

Designing Job-Embedded Professional Learning: The Authentic Task Approach



By Janet M. Phlegar and Nancy Hurley

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Do the following situations sound familiar? Do you see yourself, your school, or your colleagues here?

As the eighth grade language arts teacher on a middle school team, you find your team struggling with developing more integrated, thematic units that will tap the students' enthusiasm as well as provide the rich opportunities to address the most important curriculum content areas the state will be assessing come the spring. Your team has two new teachers, and your school faces a large number of new students –the sheer volume of change is demanding all available resources, including time....

Your district has just received the scores on the state's comprehensive tests and feels the push to "analyze the data" Various people have different ideas about what will be most productive...you have spent time on a district mission and vision, but taking the next steps are difficult...

As the principal you are proud that your school has been making some serious improvement efforts, but you also sense that your staff and community are trying to address too many needs and have added too many initiatives, leaving everyone feeling overwhelmed. You are concerned about your staff, as many have let you know they are stressed -- and bordering on burnout.

Though they appear to be quite different, each dilemma presented here can be effectively resolved through a learning design built for today's busy educators working in these demanding times. That design is the *Authentic Task Approach*TM -- a toolkit for turning your most necessary work into a powerful learning opportunity for everyone involved.

The purpose of this briefing paper is to define Learning Innovations' *Authentic Task Approach*¹, identify its component parts, describe some of the background to its development, and provide examples of application. To give some experience of the "look and feel" of the *ATA* in action, this paper includes a story of a school's use of the *Authentic Task Approach* that is drawn from a composite of schools and district experiences over the past few years.

The *Authentic Task Approach* is a model for educational leaders who want to improve their schools and the learning opportunities for all children who attend those schools. As many of us have discovered, fulfilling the rhetoric "All children can learn and all children can achieve high standards" is easier said than done. The *Authentic Task Approach* offers groups of diverse educators who value working together a productive and systematic way to identify problems, establish goals, and accelerate continuous school improvement. Mixed groups of educators, community members, and sometimes students who represent varying sizes and kinds of school districts have used this approach with great success.

"...we came as absolute beginners [to the process]... not as a team, but as individuals not even sure of what our mission was. And we came full circle to understanding each other, the vision of our group, our potential action plan steps, and the relationships of all of our own 'in house' restructuring initiative needs." (Administrator, elementary school, New England School-Wide Congress, 1999).

¹ The *Authentic Task Approach* is a copyrighted product of Learning Innovations at WestEd, based in Stoneham, Massachusetts. WestEd is headquartered in San Francisco, CA.

Now, picture this: A flier arrives in each of the above school settings inviting you to send a team to an *Authentic Task Approach*™ Institute “to focus on your front burner issues.” Your attention is piqued by the statement: “Come with a problem, leave with a product.” Depicted in the flier is a team that participated last year and left with a strategic plan to guide their improvement efforts. What is the *Authentic Task Approach*?

What is the *Authentic Task Approach*?

The Authentic Task Approach™ is a flexible learning design for getting real work done on two distinct levels. As a structured approach to doing a task, its essential steps make it an efficient tool for accomplishing objectives and reaching goals. On a more expanded level, and through the use of its key features -- guided facilitation, protected time, resource rich environment, and continuous reflection -- it is a powerful process for educational improvement that results in deep learning, sustained progress, and systemic change.

“The power of coming together of professionals from all levels of experience and expertise ... opportunities for collaboration were limitless.” (Teacher, New Hampshire Professional Development Institute, 1998).

“I am new to the school I represent ... I was so pleased to be a part of such a quality group. Each of us clearly showed how embedded we were in organizing our initiative to improve the quality of education at our school. We had a great facilitator who brought us from struggling in the dark to finding our way toward the light!” (Team Participant, elementary school, New England School-Wide Congress, 1999).

The *Authentic Task Approach* (ATA) provides an opportunity to get real work accomplished, while participants learn more about what needs to be done in the process, and how to be most effective in doing it. This is a *design for working and learning that most effectively capitalizes on the increasingly pressing need we have to continuously learn more while we are tackling our real world work*. It is the ultimate version of “learn while you earn”, and can be applied to most any work task in virtually any content area.

