



WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

Melinda George

WEBINARS TEACH US AND BRING US TOGETHER

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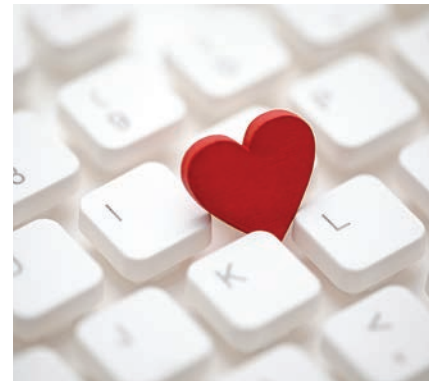
When the world moved online in mid-March, Learning Forward launched a series of weekly webinars to help educators navigate the new COVID-19 environment. With an emphasis on practitioners helping practitioners, the webinars are built around two goals: learning from one another's experiences and building community. We have had a tremendous response with educators from across the world and at all levels of education systems tuning in and learning together.

As the pandemic lingers on, evolving into what one of our panelists described as the "now normal" (rather than the new normal), professional learning has taken on a different look. At Learning Forward, we've learned a lot about online professional learning, including how to design and implement it in a way that engages educators. In the spirit of shared learning, here are a few lessons from our webinars that may be useful to others as you engage in online professional learning.

Create a space for honest and vulnerable communication.

Our webinars are informal, and presenters' remarks are not considered official statements. Although they are recorded and available on our website, we refer to them as off the record because we want to establish these webinars as a place of trust where we can give panelists the room to take risks in what they are sharing without fear of repercussions.

This allows them to share their positive experiences that have gone as planned, as well as the instances where they have learned hard but important lessons and had to pivot. We are careful to present our panelists as experts who are on a journey and willing to share their findings, without having all the "right" or "only" answers.



Emphasize learning by doing.

Throughout the course of our webinar series, educators have described a sense of urgency about learning new skills. Many were thrown into a teaching and learning environment in which they had no experience. Most have been trying new technologies and new modes of communication to help their students learn. What better way to develop those skills than to learn by doing?

Panelists for each webinar have shared specific tools and examples to allow webinar participants to see their work in action, borrow their great ideas, and try them out in their own classrooms. This emphasis on concrete strategies has been a boon to participants.

Recognize that expertise resides in the community.

One of the strengths of these webinars is the depth of expertise they offer, not just among the panelists but also among participants sharing in the chat box. Participants provide valuable ideas, strategies, and resources, often following up on presenters' ideas and providing links to additional resources.

This engagement has reminded us that educators want to contribute to the learning as well

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Foster growth mindset by prioritizing reflection with your coachees. Ensure that there is always time for a reflection conversation after working with a teacher. It is through reflection that learning and excellence develop — the doing alone is not enough.

Encourage a teacher's growth mindset by using some of these questions in your coaching. Note: You can adapt these to your own coaching style.

- What would need to change for this to be an opportunity rather than a challenge for you?
- What would it take for you to feel 50% more confident trying this?
- What part of this challenge do you feel is within your control? What's outside of it?
- What would happen for students if you tried this and it was successful? What would that change for you?
- Having tried that, what are you most proud of? Most surprised by?
- If you could do that all over again, what would be the first thing you would do differently?
- What does this new learning inspire you to do next?
- How should I support you in the next step?

It's important to note that even if the individuals within a team have a growth mindset, the team may still struggle to stay in a growth mindset when working together. As a coach, you can support the group's mindset by using the same tips and questions to support the whole team and help the collaboration grow proactively and productively. ■

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as benefit from it. We are convinced the chat box feature and the ongoing dialogue it inspires should become a regular component of professional learning. It gives voice to all who want it, when they want it, and it can help to provide real time answers, suggestions, ideas, and resources.

Give grace and space in professional learning.

If we want educators to try new things and take risks, we need to give grace and space. We and presenters have used this expression on almost every webinar to acknowledge the power of positive intentions and respecting where each person is at in a given moment.

This means respecting others' perspectives and needs, both during the webinar and in their journey overall. It means welcoming a crying infant in the background, encouraging a flustered presenter, considering a perspective you don't initially agree with, and learning from others' missteps instead of judging them.

As we educators often tell students, some of the greatest learning comes through efforts that didn't work as

expected or didn't work at all. There is power and learning in sharing those difficult experiences. It is time to make it a priority to create safe spaces for educator learning.

Acknowledge the power of relationships.

The pandemic has left all of us feeling isolated or even completely alone. Part of the power of the webinars is the way they connect us and show us that we are not alone. At the end of each webinar, we heard from participants that they felt rejuvenated, supported, and inspired to try new ideas in their own settings.

This is a little about the content and a lot about the people who shared, supported, motivated, and participated in community. It again supports what we know is foundational to high-quality professional learning — a strong collaborative environment. This has been a great reminder that, whether through learning communities within your school or district or in a chat box with 900 strangers, relationships are powerful and should be at the center of any professional learning experience.

Learning Forward's webinar

series has been a small step in helping educators navigate the pandemic. The learning coming from the webinars, however, should serve as a large step in reimagining what professional learning looks like in a virtual world. All of the components of quality outlined in the Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011) are as important as ever in an online world and can, in fact, be vibrant and exemplary.

Districts and schools need to consider the characteristics of effective professional learning — collaborative, ongoing, job-embedded — and apply them in new designs. This should include virtual coaching, virtual mentoring, virtual office hours, and online, facilitated professional learning communities. When educators have access to these new learning designs, they will feel more ready and connected to use them with their students.

REFERENCE

Learning Forward. (2011). *Standards for Professional Learning.* Author. ■