



Photo by MICHELLE BOURGEOIS

A team leader meeting at St. Vrain Valley School District includes, from left, Jenny Cloke, Susan Tatum, and Deb Stechman.

# TEACHING 2.0

TEAMS KEEP TEACHERS AND STUDENTS PLUGGED INTO TECHNOLOGY

**By Michelle Bourgeois and Bud Hunt**

**S**ee if you recognize this scenario: A school receives a grant for equipment, maybe through the PTA or other school funds. The school purchases the equipment and places it in classrooms to increase student achievement. Someone from the technology department spends several hours (or with luck, a day) training teachers on which buttons to press to make the magic happen. But after a few months, the initial excitement wears off. Teachers are hesitant to use the equipment in class because they can't quite remember what to do. Updates or technical issues require additional

support or retraining.

Adding equipment often becomes a temporary distraction from the work of teaching and learning, rather than an opportunity to rethink instruction. And so, the equipment collects dust until the next new thing comes along.

With only two instructional technologists (we've since been joined by a third) serving a district of 1,800 teachers, one of the challenges we faced in the St. Vrain Valley School District in Longmont, Colo., was how to build capacity for change through self-efficacy. How could we build processes that help teachers become self-directed learners who can adapt to ever-changing technologies? More importantly, how could we move beyond the one-stop training that so often is the model for learning about

technology use? Might we move towards a model of professional development that prepares teachers for the thoughtful use of particular equipment today and also encourages continued exploration and learning when the next technology shift occurs?

As a result of these questions, we developed a new technology professional development program in our school district. Called the Digital Learning Collaborative, it is built on three things that we know about professional learning:

- Learning takes time — time to play and explore and analyze and reflect.
- Learning is a social process. We learn best together and with each other's help.
- Learning about technology should be embedded within sound instructional practices, but often it's not.

### THE DIGITAL LEARNING COLLABORATIVE: AN OVERVIEW

The basic structure of the Digital Learning Collaborative centers around school-based teams. To apply, a school team leader completes an application and identifies three to five fellow school members who are willing to commit to the two-year program. (See application sample at: <http://blogs.stvrain.k12.co.us/instructionaltechnology/files/2010/09/dlc-app-all-schools.doc>.) The application is an open process, and any school that can fill and fund a team is open to apply and participate. All willing parties are accepted. No teacher is required to participate, but all are compensated for their participation. Teams are affordable, costing a school a few hundred dollars per teacher per year, less than is often spent for a one-day workshop from a visiting technologist or motivational speaker.

Each school team meets monthly to discuss and reflect on its progress and refine the learning and research goals the team has set. Monthly meetings also occur at the district level to give team leaders from schools across St. Vrain a chance to come together to refine their facilitation skills and to further their own learning. Currently, we have 15 participating teams in Cohort 1, which just finished a two-year commitment, and 45 teams in Cohort 2 that are beginning their second year of the program. Cohort 3's 26 teams kicked off their participation this fall. In all, more than 300 teachers, representing more than 15% of our teaching staff, are participating in a Digital Learning Collaborative team.

The Digital Learning Collaborative was deliberately named so that the three essential elements of the program remain at the forefront:

- **Digital.** While our work moves beyond technology into curriculum and student achievement, our priority is

to help teachers think through what it means to use digital tools in the classroom. The Digital Learning Collaborative is platform- and device-independent. While many of our teams are exploring traditional digital tools such as a laptop and projector, we also have teams devoted to exploring online tools such as blogs in a lab environment and the use of iPods as mobile devices for students. Teams of teachers are exploring interactive whiteboards, student response systems, collaborative writing environments, and many more technologies.

- **Learning.** The focus of the learning in the Digital Learning Collaborative is as much about process and adapting to change as it is about learning how to master a particular device. While classroom technology is ever-evolving, the process of learning how to thoughtfully integrate any new device or strategy into a classroom environment is a skill that will always be in demand. By developing an awareness in our participants of the continual learning needed for technology use, we hope to build better future use of whatever new device might come our way.

- **Collaborative.** Dunne, Nave, & Lewis have written that, in order for professional learning to impact classroom practice, it is best supported through small groups of colleagues working in teams where trust and collective support are high (2000). By requiring a team application, we ensure that participants have a group of committed and supportive colleagues within their building. In addition, the collaborative links built through the district Digital Learning Collaborative online community provide for sharing and collaboration beyond the walls of a single school. So we work together in small groups in our own schools, but also across schools.

