Professional Practice Insights

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Signature Practices:
Evidence of
Experience,
Innovation and
Expertise

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Introduction

"If it isn't documented, it didn't happen."

Versions of this statement were shared with me twice inside of one week, both times connected to principal evaluation, both in reference to the need for evidence, and with the underlying threat of preparing for the legal ramifications of evaluation.

Immediately, the two-year-old persona who resides inside my head and heart, and to whom I credit most of my passion for questions, countered with, "If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, did it make a sound?"

Our focus on "evidence" in education, particularly evidence related to professional evaluation, while begun with the best of intentions, may now be bordering on unhealthy obsession. While it is, without a doubt, irresponsible to evaluate in the absence of evidence that anchors assessment in objective reality, as opposed to opinion or hearsay, a swing to the opposite extreme, where a statement like, "If it isn't documented, it didn't happen," can actually be accepted without question, is equally as foolish – and potentially dangerous. This one short statement reduces the validity and very existence of "practice" (which term, by definition, occurs over time) to a discrete, described moment.

The temptation here is to resort to descriptions of multiple, minute and independent snapshots, and to believe that they capture a coherent whole. It is painfully clear when this is the operating approach to anchoring evaluation, because the key questions revolve around quantity. "How do we know when we have enough evidence?" A focus on quantity in a process purportedly aimed at improving quality is a pretty solid indicator of misalignment.

But, my inner two-year-old's questions poke inward as often as they focus on the world around me – and so I am left wondering…if indeed, it didn't happen if it wasn't documented – and if practice occurs over time and is more than a string of loosely connected moments or artifacts, then what would it take to document the really big, important and multi-faceted things that principals do? How can we capture the processes and practices that occur over time? What will best enable us to really get what we are after?

Signature Practices: Evidence of Experience, Innovation and Expertise

In education today, evaluation of professional practice is a prevalent theme: an expectation and a responsibility, accompanied by various tools and processes. It is no simple task, this evaluation of professional practice. "Practice" is complex and ongoing, whereas, evaluation by nature occurs at a moment in time. Likewise, the evidence of practice requires identification of complex, ongoing processes and actions (or "practices") that are aligned to explicit standards and expectations, while evidence of an evaluation moment is likely to be anchored in specific, discrete artifacts connected to individual criteria points. To reconcile the two, we need to address the question, "Why are we doing this?"

If the focus is on evaluation for the sake of evaluating, then judgment(s) based on specific criteria, supported by evidence, are both necessary and sufficient. In this case, artifacts that relate to each criteria point evaluated would create a solid case. An agenda or a newsletter or an observation, in and of themselves, would be enough to anchor the criteria in a moment.

But what if the intention is to use evaluation as a means to improvement? In this case, while evaluation remains necessary, it becomes insufficient - and inconsequential - unless contextualized inside a more comprehensive system of professional assessment where the focus is on professional practice as it unfolds over time. Likewise, "evidence" of evaluation in an improvement context, comes from the processes and actions over time that comprise the professional practice and which, when improved would have a positive effect on the practice as a whole. Artifacts and descriptions of individual aspects are still important, but they gain their credibility from the degree to which they are representative of the greater process – and of improvement in that process and the professional practice that the process informs.

This is the distinction that our work with principal evaluation and leadership development strives to ascertain, with our bias clearly being on the side of evaluation as part of an improvement agenda, in the service of learning. The professional development challenge lies far less in the concept than in its application to identification of evidence. There is a real tendency to default to the identification of individual artifacts for each descriptor or criteria statement in an attempt to "prove" attainment. But improvement of practice cannot be found in an individual artifact – instead we need to look to the process or practice that houses the artifact.

One lens to use in determining where the artifacts come from is the concept of "signature practices". Every profession has them – from chefs to designers to hairdressers to artists to surgeons and litigators. Education is no exception. In her rubric framework (1996) Danielson refers to "signature pedagogies" in disciplines, and the state of California identifies and publicizes the "signature practices" of their model schools.

What is a "signature practice"?

