FILLING THE TEACHER'S TOOLBOX
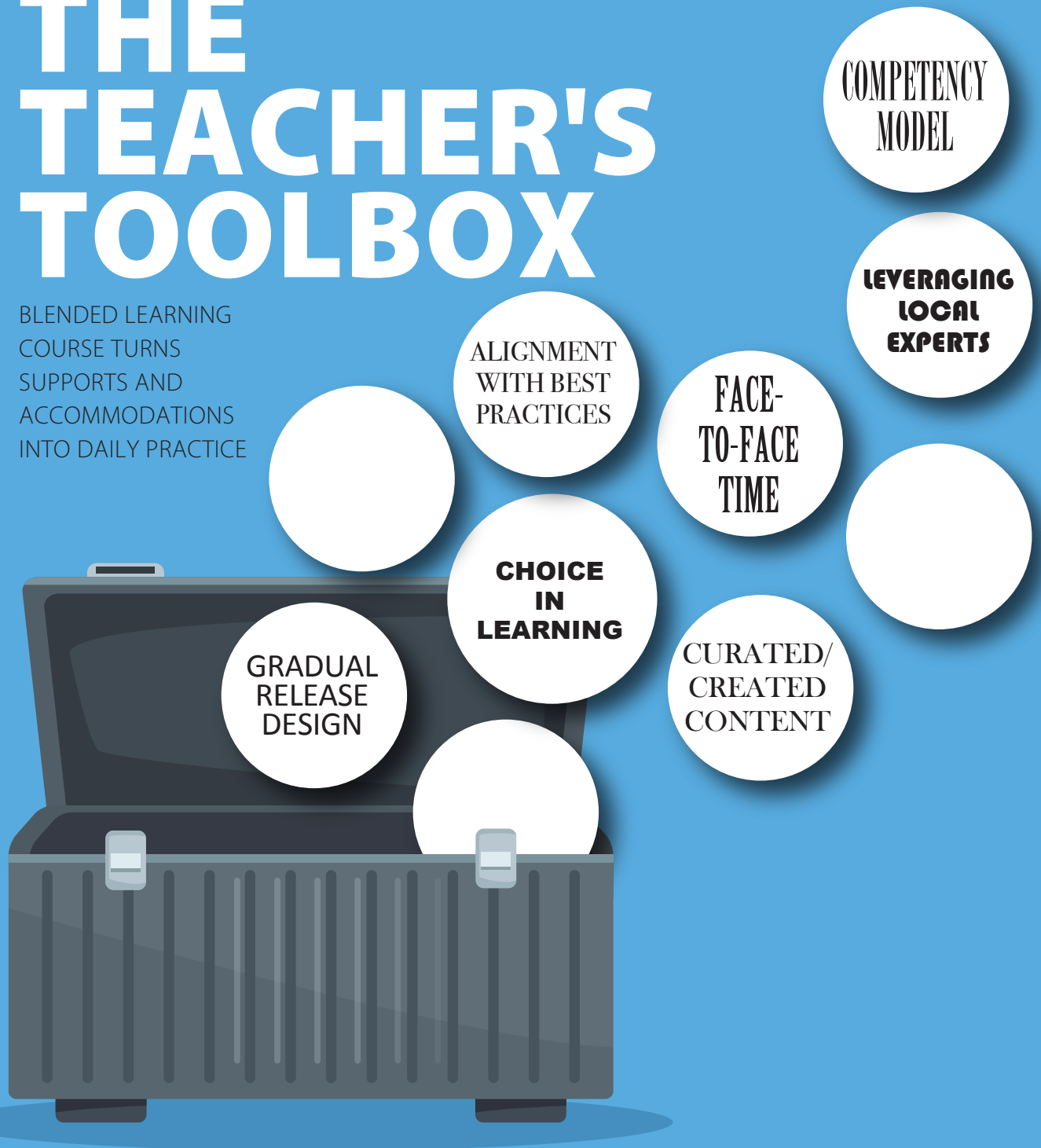
BLENDED LEARNING
COURSE TURNS
SUPPORTS AND
ACCOMMODATIONS
INTO DAILY PRACTICE

COMPETENCY MODEL

LEVERAGING LOCAL EXPERTS

ALIGNMENT WITH BEST PRACTICES

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GRADUAL RELEASE DESIGN

BY KELLY BIKLE

A two-day standardized testing workshop might seem an odd place to find inspiration for building an innovative professional learning model, but that's where our story begins.

