

The Future of PD:

How Professional Development for Educators Needs to Adapt to the 21st Century

For students to remain globally competitive, teachers also need to be globally competitive. It is common sense and the focus on President Obama's five-year strategic plan for STEM Education, addressing the lack of qualified teachers in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics, and the related subjects that fall under each. Grants have been flagged, and federal resources have been dedicated... but how do we make sure our STEM educators get the professional development (PD) that they need? What model works best for today's busy teachers? As priorities change and develop, how do we best support our educators so our students remain the priority and focus, not bureaucratic details?

The History of Teacher Professional Development

As education today is constantly changing, adapting to the complex challenges of new technology, academic standards, and increasingly diverse classrooms, professional development (PD) for educators is undergoing a similar metamorphosis.

Once viewed as vital for staying abreast of trends and standards, PD has been criticized for its cost, lack of tangible test score improvement, and vague goal setting.

The number of PD programs has also increased in variety and complexity. Historically, most administrators have favored the workshop approach, or staff-development day, conducted by a curriculum expert. However, many believe that these workshops are more like interesting lectures than building on the facilitators' knowledge and adding measurable value. In fact, PD was denied funding under the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Today's PD includes a range of activities such as teacher induction, the credits or degrees teachers earn as part of recertification or to receive salary increases, the national-board-

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certification process, and participation in subject-matter associations or informal networks.¹

It seems like our educators, already entrusted with our most valuable national resource – teaching our children- receive mixed messages. On one hand, federal funding is cut for professional development as new requirements and standards are placed on them; on the other hand, activities billed as PD lack often don't translate to an immediate, measurable impact teachers can use the next day.

For example, if the STEM initiative seeks to increase the number of teachers and students concentrating in the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics, and provides funding to help teachers develop more in those areas, how do administrators design a plan for all staff that addresses all of their existing (and sometimes underfunded) needs while “adding in” this new area of focus? Or should professional development for STEM educators look completely different than their peers? Today's administrators have their work cut out for them, every bit as much as today's educators do.

Current Challenges

Today's 21st century educators face more challenges than ever before: changes in how they are evaluated, standardized testing, Common Core State Standards, and the STEM focus mentioned above. Classes are more diverse, with English a second language for increasing numbers of students, and funding is consistently difficult to obtain due to a prolonged stagnant economy. The education community – including teachers, administrators, education consultants, and federal and state government and elected officials – continue to search for the solution that will deliver the best results and show continuous improvement in test scores, college and higher education placement statistics, and a decrease in dropout rates. But the end result is that many educators and administrators have to constantly re-evaluate their PD programs, or change them just as they are beginning to show results.

Non-profit public / private partnership group P21, The Partnership for 21st Century Learning, stated in an e-paper that, “Twenty-first century skills professional development prepares teachers and principals to

“To be able to connect with colleagues teaching my subject around the country, to bounce ideas, share lessons that connect and inspire our students has been an exciting and valuable opportunity.”

Chris Lord, Video Production Teacher

¹ Sawchuk, S., “Professional Development for Teachers at Crossroads,” Education Week, Nov. 10, 2010a.





integrate 21st century skills into their classrooms and schools. It should be a part of a comprehensive emphasis on these skills, including an alignment with standards, curriculum and assessments.”² The group went on to name several attributes shared by what they viewed as successful PD programs:

- ▶ They ensure that teachers understand 21st century skills and how important they are, with a focus on how to integrate them into daily instruction.
- ▶ They enable collaboration among everyone participating in the PD activities.
- ▶ They allow teachers and administrators to create their own learning communities, tapping into the expertise within a school or district through mentoring and coaching relationships, and team teaching activities.
- ▶ They use 21st century tools to support and nurture the professional development of teachers in their role as facilitators of learning.

This ideal outcome for a successful professional development program issued a challenge to everyone in the education community designing PD programs for their districts. However, many have successful programs in place already, that would not be logistically possible, or financially responsible, to eliminate.

A Holistic Approach

This is also not to say that the once-a-year peer workshop is not effective. There are many great education consultants who dedicate their lives to the type of deep thought and analysis that comes from exposure to a broad range of classroom situations. They are a great foundation to begin a program to implement change based on research and best practices from other communities – even other countries.

