

Using Content Analysis, Critical Friends, and a Reflective Journal to Impact Districtwide Teacher Learning in Literacy Instruction: An Action Research Self-Study

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Abstract: This action research self-study was conducted to determine the coherency of one district leader's messaging during three keynote presentations focused on teacher learning in the area of literacy instruction. Key literacy topics included comprehensive literacy, next generation literacies, and content creation. The study utilized content analysis, critical friends, and a reflective journal. As a result of the study, seven thematic patterns of communication were identified: promoting a culture of excellence with teacher leaders; modeling engagement and inclusion; wrong use of research; simplicity and focus; intent versus impact, data absence versus abundance; and forcing metaphors versus flipping the message.

KEYWORDS: *professional learning, next generation literacies, critical friends, action research, self-study, content analysis, reflective journal*

NAPDS NINE ESSENTIALS ADDRESSED:

4. A shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice by all participants
5. Engagement in and public sharing of the results of deliberate investigations of practice by respective participants

In November, February, and April of the 2018-2019 school year, a professional learning series called the Comprehensive Literacy Summit (CLS) was held in Manhattan-Ogden Public Schools, a rural school district in Manhattan, Kansas. The goal of the CLS series was to help more than 500 educators meet the needs of nearly 3,600 students in the district's nine elementary schools.

As the director of elementary programs for Manhattan-Ogden Public Schools since 2013, it is my (first author) responsibility to work with a districtwide team to design and communicate the essential aspects of comprehensive literacy instruction that integrate next-generation (commonly referred to as next-gen) literacy skills (National Council of Teachers of English, 2013) and support student content creation. At the beginning of each of the three CLS sessions, I was called upon to deliver a keynote overview before teachers divided into interest-driven, small group breakout sessions. These keynote presentations were our best opportunity to encourage unity and consistency in literacy instruction during the CLS series. With our focus on selected English/language arts (ELA) curriculum tools, I wanted to highlight the best methods for digital teaching and writing during each keynote.

Ongoing professional learning is critical to ensuring that all educators, myself included, feel equipped with the tools needed to be successful in meeting the ever-growing demands of their jobs. So, at the conclusion of the CLS series, I undertook an action research study to consider the clarity and consistency of my messaging during the three keynote presentations. My action research took the form of a self-study, with help from two critical friends who examined the text, images, and weight of my presentation slides to analyze how well they aligned with my intentions. Using an action research process, I set out on a journey to learn how I could be more effective in impacting districtwide teacher learning in the area of literacy instruction.

Context for the Study

In my current role, I am responsible for providing professional learning related to next-gen literary analysis and student content creation as well as supporting achievement for all K-5 (kindergarten through fifth grade) students through a guaranteed, viable curriculum; appropriate resources for learning; data for analysis and decision-making; and ongoing improvement using research-based instructional practices. Bolstered by the professional development school (PDS)-university partnership in existence for decades between Manhattan-Ogden Public Schools and Kansas State University, I work and learn alongside several professionals and scholars to gain a better understanding of successful literacy programs. Within our PDS-university partnership, there are several professors with expertise in the foundational skills of reading and writing, adolescent literacy, action research, and literacy across the disciplines that support the flow of information, such as year-long literacy institutes, quarterly improvement seminars, one-on-one meetings, and emails and social media updates from which I glean the latest research-based instructional practices to share with my teacher teams. I also have many opportunities to collaborate with my district's executive director, our directors of early childhood and secondary education, our special education director, our research and evaluation specialist, and nine building administrators, plus a team of lead ELA trainers.

Starting with the 2018-2019 school year, after a careful two-year review process, the core ELA program *Wonders* was adopted by our district as a rich and robust literacy program for grades K-5. *Wonders*, a McGraw-Hill Education product, is designed to help students meet high academic standards and prepare them for future success. This resource provides concrete examples of the 2017 ELA Standards and encourages next-gen literacies with effective daily practices such as staircasing complexity of text and constructing text-based answers. In district classrooms and intervention groups, students use *Wonders* to close read, write analytically, and practice foundational literacy skills. At that time, since few educators knew what next-gen literacies involved, I used *Wonders* to begin crafting a message that would open new doors for next-gen comprehension, where readers could construct meaning and knowledge while engaging in digital reading practices such as reading to identify problems, reading to locate online information, reading to critically evaluate, reading to synthesize, and writing to communicate new information.