As professional learning director in California's Palo Alto Unified School District, I attended a California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress Institute (CAASPP) workshop with a district team composed of our assessment coordinator, a special education inclusion specialist, and several teachers.

Our goal was to learn about the Smarter Balanced test, as well as strategies and best practices for using CAASPP to improve teaching and learning. These ideas led to the creation of our blended professional learning course, Supports for All Students.

THE OBJECTIVE

Workshop facilitators emphasized that testing supports and accommodations were not meant just for testing days and that they shouldn't be a surprise or a new strategy or tool, but a common practice that students use with success in the classroom.

This shift in philosophy — specifically, that our state's standardized test should be connected to the teaching and learning that happen in the classroom every day — was one we wanted our teachers to learn about. We knew that the only way to support teachers' understanding of this shift was to help them build a toolbox consisting of a range of supports and accommodations, as well as strategies they could use in real time and with real impact on the students they puzzled over each day.

Meanwhile, we had been experimenting with using Schoology, a learning management system, as a platform for professional learning. We could have used a workshop format, but we wanted to increase teachers' comfort level with and use of the system. At the same time, we wanted teachers to experience the power of blended learning experiences.

We thought we could boost teacher willingness to use the learning management system and encourage them to experiment with new ways of using technology with their students if we provided them the opportunity to experience its power at the student level.

We built our course to contain the foundational knowledge and skills we wanted participants to learn. These included understanding the differences among supports, accommodations, and modifications for learning in the classroom; the different terminology for student supports, such as Response to Intervention, Universal Design for Learning, differentiation, and co-teaching; the philosophy of California's assessment system and accessibility supports and connections to instructional design; and an array of possible supports and tools for use in the classroom.

As teachers worked their way through the various modules, the course would provide structure, space, and incentives for teachers to share learning, problem solve together, and receive feedback from the course facilitator.

WHY BLENDED LEARNING?

The majority of our professional learning is still based on a workshop model. Although they've gotten a bad name, workshops are not passé (Guskey & Yoon, 2009). In fact, we believe that online professional learning experiences are enriched by some degree of face-to-face meeting time. Paired with coaching, workshops can provide high-quality learning opportunities.

Blended professional learning opportunities offer teachers an added

> We helped teachers build a toolbox of a range of supports and strategies they could use in real time.

approach. They expand teachers' options; provide more choice; and honor how, when, and with which resources teachers learn best (Stacker & Horn, 2012). Most important, this model moves away from a reliance on time- or seat-based models of professional learning to focus on competency-based models instead.

The International Association for K-12 Online Learning has developed a set of competencies for blended learning teachers (Powell, Rabbitt, & Kennedy, 2014). For example, competencies focus on such topics as shifting to student-centered learning, using a learning management system to manage the blended learning environment, and using technology creatively and purposefully.

Not only does the work provide a useful lens for examining professional learning, it also suggests new ways of personalizing learning for teachers and students alike.

REVIEWING THE LANDSCAPE

As a frequent Massive Open Online Course dropout and Digital Badge fan club member, I had been collecting examples of how various course designers had conceptualized the path through blended and online professional learning.

To begin, we convened a team consisting of content experts with backgrounds in special education and assessment as well as a course designer. Our design team began by reviewing models from Stanford University's Understanding Language Project (http://ell.stanford.edu); the Friday Institute (www.fi.ncsu.edu); and Digital Promise (digitalpromise.org). Here's what we learned.

Massive Open Online Courses

The formative assessment course developed by the Understanding Language Project at Stanford University featured short doses of course content followed by both an assignment for teachers to gather data or implement strategies and a peer review process.

