



Serendipity and the search for buried treasure

In our day-to-day lives, the Internet makes locating what we need so straightforward. Need a new winter jacket? Just check boxes that limit selections to your size, preferred colors, and ideal temperature range, then hit search to find what is just right for you. You can use the same kinds of search tools to find a hotel room in Manhattan or the love of your life.

By and large, using data and algorithms to identify choices that meet our needs is both efficient and effective. This certainly applies to professional learning. The Data standard in Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning describes how multiple forms of student, educator, and system data help educators make wise decisions about professional learning, and data are essential in the cycle of continuous improvement.

However, we also need to make room for the unexpected. If we enter every learning opportunity with blinders on, seeing only what we intended to find when we set out on a learning journey, what compelling new idea might be just beyond view?

Conferences or other large-scale gatherings are wonderful opportunities to create learning pathways based on what we need. Strands and topic choices home in on sessions that meet

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our learning goals. Yet conferences are also great opportunities to bump into answers to questions we didn't even think to ask.

Keynote speeches, for example, are designed to inspire people with a range of needs and levels of experience. Networking opportunities can seat us next to a stranger who has done something amazing.

It is possible to court serendipity, the lucky break that we weren't looking for, whether at conferences, in everyday life, or on the Internet. Here are some suggestions for putting yourself in the best position to stumble across buried treasure:

Sit next to someone new every chance you get. Even when you attend events with a learning team and are eager to corral what you're learning, look beyond your inner circle to invite the unexpected. Make time for your learning team at home.

Read or learn outside your typical circles. This might mean reading a business management book instead of an education leadership title, or picking up a magazine about science discoveries. Every now and then, choosing a learning option based on a gut feeling can yield a new way of seeing an old puzzle.

Take reflection time when you've had a spark of inspiration. Whether your inspiration came from a speaker,



a hallway conversation, or a profound quote in a Twitter chat, don't lose the feeling you had the moment you heard it. Make a note or plan a follow-up to keep that spark lit.

Let yourself wander off track a bit. While no one has time for significant distractions, meandering a bit off course — whether to follow an intriguing link online or wandering into a session on a new topic — can expose us to new thinking, possibly the very idea that helps us solve a tough problem.

Seeking the unsought isn't at odds with a good learning plan — it's a matter of staying open to new possibilities. How will you stay open to serendipity? After all, no one experienced love at first sight through a series of checkboxes. ■