

# Three Teachers' Transfer of Literacy Learning

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## Abstract

An overarching goal of literacy professional development involves its impact on teachers' classroom practices. However, a direct consideration of this transfer of literacy learning remains unclear. I address this gap by investigating teachers' transfer of learning from their participation in a professional development event to their classrooms. I capture this intention by asking the question, what supports and drawbacks do teachers encounter when they attempt to transfer professional development proposals into their literacy classroom practices? To answer this question, I conducted a qualitative investigation during teachers' completion of activities linked to a one year, externally funded professional development project. My findings support the influence of six factors: (1) attitude, (2) compatibility, (3) activation, (4) practice, (5) information flow, and (6) self-loop. In this study, three descriptions of teachers are given to illuminate how each person's attitudes and perceptions developed in this professional development experience. The findings indicate how these three teachers' attitudes and perceptions of professional development experiences and commitment to the material influence the transfer of knowledge from the course into the reality of the classrooms.

*Keywords: literacy learning, knowledge transfer, reading perceptions*

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## 三位教師讀寫學習的課程知識之轉變

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### 摘 要

讀寫師資訓練一直以來影響與左右教學現場的成效。然，直接影響教師學習轉變因素卻不明。透過讀寫師資訓練，探討教師的學習轉變以及教學現場的應用。藉著兩方面的落差，了解教師在師資訓練學習過程中，所面臨的學習與教學應用的難處以及在教學現場應用的意願。透過一年的讀寫師資補助訓練課程與質性研究的技巧分析，檢視教師們在讀寫師資訓練過程中學習轉變的因素。研究發現，教師的學習行為印證了六個學習轉變因素：一、教師對讀寫教學的態度，二、教師對讀寫教學的適應性，三、教師對讀寫教學的活化性，四、教師對讀寫教學的實用性，五、教師對讀寫教學的融入性，六、教師對讀寫教學的未來可行性。文中鉅細靡宜描述三位教師的個人態度與師資訓練的經驗以及對教材的密切度皆都影響著讀寫師資訓練知識的轉變與現場教學應用的多寡。

**關鍵詞：**讀寫學習、知識轉變、閱讀認知

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## Introduction

The past 25 years have seen an abundance of research on reading. This trend is expected to continue with previous topics becoming more fine-grained and important and new topics coming to our attention (Pressley, 2007). Like other professionals, teachers hold a responsibility to stay abreast of this latest research. To acquire information, teachers might turn to numerous professional writings that summarize current literacy research (e.g., Armbruster & Osborn, 2002; Braunger & Lewis, 2006; Farstrup & Samuels, 2002). Commonly, teachers turn to professional development opportunities. The Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) notes that professional development experiences often trigger or enhance teachers' strategies and improve the quality of teachers' attitudes (Henke, Chen, Geis, & Knepper, 2000). Note, however, that the goal set forth by Snow and her colleague turns on implementation. Therein lies the challenge: teachers must acquire literacy information, tap it in their everyday classroom practices, and, if all goes as Snow et al. intend, enhance their students' literacy learning. Acquiring information sets this progression in process. Using this acquired information to impact student achievement demands a transfer of teachers' learning. Transfer occurs when teachers apply what they learn to a novel situation. While this process sounds simple (learn about X and then do it), transfer presents a major obstacle in the educational process (Bruner, 1977; Perkins & Salomon, 1988; Prawat, 1989). When moving from acquiring knowledge to using it, the hopefulness of professional development stalls. Even teachers who engage in professional development experiences and embrace their ideas and goals too often fail to implement these understandings in their classrooms (Ashdown, 2002; Ball & Cohen, 2000; Cobb, McClain, Lamberg, & Dean, 2003; McLaughlin, 2002; Orlich, 1981; Taylor, 1971). As literacy educators, I hold disquiet toward professional development that impacts teachers' knowledge without simultaneously triggering shifts in literacy practices. As literacy researchers, I therefore must take interest in the concept of transfer and its application to professional learning. As a step toward this overarching goal, I initially explore existing scholarship linked to professional development and transfer. This background information provides a theoretical direction for a

qualitative research project designed to understand the challenges of transfer that teachers encounter during a professional development event.

## Professional Development and Transfer

Many scholars (e.g., Berryman, 1994; Eick, Ware, & Williams, 2003; Herrington, Herrington, & Glazer, 2002; Hopkins, 1997; Rhodes & Bellamy, 1999; Rigden, 1996; Risko, 1995) have examined the content and presentation of professional development experiences. From these studies, I learn that teachers hold concerns about the appropriateness of professional development recommendations, the use of lectures as a dissemination option, and the lack of sufficient opportunities to discuss and practice the selected proposals. These areas speak directly to the organization of professional development and pitfalls that their providers should avoid. They also suggest indirect influences on transfer. Other scholars look directly at the concept of transfer. Because this more specific line of inquiry links to our intentions, I focus more attention on it. I begin by identifying three factors acknowledged by a range of scholars as important for transfer and then turn to Bruner's (1971, 1977) transfer of learning framework.