On one level, the *ATA* is a structured approach to doing a task, and therefore could be easily mistaken for a simple eight-part problem solving approach. This first dimension is extremely efficient in and of itself, and is appealing to busy, task oriented people who feel they never have the time they need to accomplish the work they have to do. But like anything intended to accomplish complex objectives, utilizing the full *ATA* treatment with all its subtleties and power, goes well beyond this level.

The more powerful dimension, and what makes the *ATA* a true learning design, revolves around the *way* the approach is used. Several key features, such as guided facilitation, protected time, a resource rich environment, and continuous reflection produce the greater likelihood that *real* learning will occur as the approach is used. The tension between learning and doing at the same time, and the implications of learning as a recursive process -- so as you learn more you shift your lens on the presenting “problem” -- are what make the *Authentic Task Approach* a powerful strategy for promoting learning and long-lasting change.

What Can the *Authentic Task Approach* Be Used For?

The types of focus areas that can be addressed by the *ATA* are varied and numerous. On review of these focus areas, patterns emerge depicting tasks from designing and planning to actually doing work. While these are typical focus areas, the *Authentic*

Example Problems Addressed effectively by the ATA:

- Create a school improvement plan
- Go through the process of aligning a school's curriculum in science (or any subject) with the state frameworks in that content area.
- Develop a full, strategic, school and district technology plan
- Write a grant to get funds to start a new after school program
- Develop an implementation plan(at the state level) to provide high impact technical assistance to school districts to help them create effective professional development
- To plan and implement a school-wide approach to using Title I funds
- To develop a new student handbook for a school
- Complete a curriculum mapping process
- Develop a new teacher induction program including designing a mentoring a coaching program
- Develop a plan to evaluate the effects of a new program to teach writing
- Develop curriculum units
- Analyze *data* on student achievement in order to target improvement efforts

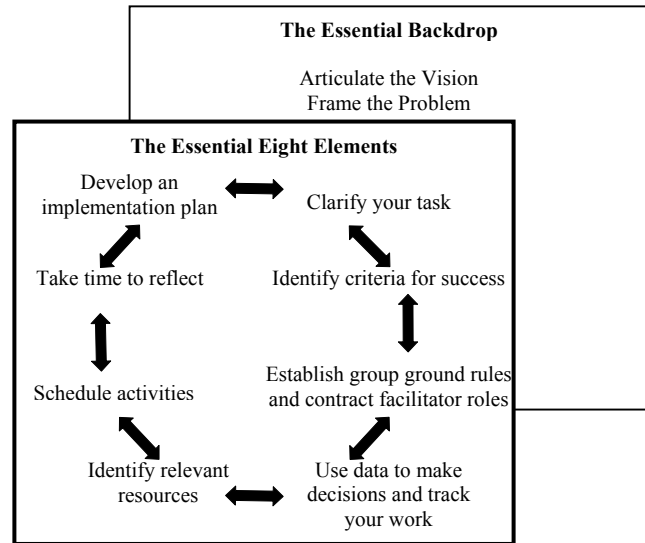
Task Approach has also been used in such varied ways that include an individual applying to graduate school, as well as by a community struggling to frame a vision for the future that turned into a strategic planning effort to get them there.

Essential to “best” use of the *ATA* is framing the task in the context of a larger goal. In the early days of the *Authentic Task Approach*, we often used the catch phrase for teams that were attending institutes modeled on this design to “come with a problem and leave with a product.” A key learning for us from the systems thinking domain is that the degree of ultimate success possible using this approach is bounded by the extent to which the participants have framed a problem that relates to achieving the most important goals, and have articulated a task that is directly tied to the root cause of the problem. This means the most complete use of the *Authentic Task Approach* is in the context in which first, a vision of a desired future has been articulated and is understood, and second, some approach or initiative has been fashioned to move toward the vision. Can you use the *Authentic Task Approach* to actually perform these two essential steps? Yes, of course. And, the *ATA* can also be used in an expedited way to accomplish a more specific piece of work. The individual or group responsible for the work may feel great, momentarily, about “getting something done.” Ultimately, this accomplishment must pass the test question: How does it contribute to the larger goal? Even more important is whether the larger goal is about promoting student success. Once you learn and internalize the approach you can re-use it at all levels.

