

Why do we need five steps?

Research shows that staff training often does not change teaching

A review of research carried out by Joyce and Showers shows that the traditional model of staff training has no effect on the classroom practice of the participants. Despite this fatal blow the old staff-training model staggers on in many colleges; but if teaching is to improve we must first change our training practice.

The good news is that training can impact very markedly on teaching, but only if that training follows a certain design. The irony is that the design required is that of good teaching:

Theory: explain and justify the new approach

Demo: Show/model how it can be done in practice

Practice: let the teachers try doing it this new way

Feedback: give the teachers feedback on their use of the new way

Coaching: help teachers work out what to do next to improve their new approach

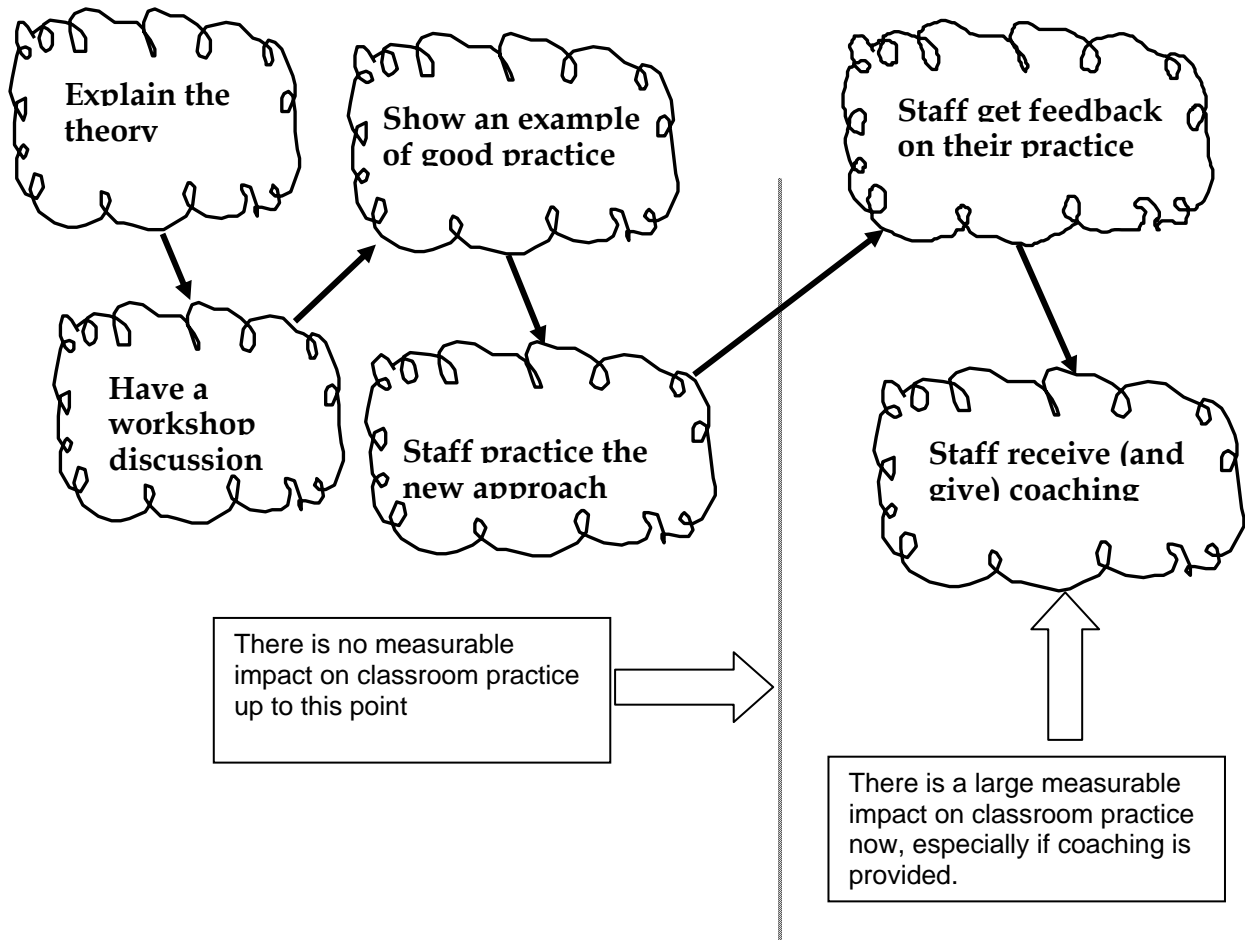
It seems that teachers learn to improve their teaching in much the same way as learners learn, say, to improve their problem solving in trigonometry. By didactic methods certainly, but mostly from corrected practice with feedback and help (coaching). Surely we teachers should always have known this? We all know that it is only when we begin to apply our learning that the real difficulties, and the real learning starts.