### Factors that Influence Transfer

Three factors seem to have wide acceptance for influencing transfer: (1) near and far transfer, (2) individual differences, and (3) cultural influences. I discuss each in turn.

*Near and far transfer.* According to Perkins (1988) and Salomon (1992), near and far transfer refers to the learner who has practiced in routine circumstances. For teachers, near transfer occurs when they learn a certain strategy from a professional development offering and practice it in a context similar to what they encountered in the course. Far transfer holds a different character. In this situation, teachers learn the knowledge within a context that holds little in common with the teachers' schools, students, or classrooms. For example, a sixth grade teacher might learn a strategy that focuses on an adult who reads at a second grade level. This teacher might

apply this basic reading knowledge to practices and activities for the specific reading level (grade two), but fail to note its applicability for underachieving grade six students. As another example, this time with students, Griffin (1995) set up two map tests to explore her students' near and far transfer of learning. During the instructional phase, the students were assigned to find routes from point A to point B on the map of the Florida State University (FSU) campus, a large outside area. During the transfer test, the students were required to navigate the science library on the FSU campus, which is inside of the building. Even though these two maps had similarities such as the legend and the index, these participants were unable to transfer the learning from the instructional phase to the related, but different second task.

*Individual differences.* In addressing individual differences, a number of variables matter. First, teachers hold a variety of work experiences and participate in a range of instructional moments. These individual variances often lead to differing assumptions and perspectives about their teaching context (Freeman, 1994; Freeman & Freeman, 2001; Griffin, 1995; Kaufman, 1966; Levin, 2003; Lipson & Wixson, 2003). According to Anderson and Holt-Reynolds (1995), teachers bring these same beliefs into professional development opportunities and they can affect what knowledge the teachers want to learn from professional development, and, consequently, how (of if) to apply it into their classrooms. Consider teachers who believe that teacher-centered instruction should be the main feature in the classroom. This existing stance might lead them to respond negatively to the idea of cooperative learning (Kaufman, 1966).

Teachers also differ in their motivation. Taking an example from the business world, Downe, Hartley, and Rashman (2004) interviewed some of the trainees in a workshop linked to their job responsibilities. They found that the trainees felt the material was not new for them. Because they felt that they already knew the information, these individuals lacked the motivation to learn and apply the knowledge in their job.

*Cultural influences.* Differences in the culture of the teaching and learning environment (e.g., content of the professional development design, support from peers and instructors, and external rewards) also impact teachers' transfer of learning (Pea, 1987). Pea asserts that these environmental influences combine with prior knowledge and carry over

from one experience to another. In studies conducted by Cromwell and Kolb (2002) and Kupritz and Reedy (2002), cultural factors included support from the supervisor and the feedback and rewards from management. Their presence increased the level of application and the transfer of learning to the work settings. Taylor (2000) also found that support from the instructor increased the learners' ability to transfer learning. In the end, while learners may attempt to apply what they learn in a course, environmental factors can intervene and either increase or interfere with transfer.

## Bruner's Transferability of Learning Framework

Beyond an attention to the above features, Bruner's (1971, 1977) transfer of learning framework provides an even broader interpretive frame for understanding transfer. Even though Bruner's framework describes children's transfer of learning, I consider its promise for understanding adults' professional development experiences. Bruner identifies six factors: (1) attitude, (2) compatibility, (3) activation, (4) practice, (5) self-loop and (6) information flow.

Bruner (1971, 1977) places attitude center stage. According to Smith and Van Doren (2004), if the learners' attitude toward material does not change to a positive attitude, they will not use the knowledge from the training in their work settings. Levin (2003) concurs. As he found, teachers' personal values impact their thinking about a course. Baldwin and Ford (1988) also emphasize the importance of attitude toward a training experience. They determined that the learners who have the highest need for achievement and desire to learn are more likely to apply and transfer new knowledge into work settings. These recent empirical findings with adults support Bruner's (1971) claim that attitude is the master of the fundamental idea of the transfer of learning. Learners benefit from an attitude that recognizes the benefits and worth of the new knowledge (Orlofsky, 2001).

Bruner's (1971, 1977) second factor, compatibility, refers to the learners' need to fit the new material into what they already know. As Ehrenberg (1983) indicates, many participants finish professional development experiences without a clear concept of what they are doing or a clear grasp of how this works within their teaching context. This lack of compatibility between

the new, the known, and a teacher's circumstances could result in a lack of transfer from the professional development experience.

The third factor, activation, refers to the need to experience success with the professional learning. For adults, activation might come from external sources such as money and promotion (Baldwin & Ford, 1988) or the employer's requirement that employees increase their skills (Ngeow, 1998). Another type of activation comes from the participants' desire to learn. They want to receive the information in order to succeed in the professional field. In this instance, increased competence provides the reward (Orlofsky, 2001).

The next factor, practice, provides learners an opportunity to use a skill by combining learned material with context-based activities. Ehrenberg (1983) notes that practice opportunities always provide an important tool in an ideal program. In fact, Orlofsky (2001) suggests including some of these practice sessions during class time. This built in practice affords opportunities for professional development providers to serve as a facilitator and sounding board and can provide assurance that learners are on the right track before they return to their unique work settings.