The *Authentic Task Approach* Process

The use of the structured *Authentic Task Approach* involves engaging with eight elements. These can be thought of as steps, however, they are not necessarily sequential. In fact, you can enter into the process at any point and move to any other point, though there are some paths between the elements that are more effective than others. Since the most effective use of the *ATA* is to move forward a task in the context of a larger goal, the essential backdrop for the *ATA* includes two preconditions: *Articulate the Vision* and *Frame the Problem*.

A Snapshot – The ATA in Action
 Against the backdrop of a widely shared vision for school success, a team is working on a particular task with all members present needed to complete the task. They have a trained facilitator in addition to all the necessary members, with whom they have agreed on how they are going to accomplish their work together. Early on they come to consensus about the results they seek and have laid out these results with a great deal of specificity in order to clarify whether everyone is agreement. As they work on the task, they seek new resources, learn together and re-think their tasks. They guide their progress by looking at data and keeping good records and artifacts of their work to share with others (and they develop a plan to do so as part of how they will implement their task). They work in protected time (perhaps for a week at an institute, and then weekly back home with the “protection” from other “outside” jobs by the school board and others). They continue to seek out others who can help, and track and share their work in an implementation plan.



While you can “start anywhere and go anywhere,” and, in fact, as you learn more about your context, you may find yourself going back to a particular element for further work, experience has shown it is most effective to begin with *Clarify Your Task*. Getting a common understanding of what you are really trying to do, and when working in a team, actually coming to an agreement about the task, is not only essential, it can be much more difficult than it might seem. It is this task that most essentially links back to the way the issue is framed and uncovers many possible different perspectives, depending on the participants’ relationship to the issue. When done well, it will be impossible for the participants to miss the connections between the particular task, the larger goal, and larger systemic issues.

Most frequently, the second step is: *Identify Criteria for Success*. Begin with asking these questions: “When we are done with our task, how will we know that we have been successful? What are the indicators? What does successful completion look like?” In specifying the results participants are seeking, they can often shed more light on the task they are really trying to accomplish and the goal they are attempting to reach through the accomplishment of the task. By arriving at a common understanding through these two steps (Clarify Your Task and Identify Criteria for Success), a team working together has laid a solid foundation for the rest of its work. If they push themselves, are forthright and examine all the possibilities, they will have already learned a great deal.

While it is possible for individuals to use the *ATA* as both a strategy and a state of mind, we have found its fullest and most effective application is in work done by teams. The very makeup of a team will cause the framing of the problem to become more systemic than any one individual working alone can make it. As a structure for teamwork, the *ATA* is also a leadership development strategy—and the skills and disposition involved in coming together as an effective team producing useful results are those same ones most often mentioned about effective leadership.

The next three elements all involve taking careful actions to apply the *ATA* to the task that has been framed. *Use data to make decisions and track your work* is a fundamental principle as well as a “step” that can cause re-framing and more learning to occur. Keeping track of the team’s work is a method of keeping *on track* as well as a way to refer to the artifacts, cause re-examination of the task, and actually share process and content with many others on your “extended team.” With an increasingly sharper picture of the problem and the direction you are investigating, the team can *Identify Relevant Resources* that will be most useful to finding solutions. Occasionally, when a team starts with “un-purposeful grazing” over what’s out there and the latest trends and answers without a sharp focus on the vision and the problem, they waste enormous time and effort on “solutions” that don’t really meet their needs. Engaged with at the right stage, however, resource identification can be key to the next phase of learning. *Scheduling Activities* is a proxy for a number of actions that a team needs to undertake to actually make forward progress.

A most critical stage, and one that really needs to happen throughout the process, is *Take Time to Reflect*. The actual learning happens throughout the process of problem solving only when there is the opportunity to reflect, digest, and then move ahead. Without this, we only “do, do, do” until we feel “over-done” and exhausted with nothing really new in our hearts and heads. Unless there is reflection, there is only task accomplishment – and that is not about learning.

“I like the idea of having built in time to reflect – because that’s where you can look back and get ideas – what worked and what didn’t work for you – and how to do some things differently.” (Teacher, MEA Professional Development Institute, 1997).