We appreciated the reliance on the professional community for discussion and feedback. In the smaller cohorts we'd be working with, in addition to peer review, we wanted to ensure we were tapping the expertise of our facilitators in reviewing and providing feedback on participant work. We also wanted to focus on a gradual release model, where the participant began the course by building shared knowledge, then moved to support innovation and ownership in implementation.

Digital Badges

In particular, we looked at work done by Digital Promise and the Friday Institute. To earn a badge, participants must meet identified outcomes as measured against a rubric by submitting written responses and artifacts from their teaching practice.

Participants can earn badges for a wide variety of competencies, such as exploring wait time or disaggregating data (Digital Promise) or executive functioning or using number lines (Friday Institute). We liked that badging provided freedom and flexibility for how to learn the content. Participants could navigate multiple resources to use those that best met their learning needs.

The badging models we explored asked teachers to submit their work to a panel for review and were often asynchronous, which afforded opportunities for expert feedback and flexibility in pace and completion time. However, that also meant that the design couldn't accommodate the discussion and peer review we valued in the Massive Open Online Courses.

SETTING PRIORITIES

We then identified the following design priorities that we felt would not only help participants build foundational knowledge of the content and engage in a community of practice, but also support implementation, data gathering, and reflection.

● COMPETENCY MODEL

All assignments and discussion are graded on a rubric aligned to the learning outcomes of the module. Participants need to demonstrate understanding of the differences between accommodations and modifications and, over the course of the modules, demonstrate an understanding of how to partner with students to identify appropriate accommodations and design them into the lessons.

Although discussion occurs among participants and participants engage in peer review, a paid facilitator also engages in discussion and is responsible for providing feedback and review against the rubric. Therefore, participants are submitting not only to the facilitator (as in a badging model), but also to their community (as in a Massive Open Online Course model).

● GRADUAL RELEASE DESIGN

There are three modules in the course. As participants work through them, they take on increasing responsibility for guiding their own learning and applying what they learn to their teaching context.

In Module 1, participants learn about the purposes for accommodations and supports and the differences and similarities among Universal Design for Learning, Response to Intervention, differentiated instruction, 504 plans, and Individualized Education Plans.

In Module 2, participants complete a class profile to explore the makeup of their class. They then identify a student who puzzles them and take a deep dive into that student's learning profile,

HOW THE BLENDED LEARNING COURSE ALIGNS WITH LEARNING FORWARD'S STANDARDS FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING	
Learning Forward standard	**Supports for All Students Blended Professional Learning Course**
Learning Communities	• The course focuses on building a professional network among participants. • Participants move through the modules on a set timeline, with a rubric supporting thoughtful conversation along the way.
Leadership	• Local experts attest to the importance of building teacher capacity in this area. • Future facilitators are identified from course participants.
Resources	• Resources on inclusion can be shared easily and widely. • This course is an additional resource.
Data	• This is an effective way to share data on inclusion practices. • The course addresses the district's priority on addressing achievement gaps.
Learning Designs	• Peers support one another across space and time as they work to solve problems of practice together. • Integrating application, implementation, reflection, and the face-to-face meeting is the most powerful feature of the course.
Implementation	• Integrating implementation as part of the design supports teachers in addressing their students' needs.
Outcomes	• Participants submit their lessons, supports, and reflections throughout the course. These data will enable us to examine the impact of our work with specific students.

personal interests, and experiences with school.

Participants interview their focal student to gain an understanding of the student's perception of his or her own strengths and needs, then they look together at possible accommodations to try. One main goal in this assignment is to support teachers to connect what they have learned in Module 1 to the needs they identify with a particular student.

In Module 3, teachers design supports into their lessons, implement lessons, gather and analyze data, reflect, adjust, and repeat. Teacher outcomes and reflection comprise the closing module of the learning experience.

● CHOICE IN LEARNING

One of our takeaways from reviewing the Digital Badge model was the idea of providing choice in the resources available to teachers. In our design, we balanced information we expected everyone to know with resources that would meet participants'

particular needs, given the classes they were teaching.