Another factor is self-loop, an expectation that successful learners must explain or restate what they have just done with others. Furthermore, Ehrenberg (1983) as well as Cromwell and Kolb (2002) agree that communication with colleagues is important for transfer because it supports learner performance on the stipulated tasks. In addition, learners who use self-loop avoid a blind use of a strategy that lacks a rationale or personalized understanding (Orlofsky, 2001)

Finally, Bruner (1977) asserts that learners need to manage the amounts of material learned. Doing this requires them to grasp, sort through, process, and digest important information in order to solve a problem. He labels this information flow. When information flow occurs, learners fix and contrast what they have learned and then apply it into their situation. For McLaughlin (2002), teachers' ability to understand how knowledge flows from the professional development event into their classroom, this "re-experience," offers one essential component for transfer.

While these recent studies and Bruner's (1977) proposals solidify the general contributors that affect transfer from professional development to a job setting or a classroom, the specific factors that influence teachers'

transfer of learning and a detailed picture of this transfer process for professional learning linked to literacy have received minimal attention. According to Pea (1987: 639), the following question captures the transfer challenge: “How can knowledge acquired in formal education be transferred appropriately to everyday life and work situations?” So, my commitment to professional development and my concern about understanding transfer for literacy teachers set the stage for this investigation. I explore this question: When teachers engage in professional development designed to impact their literacy practices, what do they view as strengthening or weakening the transfer of what they learn to what they do in their classrooms?

## Method

### Background

I conducted this qualitative investigation during the teachers’ completion of activities linked to a one year, externally funded professional development project. Developing these teachers’ understanding and uses of Scaffolded Reading Experiences (SREs) (Fitzgerald & Graves, 2004), especially to support English language learners (ELLs), formed a basis for the professional development purpose. This project included a seven-week, web-based, graduate level course offered by a university in the Northwest. The course provided participants an opportunity to simultaneously acquire new information about SREs and test the strategies in their classrooms. In addition, the on-line environment, which continued after the course ended, afforded the participants an opportunity to engage in a discussion forum where they could post questions and converse about topics of personal importance. The web-based site also provided audio and video clips related to SREs. In addition, the participants interacted face-to-face with project staff and colleagues throughout the project. By the end of the course, participants had worked through the various SREs elements, received support to implement them in their classrooms, and designed a school district dissemination project based on them.



## The Professional Development Focus

Because this professional development event emphasized SREs, I briefly explain them. In general, SREs involve a set of pre, during, and post reading activities specifically designed to assist a particular group of students to read more successfully and, as a result, understand, learn from, and enjoy a particular text selection. Each of these components serves a different purpose. Pre reading activities prepare students to read an upcoming selection. In applying them, teachers might get students interested in reading the selection, remind students of things they already know that will help them understand and enjoy the selection, and pre teach aspects of the selection that may be difficult. During reading activities include things that students themselves do as they read and things that teachers do to assist them as they read (e.g., students' reading to teachers, teachers reading to them, or students' taking notes as they read). Post reading activities provide opportunities for students to synthesize and organize information gleaned from the text so that they can understand and recall important points.

## The Course

A graduate level course offered in a web-based format provided the main source of information about SREs. During the course, the teachers explored SREs and received support in implementing them. The seven-week format of the course included weekly units that lasted from Monday through Sunday. During this time, course members were expected to examine and develop their thoughts about their teaching practice. A range of assignments encouraged participants to simultaneously reflect on lesson content and its classroom use. This involved three activities: (1) discussion postings, (2) a Learn-Apply-Ponder (LAP) response logs, and (3) Before, During, and After Reading (BDAR) assignments. The course culminated with the design and implementation of colleague-to-colleague presentations, a dissemination product for these teachers to share what they learned with their school and district colleagues.

In the discussion forum, the participants posted a minimum of two questions and three comments driven by each set of readings. For

example, the participants might post how a textbook affected and matched their classroom settings. In the Learn-Apply-Ponder (LAP) activity, they composed a log entry for each assigned reading. Specifically, the participants noted what they learned from the textbook and the course (Learn), described how they might apply what they learned from the SREs to their classroom (Apply), and, finally, shared their ideas and reflections about using SREs in their classroom (Ponder). For each of the six units, the participants completed a Before, During, and After Reading (BDAR) assignment that required them to critique, apply, or propose an aspect of SREs for a classroom setting. Participants from different disciplines worked individually or in groups for seven weeks to post questions and comments on the discussion forum and design and apply LAP and BDAR lessons for every central reading. By the end of the course, participants had worked through the various SREs elements and designed a school district presentation based on them to share what they learned with colleagues (Colleague-to-Colleague product).

