paper and post them around the room. Alternatively, you can tape 8½" x 11" sheets of paper to the middle of large sheets of chart paper.
- Have small groups of 4-5 begin work at different charts.
- Have them respond to the topic or title of the chart by writing responses or **Graffiti**, which can be short words, phrases, or graphics on the chart paper.
- After the allotted time period, have staff members move to the next chart.
- Repeat the process until all groups have reacted to all charts.
- Have staff members process the patterns, trends, and implications for their practice from what is written on the charts.

Possibilities

- Top Ten Questions I Ask Myself When I Design Lessons (See page 36 in *Instruction for All Students*).
- See pages 35-36 for an example of how one school staff used **Graffiti** to generate **Look Fors** and **Listen Fors** in a Standards-Based Classroom.

