Nader Twal

Want to create lasting change? Listen first, design second

The educational landscape around standards, assessment, professional development, and funding is changing at a rapid pace. How can education institutions — and educators — respond with a balance of urgency and coherence? How do we temper the need for risk-taking and innovation with the responsibility to deliver on the promise of public education for every student every day, showing that our work has impact on student learning?

In the words of Michael Fullan and Joanne Quinn, "The solution requires the individual and collective ability to build shared meaning, capacity, and commitment to action. When large numbers of people have a deeply understood sense of what needs to be done — and see their part in achieving that purpose — coherence emerges and powerful things happen" (Fullan & Quinn, 2015).

For the Long Beach Unified School District in California, Learning Forward's Redesign PD Community of Practice has been a catalyst for understanding and accelerating the district's innovation efforts to address the changing education landscape, especially in the context of personalized professional development.

A partnership of 22 school systems from across the U.S., the Redesign PD Community of Practice was organized around these six core elements as the group tackled issues of coherence and measuring impact across our systems:

1. Clear focus on a shared problem of practice.
2. Active learning through a process of inquiry.
3. Collective ownership of the work and one another's success.
4. Appropriate mix of partners.
5. Sufficient commitment to supporting implementation and experimentation efforts.
6. An effective structure of governance and decision-making.

These core elements offered the group a framework for building our collective professional responsibility without devolving into "pervasive groupthink" or "contrived collegiality" (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2015). Each element gave us a way to define our shared *what* and a context to amplify our efforts with others who share our lens. Collectively, they describe the conditions by which we work and interact, but do not prescribe *how* we are to innovate our solutions.

DESIGN THINKING

To bring the work of our community to fruition, the Long Beach Unified *how* found its richest answer in design thinking, which is defined as a creative, deliberate problem-solving process that puts people at the heart of design.

Using design thinking, educators frame core problems of practice in a growth mindset and convene a diverse group of stakeholders in innovating, prototyping, and testing ideas before going to scale. This is done using an interactive slide presentation that mimics the function of a formative assessment app a school district might deploy in all math classrooms.

The process allows designers and reformers to test the viability and potential impact of their ideas with real users before committing to systemic action.

This approach builds on the idea that by tapping into our self-efficacy — our creative confidence — we can accelerate successful implementation efforts and reframes problems as opportunities to design a solution. It leads with a question, rather than a solution, and engages those whom the solution is intended to serve throughout the process. Clarity and specificity are critical to this process.

In this way, design thinking is an opportunity to listen first and design second. Design thinking hinges on the idea that the people most impacted by the solution should most inform its design and the essential question it attempts to answer. We need to listen to their needs before we form our response and reform.

Designers observe stakeholders in their respective contexts to learn about the physical and social conditions that shape their experience, interview them to gain deeper insights and qualitative data about their current state and daily lives, and immerse themselves in the world of their stakeholders in an attempt

Design thinking hinges on the idea that the people most impacted by the solution should most inform its design and the essential question it attempts to answer.

to gain a first-person understanding of the underlying needs that the reform or solution intends to address.

The fundamental assumption is that the root of innovative solutions lies in meeting a real need that our stakeholders have — a need that we can only understand by observing the people for whom we are designing, interviewing them to hear their interpretation of their experience, and seeing the world through their eyes.

Otherwise, we risk answering questions that need not be asked or solving perceived challenges with best, well-informed intentions, rather than meaningful and sustained ones. Consider how often we review the data and make what we believe are informed assumptions about the underlying cause, only to find that more qualitative conversations in the field would have offered the context we needed to propose ideas that would create lasting impact.

Imagine, for instance, what solutions we could inspire if we shadowed English language learners for a day (from breakfast to dinner), interviewed them, their families, their teachers, and then attempted to spend a day in a foreign language class where the teacher only spoke the language of the discipline. What might we learn that their achievement data alone cannot tell us?

Listening before taking action

requires an intense commitment. It challenges assumptions and counts the insights of the stakeholder as equal to the designer. The actual problem or design challenge can only be defined and understood when seen through the eyes of the stakeholder.

DESIGN THINKING IN ACTION

Using the sentence starter, "How might we...," the team writes a series of questions that gets at the heart of the problem of practice or issue at hand. Using this frame allows team members to defer judgment and separate the problem/opportunity from the solution. This allows the design team to ideate freely, without restriction.

In this phase, the task is simple: Dream of relevant solutions that will meet the unique stakeholder needs. Here are ways to make that happen:

- Build on the ideas of others, using "Yes, and … ."
- Defer judgment.
- Generate many ideas (quantity over quality).
- Capture *all* ideas.
- Be brief.

At the end, team members select the ideas that they will prototype for testing by the stakeholder. Since prototyping is an iterative process, there will be many versions of the proposed solution on the way to the final choice.

Ultimately, though, the team will have to build something *tangible* so that the stakeholder can engage the solution and so that the stakeholder's feedback is meaningful and timely. In essence, prototyping and testing with the stakeholder allows the design team to calibrate its proposed solution.

In hearing feedback as stakeholders interact with the prototype, designers once again learn more about users' underlying needs and wants, helping them to further understand the people for whom they are designing.

The best part of prototyping is that

it allows the design team to test the idea in a less expensive context. Prototypes can be:

- Physical: Build a model.
- Drawing: Sketch the final part in detail.
- Wireframe: Mock up before building.
- Role play: Especially when solutions focus on stakeholder experiences.

During this phase, feedback from the interaction between design team and stakeholder shapes the final solution. A critical condition for success lies in a fundamental norm of prototyping: The design team cannot defend the prototype so that all ideas are heard on the way to a final solution — a co-constructed one that is sure to be implemented with greater fidelity because it responds to an articulated and well-understood need.

RESULTS

As we engaged in this process

with the Redesign PD Community of Practice, we saw the design- implementation gap that has plagued many initiatives diminish substantially. Rather than simply theorizing solutions anchored in research, we were able to accelerate the implementation of effective, innovative responses to the changing ecosystem in education without compromising our commitment to quality and our focus on preparing students for the complexities of the 21st century.

"At its core, [this] creative confidence is about believing in your ability to create change in the world around you," write Tom Kelley and David Kelley. "It is the conviction that you can achieve what you set out to do. We think this self-assurance, this belief in your creative capacity, lies at the heart of innovation" (Kelley & Kelley, 2013).

Perhaps the answers to complex education challenges lie in the nexus of these networked communities and the creative design process. In Long Beach, we found answers while huddled with our stakeholders, calling up our creative confidence to meet the challenge.

REFERENCES

Fullan, M. & Quinn, J. (2015). *Coherence: The right drivers in action for schools, districts, and systems.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Hargreaves, A. & Fullan, M. (2015). *Professional capital: Transforming teaching in every school.* New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Kelley, T. & Kelley, D. (2013). *Creative confidence: Unleashing the creative potential within us all.* New York, NY: Crown Business Publishing.

•

Nader Twal (ntwal@lbschools. net) is program administrator in the Office of Curriculum, Instruction, and Professional Development at Long Beach Unified School District in California. ■