Yet if you look at most staff training sessions they often only provide the theory, and if we are lucky, some examples of good practice: that is 'the demo'. The trainer may use active methods to teach the theory, but there is no requirement that the participants apply the new ideas in their own teaching, let alone that they get the vital feedback and coaching on their change of practice.

Joyce and Showers studied 200 In Service Education and Training (INSET) programmes for teachers, each of which was designed with the specific aim of changing classroom practice. They found that even when teachers were given an opportunity to practice the new approach they quickly slipped back into their customary practice after a few trials. Perhaps their most telling and disturbing finding was that teachers could be very enthusiastic about training, fill out their happy sheets with glowing phrases, and leave the session radiating resolve. But a few weeks later they had crept back into their comfort zone, and reverted to their old practice.

This was not laziness, or even the distraction of other priorities, though the marking pile and knee-deep in-tray can hardly have helped. It was not even their reluctance to change, but the lack of feedback and coaching. We all know that when we are taking risks and doing things differently things never work perfectly first time. We need an opportunity to check whether we are doing it right, and a chance to adapt our practice to make it work better. A few teachers can do this for themselves, but most of us need a structured opportunity or this follow up on our practice. This feedback and coaching does not need to be provided by the trainer, staff can support each other.

Joyce and Showers: A review of 200 INSET programmes showing that training design determines whether training will be implemented.



By 'feedback' Joyce and Showers mean information for the teacher on the effectiveness of their implementation of the new strategies. This could be provided by an observation, though this may not be easy to arrange. Alternatively the teacher may simply describe how they are implementing the new approach, and what happened as a result, including both positive and negative outcomes, preferably with some documentation or other evidence, and some thoughts on the difficulties that they encountered. This will often be enough for fellow teachers to give the teacher some support and help. Other evidence that can help colleagues provide feedback are: a video or tape of the lesson; student's work; students' views on the new approach; etc.

'Coaching' involves using feedback to provide the teacher with any extra help they might need to implement the new strategy. New strategies rarely work perfectly first time and coaching provides the experimenting teacher with some help with their difficulties, and some idea about 'what to do next'. The devil is in the detail when implementing most teaching strategies, and context is very important. What works for one class may fail in another. Approaches need to adapt to the nature of the students, the subject matter, and to other contextual factors.

Who should provide this feedback? Coaching can be carried out by a mutual self-support group, or can be lead by someone with learning and teaching expertise such as an advanced practitioner.

There is more to coaching than advice and guidance on the implementation of improved teaching strategies however. A good coaching session is inspiring, it fosters a blame-free

culture where initial failures are laughed off as inevitable, and seen as valuable learning experiences. It shows how to make ideas work in the challenging reality of the workaday teaching situation, and it reconfirms the goals and content of the training. Teachers often leave coaching sessions with their determination to succeed redoubled.

((Box))

Some findings in Joyce and Showers Research

- What the teacher THINKS about teaching determines what the teacher does when teaching
 - Teachers are likely to keep and use new strategies and concepts if they receive COACHING
 - Competent teachers with high SELF-ESTEEM usually benefit more from training
 - Individual teaching styles do not often affect teachers' abilities to learn from staff development
 - Initial enthusiasm for training is reassuring to the organisers but has relatively little influence upon learning
 - What does matter is the TRAINING DESIGN not where it's done or who does it
- B Showers et al 'Synthesis of research on staff development' Educational Leadership (Nov 1987)

((box end))

Joyce and Showers' review makes some other telling points. They insist that the goal of training should not be simply to get the teachers to adopt new methods and practices. It should aim to change the way the teachers think about teaching. The 'training' should appeal to fundamental principles of what constitutes good teaching and learning. Once teachers think in a new way about learning and teaching, they will often find ways to apply these principles that the trainer would never have thought of.