Signature practices are activities, events, programs, actions or protocols nested inside bigger structures or processes that unfold over time. A signature practice can be a new spin on a common or existing practice, or it can be a new approach designed specifically to meet an existing challenge or opportunity. Signature practices have the potential to inform or change the practices of others.

Where can we find examples of signature practices?

One clear example, quite literally a new spin on an existing practice, can be seen in Michelle Kwan's signature spiral. A spiral is a required element in skating, but Michele Kwan's spiral is different from all other spirals. Indeed, her spiral has provided inspiration to other skaters.

Another example of a signature practice that changed the way that we reference signatures goes directly back to its originator. When asked for your "John Hancock," there is no doubt what is being required. This signature has named all signatures from that moment on.

OK…but…"signature practices" of principals?

Kerry's connection to her school's community:
An inner city elementary school principal, Kerry visits students' homes and builds support for her student achievement goals. "I went to every house in my first year," she says. A well-attended family education night at Harvard Park involves parents and children in a learning game and builds awareness and understanding of the Illinois Standards Achievement Test. She thanks the parents for coming and tells them, "We can't do this work without your help and support." Kerry adds, "School is the ticket out. If you want a better life or a different life for your child, then we have to work together." (From *The Principal's Story" - produced by the Wallace Foundation and PBS.)*

Ted's graphic organizer and question for vision alignment:
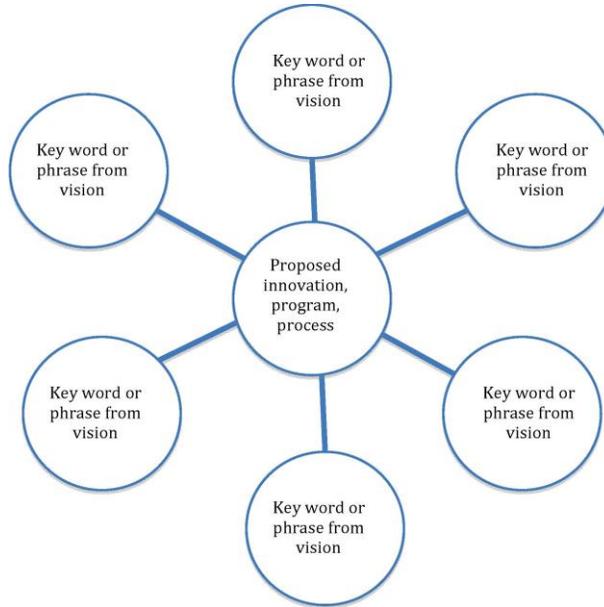
"How will doing X support and move us closer to our vision?"

Sal's cross-role strategic planning team
Monthly (more often, if needed) meetings with a strategic planning team that includes teachers, students, administrators, parents and community partners gather to analyze data, generate goals, create and monitor the implementation of the action plan to attain the goals set, and revisit/refine the school's vision. This team also troubleshoots current issues (like the district's mid-year excessing of all school aides), and identifies opportunities for improvement as they occur.

How do we find "signature practices"?

Signature practices don't exist in a single moment in time. As with all practices, they are repetitive, occurring over time. And, like Michelle Kwan's spin, they can be tied back to standards of the field…in leadership, those are generally the ISLLC standards.

Signature practices related to ISLLC Standard 1 (Shared Vision of Learning) include activities, events and programs for promoting ongoing, sustainable improvement. They connect school improvement with attainment of school-wide goals that are grounded in shared vision, mission and data. Processes the principal could be involved in, and inside

which Standard 1 signature practices might operate, include budgeting, induction, goal setting and strategic planning, decision-making, and monitoring/responding to the effectiveness of decisions, actions and strategies

Ted's vision alignment tool is a signature practice that both supports and illustrates ISLLC Standard 1. It could be used as "evidence" representative of Ted's commitment to and attainment of Shared Vision of Learning.

Signature practices in support of ISLLC Standard 2 (School Culture and Instructional Program) include principal-created activities, events, and programs focused on ensuring optimal learning for diverse student needs and abilities, the use of standards and assessment data to identify, address and monitor student needs and progress, development of best practices in curriculum, instruction and assessment, providing learning opportunities to improve teachers' practice and ability to meet student learning needs.

