



## From the President .....

### Leading professional development sessions

For me, one of the joys of 2022 has been gradually getting back into working with teachers face-to-face, and it has been great to be able to operate in an 'in-person' format again. Returning to leading face-to-face sessions has got me thinking about the local MA branch meetings that take place up and down the country and why I missed the in-person ones so much. I thought it might be useful in this issue of *MA News* to consider what might make for a good local branch meeting, at least in my opinion. And, if you've never led such a meeting before, maybe this might encourage you to offer to do so at some point in the future.

The online media of *Zoom* and *Teams* certainly have their advantages, and I was grateful to have them during the pandemic. Online sessions sometimes enable people to participate from more remote locations, or enable those who have caring responsibilities that might prevent them from attending in person on a weekday evening or a Saturday morning. The online format also means that you can guarantee that everyone will have access to some kind of technology, which might be something you want to make use of during the session. I think with more 'presentation' styles of session, online can often work very well indeed, and is easily recordable for those who might want to view it at a different time. But, if the session is intended to be more 'hands on' – doing mathematics together – as many sessions with teachers are, then the talking and interacting that is fundamental to that is, I find, still really hard to replicate online. When leading an online session, I find it very difficult to 'read the room' and gauge when it might be beneficial to give people more time, versus when to interrupt and move things on. Visiting online breakout rooms one by one can be intrusive, and it's impossible to 'eavesdrop' on what's being said, or surreptitiously glance over people's shoulders to see how they might be getting on with a task. It's difficult to talk individually with anyone who has a particular issue that is perhaps unique to them, and it's hard to judge whom it might be particularly beneficial to seek a contribution from in a subsequent discussion. On top of all of that, online

sessions seriously curtail those valuable incidental opportunities to chat over coffee and just relax and mingle with people we know well, and meet and build links with others.

A local branch meeting was my first encounter with the MA over 20 years ago – and I was hooked! Since then, I've attended a great many branch meetings in a variety of locations, encompassing a wide range of different styles of session. I can honestly say I've never been to a 'bad' one, and have always benefited enormously from whatever has been offered. Clearly, there is no 'one right way' to run such a session, but I thought I'd reflect here on things that I've appreciated as a participant in sessions like that, and offer some suggestions about what might make for a successful professional development session.

I'm aware that branches sometimes struggle to find people willing to lead sessions, and the branch leaders do a tremendous job in keeping branches alive and setting up and managing events.

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Sometimes people tell me that they are reluctant to offer to lead their first session, and, while perfectly understandable, this is perhaps a little bit strange. Teachers are very used to being ‘up front’ and speaking to and interacting with a crowd, since this is obviously precisely what they do in their day job. For people in many professions, speaking in public is a terrifying prospect, but this is generally not so for teachers, although I have often seen teachers who are extremely confident in front of children feeling very different about addressing, say, a staff meeting in school.

Maybe some things that we do unintentionally create a bit of a mystery about leading sessions that perhaps contributes to people feeling reluctant to do it. In particular, I think there is sometimes a bit of a ‘celebrity culture’ with conferences and meetings, which I think is very unhelpful and something we could try to work against. When you see a session advertised, do you look first at the name of the presenter or at the title of the session? At conferences, I find that people often say, “I went to so-and-so’s session. Whose session did you go to?”, and I notice that I often do this myself. But this can turn sessions into being all about the *person* rather than the *content*. I wonder what would happen if we perhaps chose not to advertise who the presenter was? Then we would all have to choose what to go to based on our genuine interest in that topic. Surely, it shouldn’t matter who is leading – only what they have to say or offer? If you’re particularly interested in, say, use of manipulatives in the classroom, then why would you pass up an opportunity to attend a session about that, just because you perhaps hadn’t happened to have heard of the presenter?

Even choosing based on topic may be questionable. At a conference, with multiple parallel sessions, that’s probably a necessity. But, with your local branch, a different way of thinking about it would be to try to attend *whatever* the topic, in order to support and meet with colleagues and be part of a community, accepting that some topics are likely to appeal more than others, but that there will always be something to learn from *any* session. Attending a branch meeting on a topic which you probably *wouldn’t* choose at a conference can take you out of your comfort zone and give you the opportunity to learn or experience something new. In particular, I’ve found attending sessions aimed at a topic about which I know little can be very enlightening, with often lots more than I would have expected to take back to my own area. I have always found people very accepting of me apparently attending the ‘wrong’ session, and rarely assuming that I must have come into the room by mistake!