## Participants

Initially, twenty-five teachers from five school districts volunteered to participate in this professional development project and enrolled in the course. From that population, I used convenience sampling (Cresswell, 2005) to select a subset of teachers. I based this selection on teachers' willingness to finish the course linked to this professional development and participate in the related questionnaires, surveys, and interviews for this investigation. In addition, I selected teachers with a diverse student population, particularly including students for whom English was a second language. Finally, I chose teachers whose individual teaching circumstances portrayed unique and varied characteristics (e.g., grade level placement, school location). In the end, this study focused on three teachers from three different school districts whom I will call Wendy, Rena, and John. As these pseudonyms indicate, two were female and one male. Their classroom teaching experiences ranged from four to ten years and covered a variety of grade levels and school contexts (Refer to Table 1 for specific information about these teachers).

**Table 1** Participants in the Study

Name	Wendy	Rena	John
Years Teaching	4	7-10	10
Class Level of Instruction	ESL upper elementary	Mainstream 6th grade middle school	ESL high school

## Data Collection and Analysis

To fully capture the concept of transfer as experienced by these teachers, I intentionally selected a varied array of data sources. In combination, they afforded a well rounded but complementary collection of information that informed my research intentions. As Levin (2003) asserts, dispositions can affect the transferability of materials learned from professional development experiences. Therefore, I initially surveyed these teachers' dispositions in order to determine any factors that might influence their transfer of the professional development experiences into their classrooms. These factors included their knowledge prior to this professional development experience, their current teaching context, and the support from the school. Then, to capture these teachers' acquisition of course information and its importation into their classrooms, I turned to several data sources: (a) background surveys; (b) pre and post SREs Knowledge and Use questionnaires; (c) course documents, which include assignments, discussion postings, and dissemination projects; (d) course experience surveys; (e) open-ended interviews (see Appendix); and (f) additional writing and e-mail correspondence from each participant responding to questions the instructor posted. I constructed the pre and post SREs Knowledge and Use questionnaire, course experience survey, and open-ended interviews based on Bruner's (1971) feature of transferability of learning framework which I previously discussed.

In the data analysis, I first did open-ended coding and then imposed Bruner's framework on the results. The theoretical framework for this study, transferability as learning (Bruner, 1971), also offers a method for describing data from attitude and perception perspectives in order to correspond to the sources of data. In this study, the framework gave a direction of exploring

the process of the participants' transfer of learning, such as the perception of the format of the course and the support from the instructor and colleagues. These factors led the researcher to identify the impacts that changed and influenced the participants' attitudes and perceptions. For example, the hindrance of the transferability as learning framework called "compatibility" gave the researcher a direction to examine the participants' struggles between their prior SREs knowledge and the applicability of the SREs in their classroom practice. The techniques of constant comparative analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Leedy & Ormrod, 2001), pattern matching (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001), and triangulation of data sources (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) were used to develop three portraits and a detailed cross-portrait analysis. Using the constant comparative method, the researcher collected data, looked for emerging themes and recurring events, categorized them, and reevaluated my theme categories. As I collected more data, I wrote analytic memos about my data, and reevaluated previous theories as I compared old data with new. Consequently, themes and patterns appeared through which I have evidence to identify and to portray the data.

To reiterate, the purpose of this study was to explore the factors that impact, for good or ill, transfer of learning from a professional development experience designed to alter a teacher's practices and, in turn, students' achievement. To accomplish this purpose, I aggregated data from six sources: a background survey, pre/post SREs knowledge and use questionnaire, course documents, a course experience survey, an open-ended interview, and additional writing. Once analyzed, these data sources contributed to an understanding of each teacher's current and past thinking about the SREs, their learning from the course, their teaching contexts, and the process of transferability to their classrooms (See Table 2 for a synthesized account of the four analyses that I used for the data sources and codes). I now share these three teachers' learning from this course and their transfer of learning process.

## Results

The purpose of this study was to explore the factors of impact transfer

of learning from the professional development experience in order to help the teachers benefit themselves and their students. In this section, through the data sources, the study focused on the background and events in this course of three classroom teachers in order to transport the reader to the course and help the reader to visualize each of them.

## Description of Individuals--Wendy (Year 4)

Wendy did change her perceptions regarding her real teaching contexts and prior SREs perception knowledge. Initially, Wendy was confident of her SREs knowledge because she had trained before. Consequently, she was not serious during her SREs course learning. However, she changed this view because she found the textbook gave her a different view of SREs. At that moment, she felt that SREs was applicable and useful for her classroom. In

**Table 2** Methods for Analyzing Data Sources and Codes

Constant comparative analysis	Pattern matching	Triangulation of data sources	Content analysis procedures	
Background survey Code: prior SREs training			V	V
Pre- and post-SREs knowledge and use questionnaire Code: prior and current knowledge			V	V
Course documents Code: personality, confusion, complaints, implementation	V	V	V	V
Course experience surveys Code: reaction about SREs			V	V
Open-ended interviews Code: complaints, personality, confusion, support, practice	V	V	V	V
Participants' writing Code: complaints, confusion	V	V	V	V

her words from the Unit 7 Lap assignment,

*Reading the book gave me a better understanding of what and why we should use SREs in the classroom. I think that every teacher should be required to read sections of this book so that they are more sensitive to the needs of all their students-not just their ELL student.*

In Wendy's prior perception of SREs knowledge, she also changed her perception. According to comparison the pre & post-SREs Knowledge and Use questionnaire, she seemed to realize that even though she knew the basic steps of using SREs, she did not think accommodating students' needs was useful. She also understood that application of SREs was an important process for SREs understanding because she felt that SREs processing was a time consuming tool in her prior SREs perception. Therefore, she felt she learned something and had more understanding of SREs and realized that her prior SREs knowledge was not deep enough for her to deal with ELL's needs in her classrooms.