Another of the district's key initiatives during the 2018-2019 school year was an action research group within the district, facilitated by our university partner. As an instructional leader, I wanted to support and model active professional learning, so I participated in the action research group alongside the district teachers. Rather than the one-time professional learning model that I

had used in the past, I wanted to try longer-term professional learning schedules and provide options with educator choice, curriculum protocols, and delivery models to strengthen next-gen literacy and content creation models. I sought to build a safety net to support educators and students. This is how the CLS series developed.

The CLS series centered on two overarching literacy goals while respecting districtwide demographics of English Learners (8%), students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) (21%), and students from economically disadvantaged households (42%): 1) Enable each student to proficiently read, communicate, and learn with next-gen literacies, including access, source analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, and 2) Revolutionarily transform students at all levels from content consumers to content creators, enabling them to problem solve, collaborate and produce multimedia products shareable with a wide, global audience.

Literature Review

In preparing for the CLS series, I reviewed the research on the power of sustained, job-embedded professional learning on student achievement. Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas, and Wallace (2005) reported that the “greater the extent of reported staff involvement in professional and pupil learning, the higher was the level of pupil performance and progress in both primary and secondary schools” (p. 132). Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss, and Shapley (2007) referenced a study that found that “teachers who receive substantial professional development ... can boost their students’ achievement by about 21 percentile points” (p. 1). Michelson and Bailey (2016) pointed out that “a long-term, comprehensive approach provides the necessary key to propelling educators past initial resistance and toward a self-sustaining community focused on student achievement” (p. 27).

As I prepared, I realized that the CLS series would be my opportunity to create unity and consistency around our new literacy program and build teacher leadership to sustain the program in order to improve student achievement related to our district’s literacy goals. As I began designing the keynote presentations, I was reminded through the research that curriculum development knowledge is seen as a prerequisite to teacher leadership (Gehrke, 1991). Additionally, teaching expertise in one’s subject matter is critical because it is basic to other teacher leadership roles and responsibilities, including in-service education, advising and assisting colleagues, and peer support (Gehrke, 1991). In order to build teacher capacity, I realized I would need to provide time for collaborative curriculum development centered around the *Wonders* resources. I also considered that Fink (2014) cited the following behaviors exhibited by instructional leaders related to professional learning: giving feedback, modeling effective instruction, soliciting opinions, supporting collaboration, providing professional development opportunities, and giving praise for effective teaching (p. 32). I realized it would be important to construct learning activities that allowed me to model these behaviors.

Recognizing that our district was in the midst of significant change, I knew it would be necessary to clarify a mission and a vision surrounding this work. At the district level, we had already established our mission: having our students be college and career ready and on grade-level in benchmark assessments. However, *how* we were going to support our students in achieving those goals needed a clear vision (Fullan, 2004). In creating a vision, Conger (1991) described the use of framing and rhetoric. Framing is the way leaders portray an organization’s mission to

convince the organization to accept and enact the mission. Rhetorical crafting is the use of language and images to evoke emotion, create connections, and motivate the audience (Conger, 1991). As I designed my keynote presentation slides and stories, I was intentional in both the framing and the rhetoric I chose to convey a vision for our literacy program, which was to reinforce the principles of comprehensive literacy and next-gen literacy skills and to encourage content creation through a year-long professional development effort. Each keynote presentation lasted 60 to 75 minutes and included an average of 100 slides. Knowing that there is typically limited retention of information from oral presentations, I crafted each slide show to allow teachers to download and refer to all slides and documents during and following the presentations.

Action Research Methods

This action research study used self-study and content analysis methods to determine the coherency of my messaging through the CLS keynote presentations. The study was action research in that it followed a traditional action research process: 1) identifying a question, 2) developing a plan, 3) gathering data, 4) analyzing data, 5) reflecting on the experience, and 6) taking action to improve practice (Holly, Arhar, & Kasten, 2005). Action research is also systematic, intentional, and based on a personal inquiry (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1990). The study was a self-study in that the focus was on me and my work, both as a researcher and as the person being researched. In other words, I was studying myself, in order to improve my own practice, using data that I generated.

