7 Characteristics of Effective Professional Learning And What They Mean in Practice
There is little debate that professional learning is a critical component of any initiative. However, defining and implementing high quality professional development (PD) continues to be a challenge across the board. In fact, in our 2017 Global State of Digital Learning Survey, providing teachers with relevant and effective PD is the second most prevalent challenge and the top priority of administrators surveyed.

According to a 2017 report by Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardner on defining and studying effective professional development, professional learning is effective when it:

- Is content-focused or discipline-specific
- Incorporates active learning
- Supports collaboration
- Uses models of effective practice
- Provides coaching and expert support
- Offers feedback and reflection
- Is of sustained duration

When looking at implementing something new, like a learning management system (LMS) or a technology initiative, companies often provide training as part of an onboarding package. This should be only one piece of the investment in professional learning, however, as true change at the classroom level takes time, practice, and reflection. Regardless of the PD initiative—or the technology being rolled out—ensuring lasting change is one area where a learning management system can be of help. Having a system in place that is designed to support learning can extend the reach and resources needed for effective staff development.

**Content-focused PD**

The more professional learning is directly tied into pedagogies and curriculum content, the better. While initial training might be more generic in nature, especially if it’s related to an unfamiliar interface or tool, the ongoing learning should hone in on specific areas of focus that can be seen as immediately relevant to teachers. This
is where it’s critical to involve district leadership. While we often focus on the teacher side of PD, content area coordinators and level directors can help focus PD efforts to support strategies that are tied to the classroom context.

When using an LMS as part of the professional learning approach, curriculum groups and digital resources can be made easily available for those taking part in the PD experience. Online discussion boards and places to share ideas can also support different types of learning (online, blended, face-to-face).

**Active Learning**

There should be expectations around experimentation and trying what is learned, and this is especially effective when teachers are learning in the same way or with the same tools that they will be implementing with their own students. For example, if adopting a blended learning initiative, the PD experiences should also be blended to help teachers step into the role of a learner first. When looking at something like adoption of an LMS, the LMS should be used for professional learning. Not only does this help drive adoption, but it also systemically supports both staff development and student learning.

If the professional learning taking place isn’t necessarily about technology, a digital learning environment can encourage interaction and reflection. And if designed well, it can model effective pedagogy using digital tools. PD in digital spaces is still gaining ground, and we should leverage opportunities where we can provide teachers chances to actively learn with technology.

**Teacher Collaboration**

With the prevalence of PLCs and teacher teams, many districts and schools already have time and staffing structures in place to support collaborative learning. One thing to consider, though, is whether or not there is digital space for that collaboration to occur.

If using a system to deliver PD, does it provide collaborative space for teachers and teams to work together, both face-to-face and asynchronously? Does it provide a way for school leaders to also collaborate around their own learning? This is another case where using an LMS can support professional learning, especially if the platform is designed to foster collaboration and community-building.
Effective Practice Models

To truly embrace new practices, teachers need exemplars. Ideally, these should reflect the continuum of practice established in the innovation configuration maps or IC Maps discussed by Hord, Stiegelbauer, Hall, and George in *Measuring Implementations in Schools: Innovation Configuration*.

If the professional learning focus is around lesson or unit design, PD leaders should provide examples that underscore the desired end result. If a certain instructional strategy is the focus, providing video examples from peers as models that can be shown anytime, anywhere can be both effective and time-saving. Having a dedicated online space for professional learning can provide a spot to host these models and can also provide a mechanism for sharing on a wider scale, especially with things like teacher e-portfolios.

Coaching and Expert Support

Research from Joyce & Showers on the effectiveness of coaching models highlights the importance of coaching as part of an ongoing investment. In looking at what actually transfers from professional learning into instructional practice, they found the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Components</th>
<th>Knowledge (% attaining outcomes)</th>
<th>Skills (% attaining outcomes)</th>
<th>Transfer (% attaining outcomes)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Study of Theory</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstration</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Coaching</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>95%</td>
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According to their research, without peer coaching in the mix, there is almost no yield at all in terms of change in classroom instruction. However, when theory, demonstration, and practice are combined with peer coaching, the change at the classroom level has a much higher yield.

One challenge with coaching can be resources at the school or district level. This is another area where a learning management system can support professional learning. Participants can use embedded tools to record themselves for self and peer reflection, can use a conferencing tool for live, remote observations, and can have a personal and direct communication mechanism for individual meetings with a coach.
Feedback and Reflection

The effectiveness of feedback is something that has had significant focus when it comes to student achievement, but it also needs a place in models of professional learning. The investment here is not only in the structure itself but also in carving out time for ongoing reflection. And feedback in this case does not refer to an end-of-session evaluation. Tied to the idea of peer coaching above, feedback in this case is feedback on practice itself. This can happen with walkthroughs, peer observations, and reflection protocols.

If using an LMS, an intentionally designed rubric could be used as part of the feedback loop. In addition, e-portfolios and online reflections (even with accompanying examples from the classroom) can be housed in a central space and revisited when necessary.

Sustained Duration

Probably one of the most difficult elements listed in the Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardner report is making sure that professional learning is ongoing. Time is repeatedly mentioned as a barrier or challenge when talking about PD, which makes sustained learning a continual challenge. We know that students need time to process, practice, and reflect—adult learners are no different.

As Learning Forward put it in their blog post How does a team set a context for learning and continuous improvement?, “In its most basic form such a cycle occurs when active learners—whether adults or children—observe the world around them, take action based on what they understand, and then reflect on what happened before they plan their next steps, usually modifying their actions to better achieve the results they seek.”

This is another area where a digital learning environment can help. If the learning is happening in the digital space, this would ideally be where shared practices and reflections would also occur. Leaders can facilitate and pace ongoing learning so that there are clear expectations around applying learning, including how evidence of implementation can be shared and when reflection will occur.

The investment in professional learning isn’t solely a fiscal one. Effective PD is an investment in time, people, processes and structures. Thoughtful and intentional approaches, though, can yield far-reaching results for students and learning.
See why 20 million students and educators use Schoology’s Learning Management System (LMS) as their hub for education.

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