



Open your ears, eyes, and minds to unexpected learning

I was chatting recently with Learning Forward member Mary Beth Bazzanella of Jefferson County (Colorado) Public Schools — known as Jeffco — about our upcoming conference in December. She works in the central office of her district and has attended the conference with teammates. She reflected on how much she and her peers get from the conference.

She noted, however, that sometimes folks would go to exciting sessions on their own and soak up great information and strategies without having that learning spread to others in the district. “This year, we’re thinking of sending folks in smaller teams,” Bazzanella said. “Maybe each team will take a problem of practice of sorts, or an area of focus, and attend sessions with that in mind.” Then, she imagines, these teams can learn together, strategize at the conference and after, and consider next steps. Like other educators who invest in learning opportunities such as Learning Forward’s conference, Bazzanella intends to create meaningful outcomes from the learning, and she’s planning the best ways to do that.

While we’re using this issue of *JSD* to highlight the meaningful content and insightful leaders that help our

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conference feed your hearts and minds throughout the year, my conversation with Bazzanella reminded me of another important element: There is no learning at conferences without the attendees. In one sense, it’s a ridiculous picture: An empty ballroom with a speaker, a room set up in rounds with two facilitators and no one engaged with them. But in another sense, imagine those settings as I described with just one difference — you’re sitting in the room. You’re in the ballroom, with the speaker. You’re at one of the round tables, ready to engage in group work. It’s still a learning wasteland compared to what you signed up for.

The people you learn with, whether in an online course, keynote speech, or facilitated breakout session, are an extremely valuable element of taking away lessons to apply in your own context. Whether it’s a tablemate who raises a compelling question or shares a new strategy or a teammate putting a unique lens on what you’re hearing, the other attendees at a conference are among the thought leaders you’ll meet. Sometimes these attendees will be reflective thinking partners with you; sometimes they’ll become a colleague for life through sustained networking. Attendees help one another make meaning of what they see and hear, and they expand the learning by adding to it with their own ideas and experiences.

What are some ways you can plan to leverage collegial learning at the



conference? Perhaps, like Jefferson County, you’ll be forming teams and strategizing ahead of time about what to cover. Perhaps, as longtime conference attendee Mark Onuscheck describes on p. 43, you have a group of Learning Forward colleagues you look forward to working with when you get the chance. Or maybe you’re just ready to be open when you sit down in the first session of your conference — ready to learn, ready to share, ready to listen, reflect, and offer input to your newest peers in the field.

For many attendees, this learning is not the learning they plan for, but it has the highest value of all. I invite you to keep your ears, eyes, and minds open for the experts you’ll meet in the seat beside you. ■