

Running Head: LEARNING LEVERAGE

**Learning Leverage: Designing Meaningful
Professional Development for *All* Teachers**

Jana Hunzicker, Ed.D.

Bradley University

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Abstract

The leverage of National Board candidacy provides a unique opportunity for substantial teacher learning in a way that many professional development experiences do not. The key is learning leverage - an appropriate balance of rigor, reward, and risk. Learning leverage occurs naturally among teachers who choose to pursue National Board certification, but it can be integrated into a school's everyday professional endeavors as well. When school leaders apply the dynamics of learning leverage to school improvement initiatives, teacher evaluation systems, and professional development offerings, powerful learning experiences for *all* teachers abound.

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) was established over 20 years ago. Since 1987, over 120,000 teachers across the United States have voluntarily completed the certification process and 63,821 have become National Board certified (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards [NBPTS], 2008). The vast majority of teachers who engage in this voluntary certification process describe it as the best professional development they have ever experienced – *even when they do not achieve the certification*. What makes National Board candidacy such a powerful learning experience for teachers? By understanding the dynamics that make the process of NBPTS certification such a significant means of teacher learning, school leaders can design more meaningful professional development for *all* teachers.

The Leverage of National Board Candidacy

In order to earn National Board certification, a teacher must demonstrate accomplished teaching practices through four multifaceted portfolio entries and a challenging written assessment. The entire process takes one to three years, during which time candidates dedicate an extensive 200 to 400 clock hours to the endeavor (Boyd & Reese, 2006; NBPTS, 2008). Due to its high standards and rigorous requirements, the prestige of earning National Board certification is substantial.

As candidates work to complete the process, they often discover that gaps exist between the National Board standards and their teaching practices. This motivates them to modify their teaching in order to increase their chances of earning the certification (Hunzicker, 2006; Lustick & Sykes, 2006). Through this process, considerable teacher learning occurs. However, the experience is not always comfortable. In fact, many NBPTS candidates describe their certification year as extremely challenging and highly stressful (Burroughs, Schwartz, & Hendricks-Lee, 2000; Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning [CFTL], 2002; Linquanti & Peterson, 2001; Rotberg, Futrell, &

Holmes, 2000). This discomfort is essential to the certification experience because it fuels motivation, which leads to teacher learning.

Hunzicker describes this distinctive blend of conditions - the rigorous certification requirements, the prestige of becoming National Board certified, and the high levels of challenge and stress - as *the leverage of National Board candidacy*, an uncomfortable yet positive pressure that usually leads to substantial teacher learning (2006). Learning leverage makes it difficult for teachers *not* to learn through the NBPTS certification experience.

Three Dynamics of Leverage: Rigor, Reward, and Risk

The leverage of National Board candidacy consists of three dynamics: rigor, reward, and risk. The first dynamic, *rigor*, embodies the high expectations of the NBPTS. In order to achieve National Board certification, teachers must demonstrate accomplished teaching practice as described in the NBPTS literature. Using research-based methods, candidates must exhibit intentional teaching and respect for students in addition to presenting evidence of individual student progress over time. Only the highest professional standards are acceptable.

Reward, the second dynamic of leverage, encompasses the prestige of National Board certification. Because the certification is very difficult to achieve, becoming a National Board Certified Teacher (NBCT) is a significant accomplishment. In addition to increased status, respect, and professional authority, many NBCTs receive salary increases and/or state stipends. These “carrots” are highly motivating to many teachers who choose to pursue National Board certification.

The third dynamic, *risk*, accounts for the fact that only about half of NBPTS candidates earn the certification on their first attempt (Boyd & Reese, 2006). Seeking National Board certification involves huge professional risk because it is both public and confrontational. Unlike earning a master’s degree, which can be accomplished quietly

and even sporadically over time, National Board candidates complete the certification process within a specified timeframe, are forced to confront and remediate their professional weaknesses, and receive their pass-or-fail certification results on the same well-publicized date nationwide. Because of the professional risk involved, many teachers never attempt the NBPTS certification process, and those who do often feel anxious throughout the experience.

Together, the dynamics of rigor, reward, and risk create the positive yet uncomfortable pressure known well by teachers who have experienced the NBPTS certification process. To visualize the leverage of National Board candidacy, picture a triangle. Made up of three sides, the triangle itself represents leverage while its three sides represent rigor, reward, and risk (see Figure A).

