Priorities for Progress

Includes excerpts and adaptations of the article "Keeping It Simple and Deep," by Richard Strong, Harvey Silver. and Matthew Perini, <u>Educational leadership</u>, March 1999.
Italicized statements are from original text.

What do Japanese haiku have to do with innovative school reform? More than you might think.

o snail
Climb Mount Fuji
But slowly
-Issa

Sometime in the 16th century, a paradigm shifted in Japanese poetry. The traditional court poetry of abstract allusion and elegant paraphrasing gave way to something new. This new form concerned itself not with princes, battles, and fabulous kimonos, but with fleas, snails, the pounding of rice, and the sounds of roadside birds (Blyth, 1978). The Japanese did not, of course, call this a paradigm shift; they called it haiku.

Today we are surrounded by a language of standards and authentic assessment. These hallowed educational reform movements want our work to be suffused with validity and truth, respect for the diversity of individual learning styles, and commitment to excellence and real-world applications. At the same time, we find ourselves operating in a realm of failed budgets; puzzled and resistant teachers; contradictory mandates; and administrative practices that place curriculum, instruction, and assessment at the very bottom of long priority Lists.

The haiku poets also found themselves caught between standards—like courtly love and ancient traditions—and the realities of everyday life. From this tension, they created an innovative and remarkable poetic form.

Is there anything we can learn from their negotiations of ideal standards and everyday reality? Simplicity and Depth

*Reading haiku for the first time, Americans are often struck by their simplicity. Yet the haiku also are incredibly deep… Suppose that we take these two principles, **simplicity and depth**, as the foundation for our work in staff development and school improvement.*

Traditional forms of school improvement have tended toward both excessive abstraction, with few concrete methods that speak to specific classroom situations, and daunting complexity, with pages and pages of standards to examine, organize, and prioritize. … By searching for school improvement methods that combine simplicity and depth, we can bring large-scale change to nearly all classrooms, rather than to just a few classrooms whose energetic teachers have the time and disposition to make nontraditional improvement programs work.

What does this mean for staff development?

*Changes that are **simple** have three elements.*
• Simple changes are nor radical. revolutionary, or mold breaking. They are constructed out of the educational resources and knowledge that teachers currently possess.
• Simple changes do not create conflicts between the modes of instruction, curriculum and assessment and the policy environment of State mandates and tests.
• Simple changes respect the practicalities and resources of schools, They do not call for radical shifts in school structures or budgets.

If these simple guidelines stand alone, they might seem like a prescription for no change at all. Something very different occurs, however, if we combine them with guidelines for educational depth.

Deep changes also have three elements. (paraphrased here)
• Deep changes affect the whole faculty. They are not constructed around large general sessions, complicated structures, or pre-packaged programs.
• Deep changes enable everyone to agree on unified assessment that allows for differentiated teaching. … They require common agreements but respect the differences of grade levels and students.
Deep changes are not static long-range plans. The school evaluates and assesses their effectiveness—seeking ways to make the progress work better.

The authors cite three examples, which are adapted here.

Focusing Question
Teachers read loud brief, challenging texts, centering on one higher order question.
Students take notes focusing on the parts of the text that will help them answer the question.
Students talk about what they understand and select facts to include in the response.
Students write their responses.

Levels of Learning
Teachers adjust instruction to respond to student needs by sampling students.
Teachers select representative students' work to bring to a meeting: meets, does not meet, exceeds. Teachers discuss what adjustments in instruction they need to make to meet student needs.

Posting What's Important
Teachers post the most important steps a student needs to take to respond to a BIG question or write about an important topic.