Processes and structures inside which these signature practices could be nested, and which they could inform, include scheduling, professional development, curriculum development, teacher observation and evaluation, analysis and use of data, technology integration, etc.

What "signature practices" have you seen or implemented that would evidence Standard 2?

Signature practices related to Safe, Efficient, Effective Learning Environment (ISLLC Standard 3) include activities, events and programs that improve operational efficiency, address the capacity for shared leadership, ensure safety in a variety of circumstances, etc. Processes and structures that could encompass and be informed by these signature practices are energy conservation, budgeting, induction, scheduling, safety/crisis planning, leadership development, shared decision-making, etc.

Sal's cross-role strategic planning team would be a good illustration of his connection to and attainment of Standard 3. Since signature practices are multifaceted, they often reflect more than one standard. Sal's team could be a relevant example for shared vision of learning as well, if the vision included engaging multiple stakeholders in the learning and work of improving the school.

Signature practices supporting the Community standard (ISLLC Standard 4) include activities, events and programs focused on engaging key school and community stakeholder groups (teachers, out of classroom staff, parents, businesses, politicians and community members who do not have children in the school or district) in working as partners to improve learning. Processes and structures that could contain or be influenced by these signature practices are communication plans, community outreach, and community partner development.

Here, Kerry's home visits and organization of family education night are evidence of her attainment in Standard 4. Which other standards would Kerry's signature practices provide evidence of?

Signature practices in support of ISLLC Standard 5: Integrity, Fairness and Ethics, can be found in principals' design and implementation of services, programs, and activities that address and meet students' emotional, physical, and mental health needs as well as ensure the best possible learning for each student. They can be nested inside the processes and structures that support behavior management, allocation of educational services, induction, scheduling, analysis and use of data, labor relations (including mediation/negotiation), discipline/behavior policies, etc.

Political, Social, Economic, Legal and Cultural Context (ISLLC Standard 6) could be supported by signature practices that include activities, events or actions that develop advocacy, influence and awareness that transcends the school walls. They can include public speaking, writing, and research into current events in education. The processes that would include these signature practices are communication, professional improvement, advocacy, etc.

How do we uncover or develop signature practices?
Even when signature practices exist, they often go unnoticed or unnamed. To shed light on signature practices or the opportunity to develop them, ask questions that focus on the areas in which the practices either are most likely to be present or are most necessary.

To uncover existing signature practices, ask:
- How do you foster…?
- What do you do to enable…?

To raise awareness about potential signature practices, ask:
- What could you do to address or improve…?
- How might you address (or help others to address) the need to…?
- What could you introduce or put in place that would help others to…?

How does considering signature practices inform evaluation?

The ability to tease out or establish signature practices is bigger than the evaluation moment or mandate.   While "signature practices" are not the be-all/end-all, nor the only way of looking at professional practice, considering the existence or potential of professional "signature practices", and engaging with the possibility that we can and do make unique and different contributions that can influence the present and future of learning in our schools and districts, acknowledges the importance and longevity of what we do as educational leaders in a way that focusing on "evidence" of practice as discreet, minute artifacts or actions somehow falls short of recognizing.

Though adequate to anchor moment in time evaluation, decontextualized artifacts, documentation or descriptions - no matter how detailed or intricate - may well be insufficient as evidence of complex practice, even if they align to every criteria point provided by an evaluation tool, and may actually lead to a focus on quantity, rather than quality. Incorporating signature practices into evaluation, and looking to the processes and structures that house them, can help to ensure that when we identify artifacts or provide documentation, the "evidence" they provide is indeed representative of a coherent, multi-faceted professional practice.

Recognition of the existence and importance of developing and deepening "signature practices" can provide a perspective on professional evaluation that includes the opportunity to honor and encourage professional creativity and innovation, in the service of improved learning – while at the same time providing contextualized artifacts and descriptions that are the evidence of improvement and attainment.