The final step is *Develop an Implementation Plan*. On any of the tasks that you might undertake using the *ATA*, you need to plan, do, reflect, assess, and start again. Early on in the development of

the *ATA*, we ended the elements with “reflection,” but we found that teams tended to slow down once they left an *ATA* institute or when the structured time around the task was over. We found that by specifying an implementation plan, the team could continue forward in a more purposeful way. While it makes common sense, it can be easy to overlook.

The *Authentic Task Approach* incorporates all the principles found in effective Professional Development initiatives: (Sparks, and Loucks-Horsley, 1994)

- Foster collegiality and collaboration
- Promote experimentation and risk taking;
- Draw their content from available knowledge bases;
- Involve participants in decisions about as many aspects of the professional development experience as possible
- Provide time to participate, reflect on and practice what is learned;
- Provide leadership and sustained support;
- Supply appropriate rewards and incentives;
- Have designs that reflect knowledge of adult learning and change;
- Integrate individual, school and district goals; and
- Integrate both organizationally and instructionally with other staff development and change efforts

The Foundation for the *Authentic Task Approach*

The *ATA* is grounded in research and best practice on professional development and indeed, on teaching and learning. It is aligned with our vision that professional development is a central and valued ingredient of all education reform. Fundamental to the design of the *ATA* is:

- Knowledge of what constitutes effective professional development as well as the attributes and principles of best practice (Sparks and Loucks-Horsley, 1994);
- Knowledge about learning and teaching including that which is built upon the principles of constructivism (Duckworth, 1987), and learning which grasps the “inner intent” (Sykes, 1990) of education reforms in that it focuses on supporting all the ways in which students are learning to think, to actively solve problems, resolve dissonance, notice patterns, test conjectures, build lines of reasoning and generate knowledge. (Thompson and Zeuli, 1997);
- Principles that provide “common vision” for professional development that are built upon the Standards for Staff Development (NSDC, 1995) and the U.S. Department of Education’s Mission and Principles of Professional Development (1999);
- Understanding of the shifting paradigm of professional development (Sparks, Loucks-Horsley, 1994) from less focus on certain kinds of behaviors and forms to more focus on student learning needs, more tailored to context and content, and more job-embedded;
- Grounding in understanding that effective professional development is *designed* to address a number of key elements specific to the particular context and situation—it’s about designing systems and structures to support continuous learning) (Loucks-Horsley, Hewson, Love and Stiles, 1998);
- Understanding that the need for accountability, the pace of education reform, and true understanding of systems and how they work demand that all professional development incorporates a results-oriented focus and be grounded in systemic thinking. (Sparks, Hirsh, 1997). Ultimately

professional development needs to be about teacher practice and increasing student learning.

History

The basis for the *Authentic Task Approach* was first developed and implemented at a conference to facilitate a variety of school and community teams at a weeklong institute, sponsored by the Institute for Learning Centered Education (Learning Innovations is a founding member), held in Grand Island, New York in 1995. Each team came with its own goals, was assigned a facilitator, had access to all kinds of information resources, and had time to tackle their work. Teams went through a structured approach to clarifying their task and specifying what success would look like when they accomplished their task and then proceeded to do their work. In fact, they more than fulfilled the institute planners dreams of “come with a problem—leave with a product.” Team members reported gaining new insights and great “ahas” from their participation. These ranged from “As we learned more about what we were trying to do, we realized we’d come to work on the wrong problem!” to deepening understanding about the variety of strategies they might use to fulfill their work, to learning more about working together as an effective team.

Since 1995, Learning Innovations has continued to develop, test, modify, and evaluate the *Authentic Task Approach* for use in various contexts and formats in different focus areas and as a frame around which other organizations, professional associations, districts and states have organized for task accomplishment and professional learning. Significant use of the *ATA* in New Hampshire started with the 1996 New Hampshire Professional Development Institute and has progressed through multiple statewide events targeting improvement priorities in all areas of student achievement, special education, school to work priority areas, as well as multiple regional and local institutes. The *ATA* is now the frame undergirding the Governor’s initiative on BEST Schools, a five-year continuous improvement initiative involving the majority of New Hampshire communities. New Hampshire’s work represents significant development in the *ATA* through partnering with the State Department of Education and other state level agencies to build staff capacity to fill facilitation support roles for school districts, as well as to reflect, problem solve and think ahead about the implications for themselves as their roles continue to evolve.