The first year of the Digital Learning Collaborative focuses on giving teachers the time and collaborative structures to enhance each teacher's personal and professional learning about technology. The second year expands into applying what participants learn to their classrooms with the goal of improving students' learning experiences. Specifically, we ask participants to engage in teacher research around their learning about technology and its impact on student learning (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). In or-

#### St. Vrain Valley School District

Longmont, Colo.

Number of schools: **51**

Enrollment: **27,379**

Staff: **1,780** teachers, **97** administrators

Racial/ethnic mix:

White: **66.7%**

Black: **1.3%**

Hispanic: **27.3%**

Asian/Pacific Islander: **3.9%**

Native American: **0.8%**

Other: **0%**

Limited English proficient: **18%**

Languages spoken: **English, Spanish, Chinese, others**

Free/reduced lunch: **32.7%**

Special education: **6.9%**

Contact: **Michelle Bourgeois,**

instructional technology coordinator

Email: **bourgeois\_michelle@svvsd.**

**org**

der to ensure the learning remains at the forefront, the Digital Learning Collaborative includes many process elements designed to meet specific needs within the program.

**ELEMENT 1:  
LEARNING TAKES TIME.**

What does it mean to be a learner? While we spend our days as educators helping our students become self-directed learners, we don't often apply that same lens to ourselves. Time simply doesn't allow for it, or so we believe. Linda Darling-Hammond and others have reminded us that we need to rethink our notion of professional development as a short-term, one-shot activity and begin to develop sustained opportunities for communities of teachers to come together as learners (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). By giving teachers an opportunity to explore new practices in a community normed around constructive risk taking, the Digital Learning Collaborative provides teachers a safe environment for their own learning. A variety of diverse learning opportunities are built into the program to allow for the varied learning preferences of participating teachers.

**The Digital Learning Collaborative was deliberately named so that the three essential elements of the program remain at the forefront.**

At the start of the program, team leaders come together for two days of facilitation discussion, exploration, and learning co-led by staff from our Office of Professional Development. This initial learning opportunity gives an overview of our core suite of district digital communication tools and their uses, but is primarily an opportunity to provide team leaders with skills and resources necessary for facilitating a team of adult learners. Taking cues from the district's work with the Adaptive Schools ([www.adaptiveschools.com](http://www.adaptiveschools.com)) model, team leaders learn how to develop team norms, conduct productive team meetings, and anticipate what to expect when working with adults. With these skills in hand, leaders return to their schools to kick off their own teams.

The cycle of professional learning for school teams in year one begins when they set a professional learning goal focused around technology. These goals drive the work of the teams for their first year and often provide the basis of the research they engage in during their second year. We've found that, initially, teams set goals that answer basic questions of technology function and use. However, as the year progresses, they are encouraged to revisit and revise their goals as their understanding grows. Many participants share that they initially don't feel they have enough expertise to even know what goals they could set. To help in this arena, we require that participants complete a minimum of eight hours of professional development — courses in basic technology use and/or study teams on particular technologies and instructional strategies — to provide an overview of tools and resources available in the district.

By the middle of year one, we find that teams are moving out of learning the basic function and use of their selected digital tools and are ready to start exploring classroom use. While this occurs naturally even during their initial learning, we begin to guide this thinking through providing links to articles and online communities where teachers are sharing classroom ideas for digital tools.

By giving an opportunity for teams to come together as learners and by providing opportunities for inquiry and reflection, we build the needed skills that are required for year two's teacher research focus.

**ELEMENT 2:  
LEARNING IS A SOCIAL PROCESS.**

Professional development often happens to teachers, rather than with them. A big component of the Digital Learning Collaborative program is providing spaces and structures to help participants make public their learning and to build a community of learners who come together in both a virtual and a physical space for support and conversation.

Through our monthly meetings with team leaders, we attempt to model that professional learners collectively set goals for their learning and then structure their time together to meet those goals. This took different forms in the two different cohorts engaged in the work. The first cohort set a common goal, a difficult task among 16 teacher leaders spread across 12 school sites. For the second cohort, we realized that we needed to be more actively differentiating the learning, so we helped the team leaders determine a number of possible learning goals and split the group accordingly.

In order to model and document the learning, we encourage participants to use a district-created template that guides learning about specific digital tools. This tool discovery protocol allows participants who may not have experience with a particular technology to structure their learning through the use of online resources and collegial expertise. (See template at <https://docs.google.com/document/d/11CDxPpNiXpX8SbCGFtSA42IwbCTYiwMANem0MdxjA98/edit?hl=en&authkey=CP2Yn94P>.) These aren't meant to be all-inclusive documents, but rather to provide a simple frame for those who need help getting started in their learning. In addition, by sharing the final document though an in-district Google Apps for Education (free tools for online collaboration) implementation, participants have the opportunity to begin documenting learning for the benefit of others. We share what we're learning as we go to learn from each other.