## Description of Individuals--Rena (Year 7-10)

During this course, Rena considered professional development experiences as the way that she could collect the strategy in her mind but not using them purposely rather randomly used such as, whenever she felt comfortable of using them in her classroom. Initially, she thought this course was like the other classes that she had taken. Consequently, the course confused her, such as the instructor's instruction, comments, lack of interaction and the format of the course because the course did not meet her expectation. Luckily, Rena's colleague helped her to understand the course; for example, they discussed the readings and the assignments about the course in the school district. Therefore, Rena felt that colleague's support was the big factor influencing her knowledge of the big picture of the SREs course. In a sense, Rena brought her own perception to view the course; however, she did not realize that she needed to change and be aware of her perception toward this course. From the Unit 2 LAP assignment, she expressed "I have to admit the amount of information for ME to process and

apply in one week was overwhelming.” She felt the limited time caused her to improve less on her teaching strategies in the classroom. Therefore, during the course, she judged the course and the instructor did not help her for involvement in the course. Finally, she understood the course and changed the expectation that she brought in to the course because the more work and time that she spent made her understand the format of the course.

## Description of Individuals--John (Year 10)

John did change his perception of ELLs as emergent readers. Initially, he was not able to provide appropriate teaching for his ELLs and he believed SREs could not help those emergent readers. However, the instructor’s visit gave him the impetus to change because the visit gave him a detailed explanation of how SREs operates. As he said in the interview:

*[Cindy's visit] gave me the impetus to realize I've got to teach reading. Even though my kids are emergent speakers and emergent readers, I have to prepare them to read and it gave me the rationale that this reading experience will actually boost their language capability to reading and their speaking capability. It will just accelerate their uptake of the English language ....*

Additionally, while he read the textbook, and reviewed his teaching context, this cooperation made him realize that SREs is an important tool for ELLs to scale up in their English ability and also that the outcome of using the SREs was successful. During the course, John’s colleagues’ support was another factor influencing his understanding and implementation of SREs. Through various explanation, implementation and cooperation methods, John was getting a picture of SREs and a better understanding of how to improve his teaching and assist his ELLs. During the course, even though there was a disturbing thing, e.g., an intensive course, it was not able to stop John’s eagerness to learn and to know about the SREs. Consequently, John’s positive personality was a major factor influencing his success and absorbing SREs information and implementing what he learned from the course.

As I previously explained, literacy teachers’ process of transfer from professional development experiences lacks a detailed account of the factors

that influence it. I seek to fill that void. To facilitate it, I invoked Bruner's (1971, 1977) model of transferability of learning at previous stages of this project. I again utilize its six components (i.e., attitude, compatibility, activation, practice, self-loop and information flow) which I found applicable to my findings.

## Factor One: Attitude

These three teachers brought various attitudes to this professional development project that impacted their learning and application. For example, from the beginning Wendy reported that SREs was not a useful tool for her classroom because it did not apply to her lower readers. This attitude toward SREs reduced her initial receptivity to additional knowledge and the application of it. Early on, she chose not to read the textbook and instead read the discussion postings to understand SREs. Similarly, Rena brought an attitude that also contributed to her stance toward the course content. Initially, she said that SREs was a useful tool for ELLs but not for mainstream students. Seemingly, Rena had some misunderstandings and confusion about SREs as explained and discussed in the course, and thus her learning and application of it slowed. After she implemented SREs in her classroom, she changed her mind and said that SREs could be useful for both types of students.

In part because John did not have any previous SREs professional development experiences, he brought in a receptive attitude. He wanted to learn this new knowledge in order to benefit his students. Even though he struggled with how to teach ELLs, from the beginning he exhibited a willingness to learn from this professional development opportunity and the course. This type of attitude helped him to understand SREs and resolve the problems that happened in both such as fitting course requirements and different classroom activities into an already crowded personal and professional life.

Without exception, these teachers' initial attitudes affected their subsequent learning and transfer of it to their classrooms. Wendy and Rena were distracted by their prior SREs knowledge. Since they had previous professional experiences with SREs, they believed that this professional



development opportunity would replicate rather than add to what they knew. John, on the other hand, did not express any initial hesitancy toward the SREs readings and the instructor's expectations. As evidenced by his interview and course evaluations, he felt this was the most useful course that he had ever taken.