Some parting questions from my inner two-year-old …
What signature practices in professional evaluation are being implemented today?

What signature practices could we develop to ensure that professional evaluation remains in the service of sustainable improvements in teaching, learning and leading?

Joanne Picone-Zocchia
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Appendix: Connecting Principals' Signature Practices to the ISLLC Standards

Directions:
1. With a partner, review one or two of the signature practices below.
2. Discuss what makes it a "signature practice".
3. Determine the ISLLC standard(s) that it illustrates in part or whole.

Signature Practice	ISLLC Standard(s)					
Sonia's collegial learning walks Teachers on a grade level select a strategy or area to study, based on analysis of student work and test results. As a grade level, they visit one another's classes to see the learning in action and debrief after each visit (Share: The teacher did…; The students did…; X was most apparent when…; Noticings/Wonderings). Grade level meeting and prep time are used for visits and debriefs. Cross grade visitations occur when learning focus is shared or there is expertise in a different grade level than the one doing the research	1	2	3	4	5	6
	notes					
Len's "town meeting" The community is invited to the school once a month to be brought up to date on the key issues, challenges, opportunities and accomplishments of the school. They are encouraged to ask questions, make connections to their students' specific needs - and most of all to continue the discourse outside of the school. These town meetings provide current information about changes in regulations as well as district level decisions. Attention is paid to delivering information without editorializing, and addressing questions from a place of shared interest in students' well being and learning. Since the advent of the town meetings, the community support for the school district has increased dramatically. In some cases, community members have stepped up to add their voices to those of educators, in others the community has taken the lead.	1	2	3	4	5	6
	notes					

Signature Practice	ISLLC Standard(s)					
Elsie's collegial inquiry	1	2	3	4	5	6
Elsie spent years providing her staff with professional development that directly related to what she recognized would best support student learning needs. Her K-8 school went from being labeled as a school in needs of improvement to being looked to as a model of educational innovation. While this approach was successful, Elsie realized that the staff had become dependent on her to determine what was needed and provide it.	notes					

She shifted her energies from analyzing the data and designing the plan to support teachers in meeting the needs that the data identified to creating the structures that would allow teachers to take ownership for the analysis, identification and even the learning. She used her existing grade level meeting and collaboration structures to begin teacher analysis of grade level data, then she devoted one faculty meeting a month to sharing findings, questions and insights across grade levels. From there, she asked her staff to prioritize what the data had helped them to uncover and then, to convene around the questions or needs that most interested them.

These new groups became cross grade level collegial inquiry teams that pursued further research, tested strategies and formally presented to the rest of the staff twice a year.

Signature Practice	ISLLC Standard(s)					
Sean's multi-level visioning process When he opened his school, Sean initially engaged in an extensive visioning process with his administrative cabinet, which included articulating a vision for the school, describing current reality and defining the distance between the current and desired states. He then decided to extend this visioning process to teachers. Before the school year begins, he asks each teacher to create a vision for their class as a place of learning. About three weeks into school, he asks them to describe the current reality of their classrooms, and also to define the distance between where they find themselves and where they aspire to be. The teachers' goals are generated to help reduce the distance between their current and desired classrooms. Students participate in a parallel activity that focuses on their visions for themselves as learners, and they set their own learning goals based on what defines the distance between where they see themselves and where they believe they could be as learners. This process now is part of how each year begins.	1	2	3	4	5	6
	notes					
Lina's community partners in learning This principal actively seeks and cultivates community partners to augment and supplement the school's resources and curriculum. She invites community businesses and politicians to school events, and is herself a presence at community events where she engages in what she refers to as "soft advocacy" for her school and students. As a result of Lina's efforts, a local law firm provided tutors for the after school program, while a bookstore sponsored "author's chair" celebrations. The community court provided space and guidance for students to participate in mock trials. Various school partners also combined resources and built a safe playground for her inner city school. Community partners developed a personal connection can be heard referring to "our school" and "our students."	1	2	3	4	5	6
	notes					

Processing
What signature practices do you recognize in your own or others' practice?

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