Additional opportunities for conversation and reflection exist in an online forum we've set up for each cohort's use. Teachers use these discussion spaces to ask a range of questions, from procedural to exploratory, as well as to reflect on their learning and what they're experiencing throughout the work. Time for reflective writing and discussion is built into every face-to-face

meeting, but many teams also use these spaces to stay connected in between face-to-face meetings.

**ELEMENT 3:  
LEARNING ABOUT TECHNOLOGY SHOULD BE EMBEDDED  
IN SOUND INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES.**

Too often, districts purchase additional equipment and bring it into classrooms — and that’s all; there’s no sustained support or learning. Many assume that the presence of more computers or an interactive whiteboard will lead to smarter children and better teaching. This couldn’t be further from the case. To ensure that this doesn’t occur, we’ve framed the second year around a teacher research process that requires teachers to approach their classrooms as inquirers seeking out the impact of technology on student instruction. Guiding questions for this work include:

- Are the technologies and practices we are exploring making a difference?
- What does that look like?
- How do we know?

Throughout the second year, teachers look at their classrooms with critical eyes, exploring the impact of their technology with their students as partners. As one team leader recently described, the impact of this teacher research work is that our teachers are re-examining their teaching practice and making adjustments as they work to be more thoughtful about their lessons and activities. The technology use is secondary to this examination — the critical stance helps us all to be better teachers. And, as we require that all participants “publish” their discoveries, their learning impacts the rest of our school district, as well as beyond.

Our final guiding assumption involves the quotation marks around the word “publishing.” Although traditional, print-based journals are still the most common genre that comes to

mind when educators hear the word publishing, teacher researchers in general, and the Digital Learning Collaborative in particular, take a more expansive view. In fact, more common genres include conference workshops, district meetings, and digital genres like blogs, tweets, and posts on other social networks.

Too often, teachers are given professional knowledge to consume and make sense of rather than draw from their own practice to generate and contribute to professional conversations about teaching and learning. In the Digital Learning Collaborative, we are hoping to change this through practices that foster professional learning and support other district learning processes.

In a learning organization, everyone should be learning. The Digital Learning Collaborative supports thoughtful and intentional learning for students and staff.

**REFERENCES**

**Cochran-Smith, M. & Lytle, S.L. (1993).** *Insideloutside: Teacher research and knowledge.* New York: Teachers College Press.

**Darling-Hammond, L. & McLaughlin, M.W. (1995, April).** Policies that support professional development in an era of reform. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 76(8), 597-604.

**Dunne, F., Nave, B., & Lewis, A. (2000).** Critical friends groups: Teachers helping teachers to improve student learning. *Phi Delta Kappa International Research Bulletin*, 28, 9-12.

•  
**Michelle Bourgeois (bourgeois\_michelle@stvrain.k12.co.us) and Bud Hunt (hunt\_bud@stvrain.k12.co.us) are instructional technology coordinators in the St. Vrain Valley School District in Longmont, Colo. ■**

In Yasir’s shoes

*Continued from p. 23*

him each week during his volunteer time, and I am going to continue to think about a comment he made when I shared my experience with him. Jokingly, he asked, “Perhaps Yasir can shadow you now?” My response: “I believe that is a great idea.”

**REFERENCES**

**Baeder, A. (2010, February).** Stepping into students’ worlds. *Educational Leadership*, 67(5), 56-60.

**Beck, M. & Malley, J. (2003, March).** A pedagogy of belonging. *CYC Online*, 50. Available at [www.cyc-net.org/cyc-online/cycol-0303-belonging.html](http://www.cyc-net.org/cyc-online/cycol-0303-belonging.html).

**Easton, L.B. (2004).** *Powerful designs for professional learning.* Oxford, OH: NSDC.

**Ginsberg, M. (in press).** *Transforming professional learning: A system to enhance teacher and student motivation.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press

**Ginsberg, M.B. & Wlodkowski, R.J. (2009).** *Diversity and motivation: Culturally responsive teaching in college.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

**Valdes, G. (1998, August/September).** The world outside and inside schools: Language and immigrant children. *Educational Researcher*, 27(6), 4-18.

•  
**Shari Farris (farris.shari@gmail.com) is the faculty chair of early childhood education at Vanguard University in Costa Mesa, Calif. She is the former principal at Roosevelt Elementary School in Spokane, Wash. ■**