In addition, “a defining feature of self-study research and practice is its emphasis on collaboration with others” (Berry & Russell, 2014, p. 195). Therefore, I included two critical friends in my research to help me view my presentations with more objective eyes, deepen my reflection, and challenge my personal theories (Loughran, 2007). My critical friends were our district’s director of secondary education (second author) and the university professor who facilitated our district action research projects (third author).

The research question I posed was, in what ways, if any, did the CLS series keynote presentations clearly identify comprehensive literacy, including next-gen strategies and content creation tools? To answer this question, I chose to conduct content analysis of the three keynote presentations. Qualitative content analysis identifies relevant thematic patterns in a text (Neuendorf, 2016). Often thought of as a quantitative method, it goes beyond just counting words and “provide[s] knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon under study” (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992, p. 314).

Using an inductive approach, my critical friends individually viewed and coded the slides from each of my three presentations without preconceived categories (Konracki, Wellman, & Amundson, 2002). They looked at both the images and text that I selected to convey my main ideas and considered the potential effects they might have had on the audience while also looking for the coherency of my message. They also read and coded a reflective journal that I maintained during the study about my intentions and impressions of each of the three sessions.

After coding the texts, the three of us met to debrief and discuss their coding of the slides and the coherency between my intentions (from my reflective journal) and the actual slides. Together, we generated a list of thematic patterns of communication across the three keynote presentations.

Findings and Discussion

In the self-study action research process, I found that I greatly value communication and felt mostly positive from the keynotes. I found strengths with themes of empowerment and engagement. On the other hand, I needed to review several key areas when planning and designing content. Through deep self-reflection and the use of critical friends, I discovered ways to improve the communication of my ideas with goal areas like simplicity and focus; better research and data connections; next step focus; and appropriate selection of rhetorical devices to communicate and emphasize the important themes I wanted to convey through the CLS series. As the slides were the key point of communication for the Summits, understanding their impact was critical. Each keynote lasted 60 to 75 minutes. As Table 1 shows, there were on average 100 slides per session, with limited focus on next-gen literacies and content creation.

% of slides focused on:	CLS 1	CLS 2	CLS 3
Comprehensive Literacy	31 (25%)	14 (13%)	38 (47%)
Next Generation Literacies (digital reading and writing)	16 (13%)	3 (< 5%)	0
Content Creation	0	4 (< 5%)	0
Total # of slides	126	110	81

Table 1: Percentage of Slides Focused on Literacy Topics

In considering the coding from my critical friends and our debriefing discussion, there were seven thematic patterns of communication that we identified. The next section describes the patterns we noted and provides quotes from my reflective journal about the presentations and commentary from my critical friends during our debriefing.

Promoting Culture of Excellence with Teacher Leaders

I wanted to support a culture that strengthens teacher leaders to overcome challenges by empowering them to diagnose situations, manage themselves, energize others, and intervene skillfully around literacy goals. As I reflected in my journal, “Goals are so important for our team to see where we’re headed with clarity, so I shared our horizon line with everyone over a few slides to save countless emails later on,” and I celebrated teacher successes. To me, this showed the urgency and importance of our professional learning. Demonstrating mixed evidence in this area, one of my critical friends expressed uncertainty regarding purpose: “I think you are wanting to create safety in the group by doing an icebreaker.” I see now that I should have better connected the relationship of this activity to building district culture.

Modeling Engagement and Inclusion

Even with a full plate of items to cover, I tried to honor the attention limitations of my audience. I incorporated several cooperative learning opportunities, games, or videos into each session, but as the analysis of slides suggests, I placed too much emphasis on these brain breaks to the detriment of content. In CLS 1, only 37% of the slides focused on the goal areas. In the final CLS, I reflected in my journal, “With the spring and Easter timing, I hid eggs with close reading strategies inside. As teachers found the eggs, they came to the front to read their strategy to everyone.” I think these games positively impacted our culture but needed more focus towards the larger goals to help teachers make the connection. As one critical friend stated, “I might have done fill in the blanks on the slide to see if they can remember it.” This helped me think about the engagement tools I used and ways to refine them in the future. My other critical friend shared, “I like the idea of the game to engage participants. I'm just not sure about the questions posed. Could they relate more to what was discussed last time? Retrieval of stored information would be a strong practice in moving it to long-term memory and thus encouraging its practice.”