I think we need to work on helping each other to get past ‘imposter syndrome’ and feelings of ‘unworthiness’ to lead sessions. I think it would reflect badly on us as an Association if people felt that there was no point offering to lead a session as they “weren’t well-known enough” and so “no one would come”. Really, it shouldn’t matter who’s leading – we should be about the mathematics and the community and the learning, rather than ‘personalities’. I recall some great sessions I’ve attended in the past, but I don’t recall who led them – I think we shouldn’t fixate on that. Part of the value of a branch meeting is just getting together and being mathematical.

Imagine a branch meeting about to start, and the phone call comes through to say that the speaker has got stuck on a train, and won’t be there until after the session is due to end. Or perhaps the speaker is there and all ready to begin, but suddenly receives a call about a family emergency, and has to leave immediately. This is life; these things happen. Is the session a write-off? Do we apologise and send everyone home? It’s disappointing, of course, but doesn’t have to be a disaster. Perhaps it’s a bit like a last-minute cover lesson in school where no work has been set. There are things that can be done. In professional development situations like this, I’ve heard about people suddenly stepping up and offering something they have up their sleeve – perhaps something planned for another occasion. Failing that, everyone can be asked to share around tables some of their best teaching ideas, or maybe some of their teaching struggles – perhaps things that they’ve done recently that seemed to go well and things that they are currently finding problematic. You could easily have a great session of sharing such thoughts around tables, and then perhaps collecting ideas in a plenary. It takes no preparation – just a willingness to create that space and capitalise on the experience and expertise in the room. I have heard colleagues going away from a session like that saying that it was one of the best they’ve experienced. Teachers are on the brink of productive conversations all the time, and it may not take much to facilitate that.

If you’re nervous about offering to run a session – maybe you feel like you don’t have any great, original ideas to share – I would say that that doesn’t matter.

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Just as in the classroom, teachers should not be expected to design all their own tasks from scratch, teachers find good tasks and maybe adapt and improve them and gain experience using them with their learners. So, the same should apply to professional development sessions. Novelty is overrated. It doesn't matter if the task isn't 'yours', because you can 'make it yours'. If you suspect that participants may have seen it before, then it can become their job (as, presumably, more experienced people) to adapt and extend it in interesting ways. There are thousands of great tasks in MA/ATM books and journals, on NRIC, and elsewhere. I think any teacher could lead a great branch meeting by just picking a couple of those tasks, spending some time in advance working on them and getting to know them really well – perhaps trying them out with their learners – and then building a session around sharing those tasks, giving everyone plenty of space to work on them and discuss them. Anyone can lead a branch meeting like that – you could be the least experienced teacher in the room, and that would be fine. Just find some tasks that interest you, work on them yourself to see what might be interesting about them, and present them, and I guarantee that others will find interest in them too. Whatever else you might feel you are not very expert on, you can *become* the expert on those tasks, so that you will know more about them than anyone else in the room. And I'm sure this would make a great session – that's certainly the sort of session I'd like to come to, and I wouldn't care who was in charge. I think branches could thrive with that kind of approach.

As with many things, I think with running sessions for teachers there is always a danger of overcomplicating things. This leads to over-preparation, stress and workload issues for teachers who already have an incredibly busy day job. Less is often more. When I am leading something, I always like to have plenty of material, which for me means plenty of tasks up my sleeve, in case any particular task doesn't seem to 'fly' on the day. But, as people sometimes say, the best sessions have 20 slides but only use the first 3! Unlike with school teaching, there is of course no prescribed content – there is nothing we have to 'cover'. So we can take our time and give lots of space for reflection and discussion. I like how in some sessions I've attended we seem to be given just enough mathematical activity for us to have something worth reflecting on and thinking about that we can develop from professionally – we are not rushed from idea to idea. It might only need one or two tasks to do this. With the right attitude, something interesting will always emerge if we trust the mathematics and the participants.

I do believe that how well a session goes depends much more on the participants than the presenter. With a great room full of teachers it is hard to have a 'bad' session. I was thinking about times when I have heard parents complain that their child was being taught by a newly-qualified teacher, and could they please be moved to a different class. I think it is very unwise of parents to make assumptions about teaching quality based on 'years of teaching' and not to trust a new teacher, who is possibly full of energy and great ideas. I am certainly very glad that my own daughter has had the opportunity to be taught by excellent newly-qualified teachers. Similarly, it will be healthy for our Association if we value being led in our thinking and development by those we might not (yet) have heard of, and if we attend sessions for the mathematics and the collegiality, rather than any 'big name'.

Colin Foster  
MA President 2022-23

## Maths Week England

Maths Week England, launched in 2019, is running again this year from 14th November to 18th November 2022. More details can be found at <https://mathsweekengland.co.uk>

Teachers are encouraged to sign up for the event.

(Members living in or near the capital may be interested in Maths Week London which is planned for 26th to 30th June 2023)

