



ASK

Michelle Bowman King

Are conferences and workshops valid and effective?

Q In our district we have been redefining what professional learning looks like, transitioning to more job-embedded, school-based learning supported by coaches or in some cases school leaders or lead teachers. Given how the Standards for Professional Learning describe effective professional learning, not to mention the definition of professional development in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), I'm wondering whether conferences and workshops still have a role in how we support educators? What can we do to make sure that learning from such standalone experiences has an impact?

As the organization that established the Standards for Professional Learning at the same time that we offer a conference and institutes, this is a question we compel ourselves to examine periodically, particularly when we're designing the program for an event we intend to have lasting outcomes for educators and students. There are several elements for potential participants to consider in making sure that conference learning can be a meaningful part of an overall professional learning plan.

First, what is the purpose of any particular learning experience? As the Learning Designs standard makes clear, the desired outcome of the learning is critical to determining the most appropriate learning design or strategy. Conference or workshop learning in many cases may be more appropriate for building awareness or knowledge than for other purposes such as supporting the transformation of practices. But at the same time, that depends on the content, the facilitator, and the learner.

The disposition of the learner is important to take into account. If a participant is starting on a learning journey and eager to make connections

Each issue, we ask a learning professional to answer your professional learning questions. This issue's response comes from Michelle Bowman King (michelle.bowman@learningforward.org), Learning Forward associate director of communities.

and gather information about a particular topic, a conference can offer multiple opportunities to taste new ideas and meet potential colleagues. Some learners may find they are energized by such an environment, given their own learning preferences and career stage. Others may be overwhelmed or unable to make meaning from such opportunities and should have other options available for scanning information and accessing expertise.

It's also important to remember that not all conference learning is identical. Within one conference, sessions will vary in levels of active engagement, facilitation styles, or opportunities for reflection or participant collaboration. Learning Forward's own conference covers the gamut of options, with lecture-style

learning, networking sessions, and both full-day and shorter sessions designed with intense learner engagement in mind. We hope that our keynotes inspire, as do most organizations that offer high-profile speakers from the big stage. Each variation in opportunity offers different benefits, and potential drawbacks as well, depending on what participants hope to gain by attending. For example, while inspiration can light a spark that leads to longer-term knowledge- and skill-building, if a keynote goes in one ear and out the other, it may not be helpful.

Participants can bolster the benefits of conference learning by how they engage during the conference, particularly when they tailor their engagement to what they understand about their own learning preferences. For example, some participants will deepen their learning when they schedule time to journal for themselves or reflect online about their experiences. Learners who attend with colleagues may benefit from daily debriefs to share insights and commit to next actions.

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participants generally have the option to make choices about the sessions they will attend, matching what they understand about a session with a need they know they have. With the right conference, the learning may complement ongoing, embedded learning, for example, if educators find options to learn about strategies they've identified in a learning team cycle of improvement. Educators also may have the opportunity to attend conferences with teammates. In such cases, they can plan to either attend sessions together, knowing that different learners will bring different perspectives to a session, or they can choose to divide

and conquer to cover more ground at an event.

After a workshop or conference, educators are more likely to experience lasting benefits — and see changes in practice — if they have sustained support for new learning at their worksite. For some learners, this may mean that experts at home, whether in their building or colleagues from the district office, are available to co-teach using new strategies or observe and offer feedback. For others, support may come in the form of networking with other educators who experienced the conference or with team members

taking deliberate actions to extend what they learned. Some educators may find this networking opportunity online as well as on their campuses. For still others, bringing the learning home may mean enlisting outside vendors to help a team or district go deep on a new initiative or strategy.

Ultimately, we believe that conference and workshop learning does have a role to play in an effective professional learning plan, and it doesn't happen by accident. Planning, onsite engagement, and ongoing support are essential to making conference learning meaningful. ■