The timing of my engagement tools also could have been better synthesized, as I noted they were always near the beginning of the presentations. As one critical friend said, “Again, I would suggest moving all of these slides to the end.” I agree that I should have better considered the flow of the presentations. While I improved in terms of audience inclusion from the first to the third presentation, which also positively impacted the content, I want to continue to improve on incorporating relevant cooperative learning opportunities to engage teachers throughout each session.

Simplicity and Focus

In all of my presentations, I stated a focus area, but I didn't deliver a central message to a successful degree. I'd give a priority, followed by another, and then another. It became a lengthy list. Yet, in my planning, I thought I had narrowed the topics. As I stated in my journal, “My slides give a truly honed message. This creates an umbrella and framework to guide our time.” In reality, I found that I had created too many sections or topics. My critical friends asked, “What is MOST important right now?” In CLS 2, with over 100 slides and only 19% focused on the goal areas, I recognized that it would be difficult for the audience to pinpoint the most important thing. As for tone, one of my critical friends observed, “This sounds like a cruise ship activities director, trying to generate enthusiasm for an unsure crowd!” I did grow and improve, as is evidenced in CLS 3 where 46% of slides related to a goal, but now I realize that I need to continue to clarify the intent of my message and land on one priority to convey. I hope to better simplify and focus on all three presentations in the future.

Wrong Use of Research

Rather than highlight specific skills to support our work with refined thinking, I just dumped in research like a flood of destruction. I approached the presentations, especially the first one, with a “you want research, I'll show you research” attitude that completely missed the mark and overwhelmed my audience. I wanted to support struggling readers and writers through

research-based, informed, systematic instruction; but it was simply too much, too fast, and too out of context. As my critical friends stated, “Although interesting, you don’t need to throw ANOTHER list of nine things to do.” My attempts to provide research and conclusions failed. Even when I tried to pinpoint key ideas on the slides using text features like underlining and bold text, I don’t think I met my objective of highlighting research-based ideas. One critical friend observed, “What you underlined doesn’t seem to be the most important part of the statements.” How could anyone know where to invest most?

I also need to better cite research and document ideas for those who want to refer to the slides as a reference down the road. Without the audio, several points might be confusing due to lack of text on the slides. Additionally, I repeated too many parts too often. As one critical friend said, “I feel like we covered this.” I needed to succinctly present more timely research that would allow us to reduce variance of practice.

Intent Versus Impact

These keynotes were designed to share a central, united message of student learning and teacher leadership, and provide a districtwide point of reference for teams to return to since all participants possessed digital access to the presentations. As I wrote in my reflective journal, “This was one of the first times we’d all been together in a keynote style setting. Based on feedback from past sessions mentioning that we lacked a central message, my intent was to provide clarity and focus.” I attempted to provide nearly 500 educators with the same marching orders, yet I found that I failed to adequately deliver on my intent because I didn’t consider deeply enough the impact of the sheer volume of the content.

I wanted to appear as an authority on literacy to meet my team’s expectations, but I needed many more experiences actually teaching or co-teaching from the standards curriculum and resource tools. While my intention was solid, the impact was weak. As I stated in my journal, “I wanted to speak with practical authority of examples because I was able to see these things in action due to spending time in classrooms and with students learning together from these tools.” Yet, many of these topics were questioned by my critical friends: “Why here? Why now?” Rather than drawing from actual classroom work, I used inauthentic examples, which was noticed by my critical friends: “Good to include an example, but would a real student example be more useful?” I now realize that I need to provide better student exemplars, case studies, and actual progressions of literacy learning. Based on the slide analysis, I also need to give more attention to writing and content creation in order to impact these areas in the classroom setting and have the data to support it.

Data Absence Versus Abundance

Trying to be all things to all people, my keynotes became entrenched with an abundance of unrelated information. For example, as one critical friend stated about the first presentation, “By the end, you have used 13 different slide styles/formats and covered 40 distinctly different topics. There is no clear focus of the session. There were a lot of announcements, previews, sign-ups, etc. The 9 Keys of *Wonders* only had 18 sides; that is less than 20% of your presentation.” I wish I could have done more to cut down the presentation and showcase how digital reading and writing

present special challenges. I should not have included everything I was thinking, but rather found the main ideas. In reviewing the slides, my critical friends stated more than once, “Again, these slides are not needed to make a point.” So, my goal was left unmet as I pulled in too many topics that were not the intended central focus. The slide analysis highlights the fact that the key areas didn’t get enough attention.