But as technology has changed the fundamentals of educating students inside the classroom, it has also changed how PD can occur outside the classroom. Today’s administrators have an unprecedented opportunity

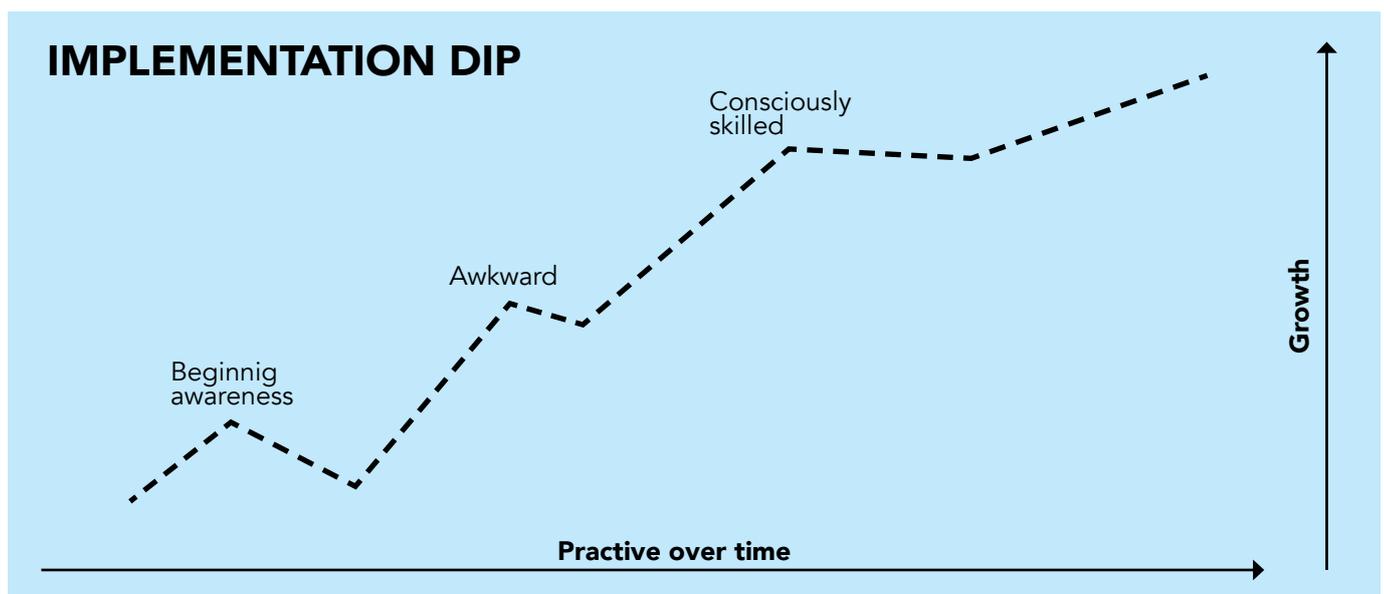
²“21st Century Skills Professional Development: A Partnership for 21st Century Skills e-paper,” Copyright © 2007, Partnership for 21st Century Skills All rights reserved. Last revised 10.14.07.



to adopt a holistic approach to continuing education units for teachers that takes advantage of all of the new, personalized approaches to PD and marrying them with what has worked well in the past.

As educators we always focus on the various elements that lead to students “coming to school ready to learn” – it’s been a part of our goal setting and program development for a long time. Indeed, we are taking advantage of this concept now with Performance Based Learning, by giving students “pre work” to do at home before coming to class.

Why not take the same approach to professional development? After all, it is education – as much as anything we do in the classroom. Incorporating, for example, online PD components that are related to the scheduled face-to-face workshops prior to attending the workshops ensure that teachers have a solid foundation in the workshop’s concept and subject matter, and that they arrive at the workshop ready to develop a practical implementation plan that allows this expertise to be incorporated into the curriculum immediately. This also gives teachers the time to raise concerns or ask questions when the expert is in the room, making the most of the opportunity. Following the workshop, online PD on the same subject can support implementation of the new ideas by allowing troubleshooting and collaboration with peers after the fact.