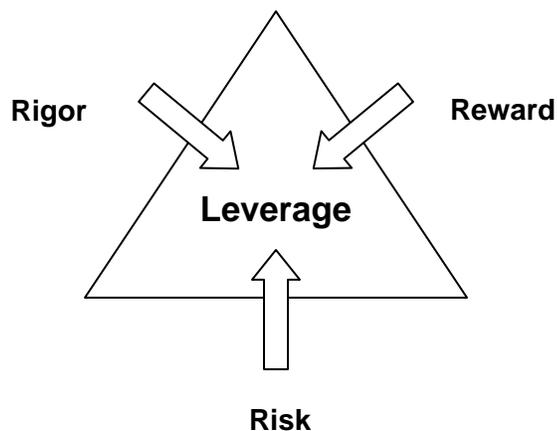


Figure A
The Leverage of National Board Candidacy

Just as a triangle must have three sides, all three dynamics must be present to create learning leverage. Without all three, leverage cannot exist.

Applying Leverage to Other Professional Development Settings

Although National Board candidacy is one of the most valuable learning experiences currently available to teachers, it is a voluntary endeavor that not all

teachers choose to pursue. How, then, can the concept of learning leverage be applied to professional development opportunities for *all* teachers? By ensuring that an appropriate balance of rigor, reward, and risk is present, a wide range of professional endeavors can be transformed into powerful learning experiences for teachers.

Learning Leverage through School Improvement

School-wide improvement initiatives are one potential means through which all teachers can experience learning leverage, and Edison Junior High School in Pekin, IL provides a powerful example. When principal Leonard Ealey learned that his school had not achieved adequate yearly progress (AYP) for the second year in a row, he approached his staff of 30 teachers to discuss the problem. Facing much pressure as a result of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the Edison staff engaged in a series of intense conversations over several months' time about strategies they could implement to raise student achievement in math and reading.

Committed to the idea of involving all teachers and addressing the needs of all students, the EJHS staff altered their master schedule to combine homeroom and study hall into one, 45-minute period. Targeting this daily, school-wide instructional time for interventions and enrichment, teachers worked from August to December finding and developing appropriate materials and assessments.

In addition, teachers established a systematic method for tracking student progress. A 4x6 index card was created for every student in the school, briefly describing individual demographics, test scores, attendance, and other relevant information such as disabilities and social-emotional needs.

Next, a specific goal was targeted for each student for emphasis over a 10-day period. During this time, one teacher worked directly with a specific group of students toward their individual goals, and on the tenth day interdisciplinary teams met to review progress and select new targets. A running record was maintained on each student's

index card for each 10-day intervention, creating ongoing documentation of interventions attempted and resulting student progress.

While Edison's efforts to dramatically increase reading and math achievement proved highly successful, the school's journey was not an easy one. In addition to spending months finding and developing instructional materials and assessments, transforming homeroom and study hall into a 45-minute intervention/enrichment period added a daily preparation time during which each teacher in the school was responsible for individualizing instruction for 8 to 12 students (rigor).

In January the EJHS staff reached a point of frustration and exhaustion, but after identifying their restraining forces, they redoubled their efforts by meeting regularly in both content area and interdisciplinary teams to further develop materials and assessments, exchange strategies, and engage in targeted professional development (rigor). Even so, there was no guarantee that they would achieve AYP (risk).

Happily, EJHS achieved AYP in 2008; but perhaps more importantly, as teachers school-wide reflected on the year-long experience, they knew that their investment of time and effort had been the "right thing to do" for their students (reward).

Learning Leverage through Teacher Evaluation

Learning leverage also can be realized through innovations of well-established systems such as teacher evaluation. During the 2003-2004 school year, the East Peoria, IL District 86 teacher's union and administration convened a committee to revise the district's teacher evaluation instrument. Influenced by the work of Danielson and McGreal (2000), McCormick (2002), and Peterson (2000), the committee quickly expanded its efforts from simply updating the current evaluation instrument to creating an alternative evaluation option that would allow tenured teachers to engage in a professional growth plan in lieu of the traditional preconference/classroom observation/post conference evaluation model.

During its second year, the district-wide committee developed processes and created structures to support the alternative option, presenting drafts to teachers and administrators across the district on a regular basis and making numerous revisions based on concerns and suggestions that were voiced. In addition to maintaining a research-based focus and creating a system that teachers and administrators throughout the district would support, the committee had to ensure that the alternative option met the requirements of Illinois School Code as well as the district's negotiated agreement. Finally, after a one-year pilot, the alternative option was launched.

Despite the differentiation and professional relevance provided through the new option, only eight teachers district-wide chose to participate during the 2006-2007 school year. The professional growth plan required a great deal more time and effort on the part of both the teacher being evaluated and the supervising principal, plus some principals were more comfortable than others in supervising the process. In addition, questions were raised regarding the distribution of resources such as professional development monies and release time. Was it fair that teachers choosing the alternative option receive more resources and support than those who selected traditional teacher evaluation? To complicate matters, some teachers embarked upon a two-year growth plan which further muddied the waters regarding distribution of resources and delayed closure of the evaluation process.