Additionally, I did not adequately pull in student-level data to inform practice. To promote literacy, I was committed to working out some of the challenges and stigmas of comprehensive literacy so our children can be identified as students and scholars; not labeled by their limitations. However, my messages fell short with student data either being absent or not justified in the presentations. Too often, I either left out data completely or dumped student results onto participants without enough meaning or context. Upon reflection, I should have shared winter data on universal screeners and/or other pertinent assessment information.

Forcing the Metaphors Versus Flipping the Message

Finally, I wanted to provide several sources of inspiration to encourage my teams in this difficult work. As I wrote in my journal, “I love using analogies and big images to tell our story and remind my team of our ideals.” I wanted to make my messages easily remembered back in the classroom in order to inspire perseverance and a growth mindset, yet these messages didn’t always hit the mark. As one critical friend stated, “Here’s that slide that makes me dizzy! Is the message that this is still a steep learning curve? Am I not conquering part of it by now?” My other critical friend said, “Personally, I don’t find this video funny.” I needed to consider more perspectives and not approach everything through my own lens. I hope to provide more inclusive videos and images, and balance athletic or culturally specific examples to ensure that they make sense and appeal to a wide audience.

Implications for Practice

This experience has been empowering and eye-opening for me, and as I share it I encourage others to engage in a similar practice of action research self-study. It is through reflection on current practice that we grow as educators. However, as a district leader, self-study is only the first step. Other pertinent information must be obtained to fully evaluate professional learning. Guskey (2002) suggests that one must consider participants’ reactions to professional development and then determine whether they “acquired the intended knowledge and skills” and can apply them effectively (p. 48). Moreover, questions must be asked such as, was implementation advocated, facilitated, and supported? Additionally, were sufficient resources made available? (p. 48). Finally, we must look at how student learning is impacted since this is truly why we engage in professional learning. These are areas I plan to analyze moving forward in order to better understand the overall impact of the CLS series.

This action research self-study has driven home my need to commit to a less-is-more approach. In the future, I hope to tailor my content and presentations to follow these points based on McKeown’s (2014) *Essentialism* outline:

Explore: To better find appropriate research and data, I hope to invest more time in gathering ONE precise idea and link it directly to student or district data. I'll ask: What is ONE new big idea to share? What is ONE piece of data to back this up?

Evaluate: Filtering from many to few, I want to weigh each element to find the best ONE priority with a single step to move forward. I'll ask: What rises to the top as ONE big idea to explain and focus on during the keynote session? Who can best tell ONE story to fit with specific audiences?

Eliminate: I hope to better cut out, trim down and combine slides to make ONE element. I'll ask: What must be taken out to concentrate on ONE central theme? How can I ensure ONE take-away message?

Execute: I want to find a joyful and empowering atmosphere to support my teams to take ONE action step to practice and refine their learning. I'll ask: How can ONE big idea transfer to 500 educators? How can ONE essential message promote student success in a big way?

Limitations

This study is a small slice of what actually happened during the CLS series keynote presentations. Since the study only looked at slide decks, it did not take into account any of the verbal speech delivery variables like volume, rate, voice quality, posture, gestures, or body movements. It also did not take into consideration audience interactions and feedback loops during the presentations. Finally, professional learning is only one aspect of my role as a district leader.

Conclusion

Using an action research process, I set out on a journey to learn how I could be more effective in impacting districtwide teacher learning in the area of literacy instruction. As a result of the study, my critical friends and I identified seven thematic patterns of communication: promoting a culture of excellence with teacher leaders; modeling engagement and inclusion; wrong use of research; simplicity and focus; intent versus impact, data absence versus abundance; and forcing metaphors versus flipping the message. While I delivered on some areas, like promoting positive district culture, empowerment, and participation; I learned that although my framing of the district message was clear, my rhetorical crafting (Conger, 1991) needs improvement. As I continue to learn and grow professionally, I must find ways to enhance teacher clarity and the inclusion of applicable research and data, along with more universally accepted metaphors to frame our district's common work.

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