## Factor Two: Compatibility

Issues of compatibility arose for each teacher. For Wendy and Rena, the most stark example stemmed from their belief from prior SREs training that SREs were too time-consuming and therefore inappropriate for their classrooms. For example, Wendy described rewriting the text, a proposal from Fitzgerald and Graves (2004), to be an interesting and potentially beneficial activity, but she worried that creating it would take too much time. Therefore, she did not try it. Consequently, and based on her response to one SREs option, she classified the entire SREs concept as too time-consuming. Her perceived lack of time resulted in her not applying a single SREs strategy in her classroom. Finally, at the end of the course, she confessed that the lack of application of SREs beyond the course assignments caused her to maintain an incomplete understanding about them.

Rena, too, shared the belief that pre reading and during reading activities went beyond time available to her. While she gained an additional respect for their potential, she did not know how to consistently balance her two competing understandings of promise and impossibility. She remained challenged by this competition between dividing and balancing possible SREs reading activities. Another compatibility problem arose for her when she attempted to connect SREs and her assessment of less capable readers. For example, the textbook for the course questioned the importance of testing lower readers for the purpose of grading them. This troubled Rena. She wondered how she was going to present a grade to one student that would be different from another student without formal testing. In addressing this dilemma, Rena could not find a connection between what she learned in the course and the classroom circumstances that concerned her.

John also experienced compatibility problems in learning and applying the principles of SREs. He struggled to balance his attention to the goals of

his academic subjects and his intention to make his instruction interesting for his English Language Learners (ELLs). In his mind, he tried to do his best to support his ELLs by using different strategies and considering SREs. He understood the need to connect his previous actions with these new ideas. He persisted and eventually perceived SREs as compatible with his understanding of worthwhile events for his ELLs.

In the main, the problem of compatibility that Wendy and Rena encountered stemmed from their perceived disconnection between SREs and their classroom settings. Because of their initial lack of clarity about the concept of SREs, they were afraid to try the strategies in their classroom because they regarded them too difficult and time-consuming. In contrast, John understood that a lack of compatibility might appear between his classroom context and the SREs proposals, but he willingly examined the problem in order to improve himself and offer better teaching for his students.

### Factor Three: Activation

As a reminder, activation refers to events that support a learner's push for success. Before this professional development event began, these three teachers experienced different activations regarding their involvement with it. Baldwin and Ford (1988) assert that learners who have the highest need for employment achievement and desire to learn are more likely to transfer the knowledge into the job setting. As an example of this type of activation, John's supervisor recommended that he participate fully in this project and course. He tried to do a good job, in part, to impress his supervisor. This desire to make a good impression on his supervisor made him want to learn the applicable SREs strategies for his classroom needs. Rena came to this course because it was free, and she felt that she could get free resources and credit for her professional development experiences and graduate degree. This type of monetary activation helped her to understand and apply SREs to complete the course assignments. She wanted to show the instructor that she was trying hard in this course in order to get the benefits linked to it. Consequently, this motivated her to apply SREs strategies in her classroom. In contrast, Wendy came for individual needs. She decided to enroll in

the course because of a book that she received from previous professional development. When she found out that this was a course related to her book, she thought this would be a chance to better understand SREs. However, this attitude did not help her to understand the SREs fully. She did not have a need to do a good job for anyone. Presumably, she held a weak and incomplete desire for learning from this course.

As with previous attributes, activation differently influenced these teachers' learning and application of the professional development information. For Rena and John, a push from a supervisor and monetary rewards activated their processes of transfer of learning. Wendy's activation (i.e., her own purposes and goals) did not provide the additional drive to maximize transferability.

## Factor Four: Practice

During this professional development event, these three teachers' practice of the various proposals in their classrooms depended on whether they thought SREs could benefit their classroom. While each teacher completed the course-based practice activities, they differed in practicing them in their classrooms. For example, and as previously mentioned, Wendy initially did not utilize SREs in her classroom. She did not view them as useful and beneficial for all students and she considered her available time inadequate. Contrary to Wendy, Rena practiced some SREs strategies, but declined to use those that she predetermined did not apply to her classroom. Furthermore, she, too, felt that she did not have enough time to regularly apply SREs strategies in her classroom. As for John, he was satisfied with the practice generated by the course assignments. He felt that he sufficiently learned one applicable strategy each week to apply it in his classroom the next week. He did not doubt that SREs would benefit his classroom and that he was prepared to implement them.

Overall, these teachers' stance toward an idea's applicability typically determined its practice. If a teacher did not pinpoint an advantage, he or she would not attempt to use the proposed idea beyond the course assignments. In addition to the lack of applicability that Wendy and Rena perceived for SREs in their classrooms, they continued to cite a lack of time. However, John

applied those strategies in his classroom that Wendy and Rena rejected and found that they enhanced his previous teaching and made it more beneficial for his students. He was pleased with the result of using SREs because they worked so well in his classroom. As these teachers' practice decisions note, classroom use of an idea does not occur in a straightforward line from the course to the classroom. Instead, and even when successful course-based practice occurred, these teachers' prior knowledge of SREs impacted their willingness to use them in real time.

## Factor Five: Self-Loop

For these teachers, and as provided in this professional development, support from colleagues afforded an important element for the teachers in learning and implementing SREs. For instance, Rena discussed the course assignments and the required readings with a colleague in order to pass the course. Even though Rena received support from her colleague, she did not gain a complete understanding about SREs. She continued to lament that this course was not applicable and too time-intensive for her to implement SREs. She relied on her prior knowledge to select only particular SREs strategies. In this instance, support from her colleagues did not help her to create a concrete idea about the classroom application of SREs. Instead, she simply focused on finishing the course requirements.

