

HAPPY WITH YOUR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING? THAT'S NOT ENOUGH



By Frederick Brown

One of my favorite commercials is from Esurance, the online car insurance company. The commercial begins with a woman named Beatrice standing in her living room discussing her recent vacation with two friends. She proudly states, “Instead of mailing everyone my vacation photos, I’m saving a ton of time by posting them to my wall.”

Next, the camera zooms out, and we see Beatrice has actually posted all her vacation pictures on the wall of her living room. One friend looks impressed, while the other is quite confused. Later in the commercial, the questioning friend says, “That’s not how this works. That’s not how *any* of this works!”

So much comes to mind when I see the commercial, but high on the list is the issue of knowing just enough to be dangerous.

I heard the following statement recently from someone who was very proud of the shifts his school had made in its professional learning program: “We now do a much better job of delivering professional learning.” The individual went on to describe how happy teachers were upon leaving the building’s new and improved professional learning sessions.

When I pushed for an explanation of what was meant by the words “delivering,” “happy,” and “new and improved,” I quickly realized this was a school that had simply freshened up its old professional development days

with a very thin coat of professional learning paint. The reality was that not much had changed. In the spirit of my new friend Beatrice, let's unpack these words just a bit.

DELIVERING

As National Staff Development Council transitioned to Learning Forward, the organization also shifted its language from staff and professional development to professional learning. There were many reasons behind that shift, but high among them was the notion that we shouldn't be trying to deliver professional learning and "develop" teachers and leaders.

Instead, Learning Forward advocates for a form of professional learning where the individual is actively engaged in his or her own learning. Often this means the most powerful professional learning happens among grade-level teams that are taking collective responsibility for the students they serve, collecting data that will inform their practices, and assessing their progress. A workshop isn't happening, and a speaker isn't being hired. In this form of professional learning, nothing is being delivered — except maybe some pizza.

NEW AND IMPROVED

On the surface, new and improved sounds wonderful. Perhaps it's a new professional learning computer lab where teachers have access to a wide array of online courses. It might also be a district professional learning center full of comfortable seats, round tables, and giant screens.

The truth is that I've seen some of the worst professional learning in some of the most state-of-the-art facilities. Yes, there are times when it's necessary to bring large groups together to share information, but it's not effective professional learning simply because it's happening in a new building with plenty of plugs and online access.

Instead, imagine a district that brings together its staff to provide an overview of a new initiative or districtwide strategy. Recognizing that job-embedded and team-based professional learning is the pathway to the actual implementation of new practices, this district uses its opening meeting to share information and give teachers and leaders a taste of the new program.

However, this district relies on its standards-based professional learning systems to ensure scaled and sustained implementation. The real work will occur in schools among grade-level and subject-area teams.

HAPPY

Singer-songwriter Pharrell Williams and I like being happy (ask your kids about that reference if it's not ringing a bell), and I love seeing others having pleasant learning experiences. However, it's not enough for teachers or leaders to exit a professional learning experience just feeling happy.

I'd rather they feel challenged, determined, focused, and ready to practice their new learning. I urge schools and districts to measure the effectiveness of their professional learning not by worrying about how content people are but by assessing the actual implementation of newly acquired skills.

If Beatrice were in charge of professional learning, she might say, "Our district is saving a ton of time by delivering new and improved professional learning, and our people couldn't be happier." Well, that's just not how this works. That's not how *any* of this works!

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