The *ATA* has been used on the school level, through school team's participation in institutes at the state, regional or professional association level; and at the national level, with the National Research Council sponsored State Leadership Institute for standards-based math and science education. Schools from southeastern states sent teams to the SouthEast and Islands Regional Technology in Education Consortium (SEIR*TEC) sponsored SEA Academy in July 1999 where they worked on state level implementation problems around integrating technology into schools to support learning. The Michigan Education Association has integrated the *ATA* into its successful Professional Development Institute, which is now embedded into other MEA efforts. The six New England states have each participated in the New England Comprehensive Assistance Centers' Annual School-Wide Congress, another institute based on the *ATA*, involving school teams working on implementing school-wide Title I programs.

Until 1999, Learning Innovations disseminated the *ATA* as a model through direct consultation with partnering agencies (SEIR*TEC, NECAC) or through contract to support schools, districts, and professional associations looking for a flexible learning approach on which to design for specific needs. The future directions are to make a field tested version of the *Authentic Task Approach* more widely available through a wider variety of support, services, and products such as *ATA* Leadership Development Training and a forthcoming implementation guide.

Conclusion

To successfully implement change and address such demanding tasks as restructuring a school, instituting block scheduling, developing rich integrated learning units, or designing a comprehensive professional development program, teams of teachers, administrators, and community members must engage productively over time. This *Authentic Task Approach* allows groups to function effectively, within reasonable time frames, and is simultaneously a powerful vehicle for professional development. Teams who have used this approach report success in the complex business of managing change. They also see improvement in making decisions that stay made and increased ownership and responsibility for innovation.

“The fact that [the *ATA*] is really personalized – directly related to your own school problem – is great. You take the issue that really directly affects your school so you're not

working on irrelevant things.” (Team Participant, New Hampshire Professional Development Institute, 1998).

“I read something somewhere which reminds me of this... ‘You don’t get harmony when everyone sings the same note.’ And I thought that was such a perfect way of explaining why we want everyone working with us and why conferences like this one are so useful – none of us can do it by ourselves.” (Administrator, MEA Professional Development Institute, 1997).

“Having the opportunity to work intensively and focus on our task in an extremely effective format is invaluable. The *Authentic Task Approach* is an excellent tool to have learned.” (Teacher, New Hampshire Professional Development Institute, 1997).

Using the *Authentic Task Approach* – One School’s Story

The teachers gathered around the table in the Oakdale School library were obviously focused and on task. The lively discussion taking place revealed their satisfaction with the progress they had made in just a few short weeks. Their goal -- to formalize the rather haphazard, informal mentoring program that had been in place for a few years – was quickly moving forward. After struggling with the issue for many months, they all agreed progress was finally being made through the facilitation of Maura Wilkinson, who had joined them three weeks earlier. With her help using the *Authentic Task Approach*, everything had turned around quickly.

At the first session with Maura, they learned they had been approaching the issue with different perspectives and priorities, and getting everyone’s thoughts out on the table had helped them to clarify the task and determine criteria for success. At first, it had seemed like a simple task, with the needs of new teachers at the center of the issue. But after some brainstorming, and some tough questions from Maura, the teachers were surprised to find the task before them was more complicated, and their solution would be more far-reaching than they had expected.

As the teachers worked to address the immediate concerns that involved refining the informal procedure they had in place for selecting veteran teachers, arranging schedules, and determining pairings, they quickly learned that their entire district was more in need of a formal mentoring program than they had realized. *DATA* the team had gathered showed that many veteran teachers would be retiring in the next couple of years, and with a new elementary school and an additional middle school, there would be a huge influx of new teachers joining the system. Through a review of the research, they learned they were not alone with the dilemma of facilitating the transition of new teachers, as around the country more and more school districts were grappling with the same problem.