Like Rena, John also received support from colleagues. However, he was more likely to discuss how the strategy could be implemented in his classroom and share this reflection with them. The communication between John and his colleagues typically fostered a positive reflection about each other's implementation. Through this shared communication, John had a concrete understanding of SREs and created a fuller picture for appropriately using them in his classroom. Wendy, on the other hand, did not have a colleague in her school or district to support and talk with her during this course. In spite of the availability of on-line support, she felt that she worked entirely alone.

For each participant, communication with colleagues impacted how they perceived and understood this course. However, only positive communication with a colleague possibly enhanced the teachers' willingness

and motivation to transfer their learned knowledge into the classroom. Both Rena and John received support from their colleagues, but the end result of application of SREs turned out differently for them. Rena still used her previous pedagogical stances to select only certain strategies. John, on the other hand, was totally receptive to considering all SREs strategies and selecting from them to use in his classroom. So, while good communication and support generally helped each teacher, only positive communication with colleagues about classroom implementation supported transfer.

## Factor Six: Information Flow

When teachers organize the ideas they learn from professional development, they typically digest it and fit it into the reality of their classrooms. However, Wendy and Rena had difficulty with this progression. For example, when Wendy initially read the textbook, she felt that its information did not match her teaching context and, therefore, she balked at transferring the information into her classroom. She repeatedly commented that the SREs did not apply to her students. Rena had a similar problem. If the text presented strategies for students that differed from those she taught (e.g., a grade level difference), then Rena would not use them because the situation did not mirror the one that she faced in her classroom. Apparently, Wendy and Rena could not digest some of the SREs knowledge presented in this course if even the slightest variation from their specific situation existed.

As for John, he valued the textbook's content because it reminded him to think about his teaching context. And he did. During this course, he practiced textbook recommendations in his classroom and in his completion of course requirements. Seemingly, John learned what he needed to know without rejecting or being overly selective; he knew how to digest the information he learned from the course and apply it into his classroom. In other words, he was not burdened by what he needed to know and what he did not need to know. He considered everything in this course and adapted it to fit his teaching context.

Based on these teachers' experiences, simply collecting strategies from professional development is not enough for teachers to transfer them to their classrooms. They also must digest the information and apply it to specific

situations. This is a key step of transfer of learning. In this course, Wendy and Rena experienced a hard time conceptualizing the SREs strategy and determining whether or not it could be implemented into their classroom. They continued to hold a reticence about whether SREs coincided with their teaching experience and supported their teaching context. They took longer to learn and implement the SREs. John, on the other hand, was not selective of the material in the SREs; he accepted it all. When he successfully implemented it, he realized the inadequacies of his previous teaching experiences to adequately support his students' literacy learning. In other words, the implementation of the SREs without selection and rejection based on prior knowledge helped John to reconsider the appropriateness of his previous teaching experiences.

## Concluding Comments on these Teachers' Transfer of Learning

According to Bruner's (1971, 1977) model of transferability of learning, attitude matters in how learners view incoming information. Attitude also mattered for Rena, Wendy, and John. These three teachers initially exhibited differences about how they might incorporate this professional development proposal in their individual classrooms. However, unlike Wendy and Rena, John early on perceived benefits from the SREs and implemented it very well in the classroom. In the description of his process of transfer of learning, John embraced a need for teachers to upgrade their ability to teach because the world is changing. He vowed to keep moving forward in his profession. Consequently, this attitude led him to persist in this course even though he encountered problems and obstacles. He did not stop or change his receptive attitude toward the professional development experiences.

Wendy and Rena felt that professional development experiences should provide them with directly applicable strategies for their classrooms. They deemed the need for change or modification an unnecessary burden. Peery (2004) and Ashdown (2002) commented that some teachers become tired and frustrated when professional development experiences force them into the type of real learning that requires the use of a strategy in their

classrooms. Returning to Bruner (1971), if the learner can fix and digest the information into the specific situation, then they can achieve transferability. However, Wendy and Rena did not adjust and transform the knowledge they learned. Rena desired a professional development experience that would be fast and evidence an immediate result. Similarly, Wendy wanted to see a quick result and not devote much time to achieve it. Therefore, Wendy and Rena's attitudes toward professional development experiences coupled with their steadfast concern about time resulted in their incomplete understanding of the concept of SREs and less than hoped for use of them. As Peery laments, too many teachers, like Wendy and Rena, miss something in their professional field by seeing dead ends rather than possibilities.