● CURATED/CREATED CONTENT

Although designing and curating our own content take time and thought, they also afford an opportunity to select content that connects to ongoing initiatives and resonates with district culture. We reviewed videos, activities, and articles freely available online and selected resources we felt would resonate with teachers and align to our goals. Where necessary, we created our own content, screencasts, quizzes, assignments, and documents. This enabled us to present material in a way that allowed us to connect the dots for our context.

● LEVERAGING LOCAL EXPERTS

Many in our group worked as instructional coaches supporting students with learning and behavior needs, and they were feeling stretched thin. They saw this course as a way to reach more teachers with the content,

open coaching opportunities, and build networks of support.

● FACE-TO-FACE TIME

Although the majority of participant interaction occurred online, participants did attend one face-to-face meeting. The meetings were important to us, not only to build community and connection, but also to bring people together for in-person problem-solving conversations.

● ALIGNMENT WITH BEST PRACTICES

We used both California's Professional Learning Standards (California Department of Education, 2017) and Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning as a lens to examine our work. (See table above.)

That conversation resulted in the design priorities, as well as a list of questions to examine after completing the work. In particular, we were concerned about the role of expertise in the course. We decided to

position the facilitator as summarizer and cheerleader, but also have that facilitator attend to misconceptions and knowledge gaps.

We also wondered about support. Although the online course is convenient in terms of time and space, that community doesn't entirely replace in-person conversations. A few participants decided not to continue due to the workload, and we wondered whether additional in-person support might encourage completion.

OUTCOMES

To date, we have run the course twice, once as a small pilot and once as a larger group. In total, 27 participants have completed the course. When asked for feedback, the majority of participants responded favorably, noting the flexibility in content and pace as well as the opportunity to interact with teachers across the district without having to stay after work.

As a result of taking the course, participants identified goals and next steps for their own teaching. They found the modules useful in growing their knowledge and skill to meet a wide range of student needs. As one teacher noted, "The most useful activities were developing a student profile and implementing an accommodation with that student. These activities forced me to think specifically about my student's needs, and I was able to see immediate results from the accommodation I tried."

LESSONS LEARNED

Here are three lessons we've learned.

The need to address the challenges of scaling

Using our learning management system has been beneficial because we can enroll a large number of participants and easily replicate

the course many times. Moreover, relying on the community of practice helps coaches and facilitators reach more people because peers provide some of the support.

At the same time, this course is time-intensive. We'll need to consider how to support facilitators in focusing their attention on the most crucial aspects of the course so the work remains sustainable.

This is new landscape for all of us.

The need to provide ongoing support

In this course, we offer tools for identifying students in need of additional supports, supply information about where to find ideas for supports, and provide opportunities for teachers to implement their ideas and reflect on how well those choices met a student's needs. We know that having done this once in the context of a class with facilitator and peer support won't be sufficient for long-term change. But it's a good start.

Our next step is to grow our community of learners through enrolling additional cohorts, leveraging our coaches to provide ongoing support, and creating new courses or groups to support ongoing learning.

The need to clarify the design model

Some participants found they spent much more time in the course than we had planned. We're tackling this challenge in two ways. First, we're reviewing course content to identify where we might streamline or add additional materials. Second, we're planning to add an overview to the introductory module so participants more clearly understand the design concept of the course. People are not expected to explore every resource, but should use the expected outcomes and

rubric to decide what they need to do to meet the expectations.

NEXT STEPS

Two important next steps can move us forward. First, we would like to streamline the course development process so we can scale our program and add new content with minimal course design changes. Second, we need to build a support system for facilitators and course designers to ensure they have the knowledge, background, and skills to meet our expectations for building and running courses. We need to include content focused on blended teaching, online facilitation skills, and learning management system skills.

This is new landscape for all of us. Professional learning providers have an opportunity to model risk-taking, use of best practices, and agility in supporting a wide range of educator learning needs — in the same way we want educators to approach education for their students.

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