

Professional Development

To attend IISME orientation is to learn about IISME's view of itself. From the opening video through training sessions, discussions, and presentations runs the theme that IISME provides an exemplary professional development opportunity. The cynical teacher might think, "Professional development? Who are they kidding? I'm just here to get paid!" During my first summer with IISME, I was that cynical teacher. As a veteran IISME fellow, I can now attest that this is a limiting viewpoint.

Being open to opportunity has provided rich experiences I can take back to the classroom, both for myself as a teacher and to facilitate my students' experience.

Perhaps the most valuable thing offered by professional development is the opportunity to experience community: to meet and interact with other teachers. Teaching is such a solitary profession, alone in a room with a bunch of kids. I welcome the chance to exchange ideas with likeminded colleagues. Conversation and comparison improve my classroom management strategies, content ideas, and teaching methods. Just the reflective practice of articulating my systems is helpful, never mind the brilliant ideas I have stolen from some exemplary teachers.

The fellowship offered community in several ways. First, my desk was near the other IISME fellows, all of whom were warm, welcoming, and engaging. Two of them have similar jobs to mine – one even teaches computing in a middle school, just like me! Synopsys and IISME facilitated our building community through receptions and trainings (by Synopsys) and the weekly community group meetings, where we exchanged stories and brainstormed solutions to problems we faced.

A second way of facilitating community was the weblog pilot project. Although it was a small circle of fellows who participated, I felt that I got to know each of them through their writing and commenting. Feedback on my own posts helped me resolve my thinking about what I posted. The act of writing at the end of each day helped me take time to reflect on both my teaching practice and on what I was doing in my fellowship. In a busy life, it is too easy for even a reflective practitioner to put off thinking deeply about what is happening. Then later we have forgotten what we were going to think about or mis-remember what happened. Working through it in writing is nearly as good as talking about it – and for a profession that happens behind closed doors, may be the only option.

In looking back at the history provided by my weblog, I have multiple ideas to take back to school. The most important is the idea of flexibility. My mentor was extremely supportive of me, but also quite hands-off, partially because she is very busy. As a busy teacher with a lot of students to oversee, I would like to take this model back to my classroom. By setting goals (called "Management by

Objectives” or MBOs at Synopsys) and allowing students to choose how to meet them, students may be able to improve their own productivity. Obviously, this will require oversight on my part to make sure no one gets too far off track. Having all the students work on exactly the same thing at the same time has never been my style and in a classroom with limited resources isn’t feasible anyway. In this way, students can work on the “easy” parts of a project (whatever seems easy to them) at the time when they need to, and work on the “hard” parts when they feel focused and ready.

In order for this flexibility to be successful, it will require a focus on outcomes rather than process. Students who work at their own pace and in their own way will not all follow the same process. I will need to support students in recognizing processes that they can use in order to ensure they finish each project by the deadlines, then give them the autonomy to work independently. Each student can use the process that is most effective for her, rather than using the process that is most effective for me.

There are many similarities between the corporate and educational worlds. At many times as I traversed the hallways of Synopsys, I felt how my students do as they navigate through school. Beginning a new fellowship, no matter how welcoming, echoes the anxiety of the new day of school. “Will they like me?” “Am I wearing the right clothes?” “What if I can’t do the work this year?” The desire to impress one’s boss is no different than the desire a student feels to impress the teacher. We all try to look cool when we feel like we don’t know what we’re doing. The hierarchical nature of industry, with CEO, vice presidents, directors, senior managers... all the way down to interns compares to the district with superintendent, principals, teachers... all the way down to students. I was given a similar amount of autonomy to complete my project at Synopsys, just as I am in setting my curriculum at school. In both cases I had to communicate my process and be prepared to defend my decisions, but I was trusted as a professional.

Industry and education are not alike in all ways, of course. As a teacher, it is always a change to be in an environment where I am not in charge. Sharing a cubicle with someone who is here at the same time I am, but where I clearly “get” half of the walls to decorate, is quite different from sharing a classroom with another teacher who is only in it at times that I am not, but who wants to cover all the walls with her students’ work. It has been a big change (to my hips) to have to remind myself to stand up and walk around rather than spending all day on my feet, propelled by cries for help.

The major difference between industry and school is the outlook on collaboration. Too often, in schools, we call it “cheating” when students work together. Even in a school such as mine, where groupwork is the norm, knowing who did which piece of work and assessing whether all members of the group understand the material is a challenge. In Industry, results count. Of course, managers need to

know who the productive members of a team are, but asking for help not only isn't discouraged, at times it can be the only way to complete a task.

Another significant difference between school and industry is time for reflection and revision. At school we are so often rushed to complete everything. I have an ambitious curriculum and am constantly losing curricular time, either due to schedule changes or to class trips and other pressures. If something goes wrong during class, a teacher feels the pressure of 40+ eyes watching for a solution. When things went wrong while I was alone in my cubicle, I felt the luxury of time to solve problems. At school if I took two hours to find a missing \$, I'd have kept the kids long past the end of the period! I am glad to have had the experience, because I can take it back as an instructive lesson to my students: even some simple problems can take a little time and patience to solve!

Synopsys provided an inspirational idea during the New Employee Orientation. The idea is "yes, if" thinking: instead of saying no to requests, reframe them in a positive way and outline what barriers there are to agreeing. For example, this year my contract requires a duty I did not want to fulfill. Instead of saying "no," I could reframe it in several different ways: "yes, if it is only for one year" or "yes, if I get paid extra for it." Yes, if thinking is much more positive and I think it will help me have a better year and form closer relationships with my coworkers.

Being open to opportunity has provided rich experiences I can take back to the classroom, both for myself as a teacher and to facilitate my students' experience. At the conclusion of my fellowship, I feel refreshed and ready to face the rigors of teaching again.