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The Way Forward

When it comes to professional development opportunities for teachers, today's educators are recognizing that the emphasis on personalization brought about by technology in the areas of social media, online video, and tablet, smartphone, and desktop applications needs to translate to the classroom. Giving students the opportunity to choose whenever possible gives them a feeling of greater control and ownership over their education experience. We know that this drives engagement in the learning process, and makes students more excited about their learning experience.

Yet, this level of personalization has yet to fully reach PD. Too often, teachers are grouped together and PD has been received by a group of educators in exactly the same way. This doesn't take full advantage of the investment administrators are making in professional development – or all of the opportunities changes in technology and federal STEM funding present.

Two models are already in place to address this: professional learning communities (PLCs) and personal learning networks (PLNs). Both have tangible benefits, but selection of the best option of course varies according to the needs of the individual teacher, group of teachers, and learning community.

PLCs work through compromise and take advantage of the expertise that exists within a school system or district. A teacher in a PLC might collaborate on one aspect of their teaching, which is not necessarily what they would pursue if the choice were theirs and theirs alone. PLNs are great for access to educators around the world, which exposes teachers to new ideas and best practices, but they often leave teachers with practical questions about how to implement these ideas into their curriculum.

As with classroom instruction, increasingly online coursework presents an opportunity – but also has room to grow. Both are most effective as part of a program that takes advantage of all of the various formats available – the holistic approach mentioned above. By blending face-to-face workshops with online courses, we can not only announce standards for our teachers, but give teachers



options on how to meet those standards. After all, driving a sense of ownership and engagement is just as important for teachers as it is for students.

Another advantage of incorporating online PD courses is the ability of the courses to address learning challenges in real time. Inspired by a method demonstrated at a one-day workshop, a teacher might begin an implementation program but have questions along the way. Choosing to access an online course in the subject area helps that teacher see what best practices he or she can glean from others, and then try those approaches beginning the next day.

Today's Online Teacher Professional Development

The earliest forms of seminars not conducted in person included site-based PD include the Japanese practice, in which a teacher creates and teaches a model lesson for other teachers to study. The lesson is observed and sometimes videotaped so that colleagues can analyze the lesson's strengths and weaknesses and determine how to strengthen the lesson.³ We've come a long way since then!

Today's online PD is much simpler and more interactive, with an easy-to-use web interface. Teachers simply log in, select a topic, and then preview the course with an introductory video. The next step is to see an outline and a goal statement so they can select the course that gives them the product or outline they're seeking. The outcomes are specific and measurable, and each course has mini-lessons along the way, including deliverables as well as concepts to introduce to students. Worksheets and templates are included, and through an online portal, teachers who are taking the course can communicate with each other, allowing them to collaborate virtually along the way.

When the teacher chooses the focus of their online PD, students see immediate benefit because online PD is typically classroom-focused and practical in nature, although grounded in high-level theories. PLCs and PLNs, combined with one-day workshops and seminars, are all effective – but nothing compares to the immediate applicability of having access to ongoing online PD courses.

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³ Viadero, D., "Complete Coverage In «Lesson Study» Sessions, Teachers Polish Their Craft," Education Week, Feb. 11, 2004.





Online professional development also allows specialized areas of focus. Rather than a “one size fits all” (which really translates into “one size doesn’t truly fit anyone”) approach, incorporating webinars and online PD allows big concepts to be addressed in workshops, then drilled down into relevant levels of detail based on whether the teacher incorporating the concept is a STEM teacher, or Career and Technical Education instructor, for example. This means you are addressing the unique needs of PD for STEM teachers and Career and Technical Education teachers in the context of an overarching umbrella of the concept that every teacher in the district is incorporating.

Conclusion

No matter what kind of PD programs you have in place, online teacher professional development courses are worth a second look. A lot has changed since they were first created, and evolving technology has made them more interactive, globally oriented, and accessible than ever. It’s time to stop thinking of online PD as a substitute for workshops and staff development days, and more as one ingredient in a robust program designed to boost creativity, foster engagement, and most importantly, make a measurable positive impact on the education of our children.

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