In contrast, John's commitment to his students, and especially his understanding of the situation that ELLs encounter, allowed him to persevere to find a better solution for them. According to Husu (2002), teachers' commitments extend beyond the students' personal welfare to include students' academic improvement in their schoolwork. Often this commitment requires that teachers maintain "personally relevant and optimistic beliefs" (Husu, 2002: 65) about their students and teaching contexts. Throughout this study, John desired not only to teach the subject for his students, but also exhibited concern about his students' lives and the school's learning demands. He displayed empathy toward his ELLs' learning obstacles and a willingness to support them in order to achieve the standards of the school. Based on his commitment to the students, he persisted to learn how to use SREs for their benefit. As these results confirmed, when something did not work in his teaching, when a student did not learn or behave as expected, or when his interactions with students were not productive, he believed that he was the one who needed to change and provide help. He did not blame the strategy or the students. After all, he viewed himself as the professional who needed to find a way to solve the problems rather than pull the students from his classroom or set their learning aside.

Wendy and Rena reported the amount and quality of thought and energy they put into their work. Even though they cared about their students' learning and lives, based on this data, they did not take time to fully commit to the proposals from this professional learning opportunity. They considered SREs a good tool, but hamstrung by their original hesitations and fueled by

their perception of a lack of compatibility with their classroom contexts, they reneged on classroom implementation.

In summary, John, Wendy, and Rena differed in their attitudes toward the professional development experience. For example, while Wendy and Rena felt that professional development experiences were time-consuming, frustrating, and isolating, John did not. He believed that he could address all students' learning challenges. To do so, he needed to keep moving because he believed he had much left to learn. In the end, John, the teacher with a positive attitude toward the professional development experiences, transferred learning more readily (See Table 3 for a summary of the application of the six transfer factors to these teachers).

## Discussion and Implications

More and more, school districts plan and teachers attend professional development sessions. Whether offered on-line or face-to-face, the goal remains constant: change teachers' literacy practices and improve students'

**Table 3** Summary of Application of Six Factors of Transferability

Factor	Attitude	Compatibility	Activation	Practice	Self-loop	Information flow
Wendy	Confident about the SREs	Conflicting between prior and current knowledge	Previous book	Not beneficial and no time for practicing	No support from the colleagues	Difficult to digest the SREs into the classroom
Rena	Confident about the SREs	Conflicting between prior and current knowledge	Monetary	Practice partly	Negative support from the colleagues	Difficult to digest the SREs into the classroom
John	He liked to learn new knowledge	He was willing to overcome the struggles	Supervisor	Followed the required practice	Positive support from the colleagues	Understand the SREs and able to fix into his classroom



literacy achievements. For John, Wendy, and Rena, this was not a straight line occurrence. Instead, their accounts underscore that factors such as attitude, compatibility, activation, practice, self-loop and information flow either place obstacles or foster building blocks into professional development initiatives. The message learned from them becomes simple. Professional development plans might consider more than content and organizational arrangements. Based on the findings, there were attitude and perception differences among these three teachers. The attitude and perception differences seemed to be caused by the teachers' lack of a concrete SREs background, and how their attitude toward this course reflected a misunderstanding of the prior knowledge. Also, the teachers might not understand how to adjust between their prior knowledge and current SREs learning knowledge, and then how to apply to their classroom practice, because there was not enough time and attitude adjusting to enable what they learned to eventually go beyond their classroom. Therefore, the suggestion for professional development needs to provide teachers with opportunity to voice their prior attitude and perception toward workshops and courses in order to discover the misconceptions among them. In the meantime, the instructor needs to give the teachers a clear goal of this course and give them explicit instruction and assignment that will benefit their class. This type of attitude and perception interaction will clear the teachers' misunderstanding and confusion about the course.

Implementation of ideas, rather than initially learning and practicing them, becomes the benchmark for judging the success of professional development experiences. This implementation requires transfer. While I found that Bruner's (1977) six factors applicable, the experiences of these three teachers clarify that two of them matter more: (1) attitude, especially the individual differences of teachers' receptivity toward the new information, and (2) compatibility, primarily the cultural influence of the classroom context. I acknowledge that these findings stem from a specific type of professional development opportunity (an on-line course), a relatively unidimensional intention (to institute SREs), and a unique and small compilation of participants. Therefore, I do not propose infallibility to my conclusions and commitments. Like Hillocks (1995), I do think qualitative studies can imply predictions. My strong prediction is this: Without

acknowledging and accounting for the role that attitudes and context play in professional development, they hold the potential to derail professional development initiatives. While transfer of learning will never become a simple process, it is possible to strengthen it. Identifying and embracing teacher and workplace differences and planning in advance for these variations afford a richer way for considering transfer. In turn, identifying these important differences suggest guideposts for instituting a wider range of features into a professional development program and monitoring for them along the way.

Horton (1998: 100) attests that “the only reason problems seem complicated is that you don’t understand them well enough to make them simple.” My findings pinpoint a co-mingling of factors that facilitate transfer. Attending to them presents a challenging but not an impossible, perhaps even simple, goal.

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## Appendix: Interview Questions

1. What makes a professional development experience useful for you?  
Be specific.
2. How does what you learned in the Scaffolding Reading Experiences (SREs) course apply to your classroom? Please give a specific example.
3. Have you or will you use what you learned in the course? Why? Why not?
4. If so, how have you used it (the specific example)?
5. What prompted you to take this course?