Driving to the Oakdale School for the third meeting of the Mentor Program Team, Maura thought about the best way to proceed today. She remembered the role the team had negotiated with her. “We’d like you to keep us on track, of course, and help us finish this plan by June. We’d also like you to be ‘real’ with us – to make sure we see the whole picture. Some of us tend to have tunnel vision,” one teacher explained, as the others chuckled. And from another: “I’d like to understand more about good teamwork by the time we finish here.”

Grateful for some time to think it through, Maura pondered her approach to today's meeting. "I think today I'll need to ask some more tough questions," she thought. "I need to help them really examine the role of their principal in this mentor program. There are so many different perspectives on this, not only in the research, but here in this group. And they need to decide how substantive these mentor/mentee relationships will be." Remembering her training, Maura thought, "I need to be sure everyone is heard today – that will be important. And I need to bring them back to reflect on where they are and how much progress they have already made together, otherwise they will make these decisions too quickly. Should be a lively discussion. I wonder how it will turn out."

When Maura entered the room, three teachers were poring over documents about training programs for mentors. Another teacher had brought in research on the success of established mentoring programs around the country, and two were discussing the necessary elements.

The others were talking about different ways to approach some immediate issues. They all gathered around as Maura began to ask some questions: "Do you want to see all new teachers paired with a mentor? Will the mentor simply be a "buddy" to help the novice adjust to the school and locate supplies, or will there be real cognitive coaching going on? And if so, do you want them to use a particular formula for their work together – one that you create? What role should your principal play? Will she be the one to decide who the mentors are? How will you dissolve the partnerships that don't work in a way that is not injurious to either party?"

One teacher offered information from some of the research that had been brought in. They wrestled with these questions, and each contributed to the discussion. Slowly they began to make some definitive decisions. Then Maura posed more tough questions regarding the big picture. She asked: "Have you thought about whether the issue is larger than simply meeting the needs of new teachers as they enter your school system? Could there be a need to address content knowledge of both new and veteran teachers? And what about the selection of new teachers? There is a large Spanish-speaking population here. Have their concerns been addressed?"

The teachers quickly went back to the rubric they had created to keep them focused on their goal, and also to record the benchmarks they agreed to at an earlier meeting. Defining and re-defining their task had become second nature to them already. They once again looked at the criteria for success they had agreed on, and refined it further. One teacher stated: "I always forget how connected everything is ... we can't change just one small piece ... we need to look at the whole system here. This is so much bigger than we realized at first. Actually, it's a bit overwhelming!"

At that point, Maura knew it was time for a break. She indicated that the today's meeting was almost over. She urged them to reflect on what they had accomplished, to write down some thoughts about how they were working as a team, and on the rubric exercise. She asked them to note how this approach had been different from other ways they had tried to tackle a problem or project. She wanted them to think about their own reactions and interactions with each other, and how they had come to resolve some disagreements that had arisen. They took a few minutes to share some of their thoughts:

“What’s different about this approach is that we are actually getting real work done together when we meet. We’re learning how to have effective meetings, how to work well together as a team, and we’re also learning a great deal about the issue at hand – mentoring for new teachers.”

“For me, I have observed myself during our group work together, and, though sometimes it’s a bit painful, I am learning through reflection that I am not always an effective team member. The good news is, I’ve started to change some of those behaviors already.”

“Yes, the ground rules we agreed to early on have been critical to our process. Not only are we more open to hearing each other and recognizing differences in perceptions and thinking, we also treat each other better. The energy in the room is more productive. All of the tension we had back at the beginning is gone.”

“I think it has been very helpful to see results so quickly from the work we have done in just a few weeks. The structure of the whole approach -- getting clearer on our task, agreeing on criteria for success, struggling with and refining the rubric, and tackling the issue head on has re-energized us all and increased our level of commitment to the group and to the task.”

Maura was exhausted when she left the meeting, but she was also optimistic. “This group made some real progress today. I’m glad I was able to include everyone in the conversation because they really listened to each other. Everyone had valuable input. I think they really honored each other’s point of view and expertise. Their decisions so far are on target. I think we’ll be able to get a timeline in place for tasks at next week’s meeting. Then, they’ll be off and running. They won’t need much more from me except follow-up in the fall.”

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