Even so, those who selected the alternative option reported it as a meaningful learning experience in terms of increased collaboration with colleagues, strengthened teaching practices, and enriched learning experiences for students. In one school, two primary-level teachers conducted a year-long study of phonemic awareness that resulted in the district-wide adoption of the Heggerty Phonemic Awareness Program. In an effort to engage students socially in the process of reading, boost student comprehension, and strengthen students' writing skills, teachers from two other schools

created a blog through the district server by which their students posted messages and reviews about books they were reading. "One of the greatest benefits of the alternative option is being able to learn from teachers in other schools and districts," reflects literacy coordinator Terri Woodward. Danielson (2006) calls this as de-privatization of practice, a condition that must be in place before professional learning communities can thrive.

The teachers and administrators in East Peoria District 86 experienced learning leverage through both the creation and the implementation of the alternative option to teacher evaluation. During its study and planning years, committee members gathered information, created processes and structures that made sense for their particular district, and continued to revise the new option until they reached district-wide consensus (rigor). Once the alternative option was launched, teachers and principals engaging in the process had to devote more time and effort than they would have through traditional teacher evaluation, plus they had to grapple with the many issues that emerged as a result of the new option (rigor).

Further, even as the committee studied and planned diligently over two years' time, they could not be sure that they would achieve the district-wide consensus needed for adoption; and once the alternative option was implemented, no one could be sure how many teachers would choose to engage in a professional growth plan or whether or not the process would accomplish its goal of providing a more meaningful evaluation experience for tenured teachers (risk).

During the 2007-2008 school year, five additional teachers chose the alternative option, and several others have expressed their intent to do so in 2008-2009. Teachers and administrators in District 86 are beginning to see the professional growth plan as a valuable opportunity to expand professional knowledge and skills in areas of particular interest or need (reward). As meaningful learning experiences – for both teachers and

students – continue to accumulate, participation in the alternative option to teacher evaluation is likely to increase.

Learning Leverage through Professional Development

During the past several years, short-term workshops for teachers have been widely criticized for being ineffective. However, when designed with learning leverage in mind, even traditional one-day professional development experiences can result in meaningful teacher learning. One example is the Instructional Practices Inventory (IPI) Level I workshop, created in 1995 by Dr. Jerry Valentine and colleagues at the Middle Level Leadership Center (MLLC) at the University of Missouri at Columbia (Valentine, 2007). This one-day workshop engages teams of teachers and administrators in active observation and analysis around levels of student cognitive engagement.

The workshop consists of direct instruction and guided practice in the morning with an application experience, debriefing, and comprehensive test in the afternoon. During the morning session, after introductions and a brief overview of IPI, participants read a written classroom scenario and code its level of student engagement using a 6-point rubric. Then, each individual states aloud the code he/she selected. Participant answers are offered in quick succession, no explanations are allowed, and a different person speaks first each time. After everyone has publicly stated their selected code, the workshop presenter reveals the correct code, offers a detailed explanation, answers questions, and gives additional examples. This process is repeated until 20 different scenarios have been read, coded, and discussed.

Learning to code quickly and accurately is difficult, and the pace of the workshop moves swiftly (rigor). Even so, participants are motivated to do their best because they know that they must share each answer publicly, that they will be expected to observe and code in actual classrooms in the afternoon, and – perhaps most importantly – that

they must take a test during the last hour of the workshop in order to demonstrate their coding mastery (risk).

During the afternoon session, participants travel to a nearby school to observe student cognitive engagement in actual classrooms. Then, everyone returns to the training site to discuss the experience and analyze the levels of student cognitive engagement observed before taking the final test. By the end of the 8-hour day participants are exhausted, but most depart feeling a sense of accomplishment and the satisfaction of time well spent. In addition to gaining new professional knowledge and skill, they leave the workshop equipped with tools and processes they can use immediately for both self-evaluation and school-wide analysis (reward).

Conclusion

The leverage of National Board Candidacy provides a unique opportunity for substantial teacher learning in a way that many professional development experiences do not. The key is an appropriate balance of rigor, reward, and risk. When school leaders apply the dynamics of learning leverage to everyday professional endeavors such as school improvement initiatives, teacher evaluation systems, and professional development offerings, powerful learning experiences for *all* teachers abound.

Questions to ensure an appropriate balance of learning leverage:

Rigor

Are both the content and the process of the experience challenging to participants?

Reward

Do participants perceive their investment of time in the experience as highly beneficial, both personally and professionally?

Risk

Will participants be required to cognitively and individually perform to a reasonably high standard (during, at the conclusion, or both) in order to successfully complete the experience?

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