



Can workshops be high-quality professional learning?

BY SHARRON HELMKE AND SUZANNE BOUFFARD

One of the defining features of high-quality professional learning is that it is ongoing, not a one-off event. Learning Forward’s definition of professional learning, which appears in U.S. education legislation,

specifies that meaningful professional learning activities “are sustained (not stand-alone, 1-day, or short term workshops), intensive, collaborative, job-embedded, data-driven, and classroom-focused” (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). But that doesn’t mean that a workshop or a learning

session has no place in professional learning. Dedicated time away from the classroom for in-depth learning can be very valuable — if it’s done well.

To make a difference for educators and students, workshops must be an integrated part of a larger professional

learning strategy. They can be used to introduce new strategies or concepts, advance to a new phase, or provide an opportunity for educators to share successes and learn from one another. In all cases, they should be driven by and aligned with district and school goals and with other elements of the professional learning plan and to the elements of quality outlined in Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2022).

When we plan lessons for students, we start with what we want students to know and be able to do and create an intentional learning trajectory that builds over time, not a series of lessons on disconnected topics that happen to sound interesting. So why would we approach professional learning for educators that way?

And just as we should do with students, we should be clear and transparent with teachers about the learning trajectory we're constructing and how individual workshops or sessions fit into it. Even more importantly, we, the professional learning designers and facilitators, must be clear about that ourselves.

In working with schools and districts, we have seen how workshops can go wrong — but also how they can go right, anchoring and forwarding a professional learning strategy that is grounded in Standards for Professional Learning. The following recommendations can help learning professionals in a variety of roles and levels make the most of workshop time to drive meaningful changes in instruction and student learning.

START WITH GOALS AND NEEDS

Ensuring that workshop time is meaningful starts with intentional, goal-focused planning — not with figuring out how to fill up a release day. The planning process begins with asking: “How do we expect teachers to implement their day’s learning, and how will this benefit students?”

The answers to these questions should be connected to a larger strategic plan, such as a school improvement plan or district strategy. There are many things we’d like to help our colleagues do, but what are the current priorities we have established to lead to more student learning?

Additional questions that can be helpful in setting the vision for the workshop include:

- What is the challenge that this learning needs to address?
- What would a successful outcome be?
- What will successful implementation of new practices or mindsets look like?

Asking these questions leads to a fundamentally different approach than planning to introduce content and then tacking on a “how to apply this information” section at the end of the workshop. It allows learning designers to draft a desired outcome statement for the workshop, then begin to identify the important characteristics of the learning content, sequence, and workshop experiences that will lead to that outcome.

But before getting too far into the content, we need to understand

what teachers already know and do and what learning they have engaged in. This information-gathering stage is a kind of formative assessment. Just as lesson planning for classrooms should incorporate students’ current knowledge and skills, professional learning planning should begin by assessing where teachers are.

The following questions can help with that process:

- What have participants learned before this that you’ll be building on?
- What evidence of implementation of previous learning have you collected?
- What is the current range of implementation among the participants?
- What barriers have you observed or heard referenced regarding this initiative or learning so far?

FOCUS ON YOUR TAKEAWAYS

One of the problems of workshops, especially long workshops, is that they can result in cognitive overload. If we introduce too much at once, people struggle to retain it all, and that issue is compounded when learning sessions happen after a half or full day of teaching, when participants are already mentally and physical tired. Although thoughtful scheduling can help with that challenge, we also need to be mindful of what we’re asking of participants in a limited amount of time.

It’s helpful for learning designers to ask themselves: “What is the most important thing I want people to

HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF WORKSHOPS

- Start with goals and needs.
- Focus on your takeaways.
- Place the workshop in a larger context.
- Design the learning experience in accordance with best practice.
- Plan follow-up.

remember, if they're only going to remember one thing?" The design of the workshop should take this into account and ensure that the most important thing really stands out.

Participants need meaningful opportunities to think about it, process it, practice it in a supportive environment, and figure out when and how they're going to implement it. That requires threading and reinforcing the take-home message throughout the workshop, as well as planning for follow-up.

It's not always easy or straightforward to identify the "one big thing" we want people to remember. It can be helpful to start by using the KASAB framework (Killion, 2017) to figure out the domain we're most interested in at the current stage of learning. KASAB standards for:

- Knowledge: Conceptual understanding of information, theories, principles, and research;
- Attitudes: Beliefs about the value of particular information or strategies;
- Skills: Strategies and processes to apply knowledge;
- Aspirations: Desires, or internal

motivation, to engage in a particular practice; and

- Behaviors: Consistent application of knowledge and skills.

Often, educators only focus on knowledge and skills and fail to recognize the importance of the other elements that are essential for enacting change. Attitudes and aspirations affect whether people are receptive to new learning, how they make meaning of it, and whether they put in the effort to change practice. Behaviors are essential for learning to be translated into practice. It is the totality of these elements that leads to transformation.

PLACE THE WORKSHOP IN A LARGER CONTEXT

It's not enough for the designers and facilitators to know why this workshop matters and how it is connected to a larger standards-based professional learning strategy. We also need to make that clear to the participants. Learners are the ones who make meaning of their experiences and connect them with other knowledge and skills, but facilitators can be valuable guides in that process, just as teachers are for students.

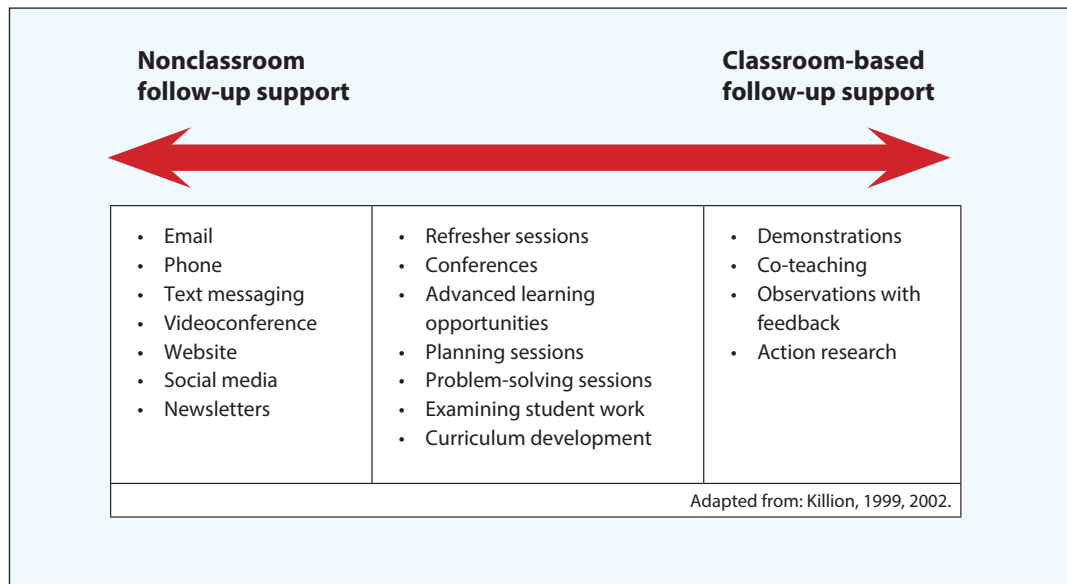
Planning should therefore consider

who will communicate to teachers what they are expected to learn and implement as well as when and how. This communication should also address the things teachers need to know about how they will be supported as they implement the new learning. Without this information, participants may be confused or frustrated. With it, they can feel prepared to learn and implement change.

For example, if the goal is to implement a new strategy for working with English learner students, professional learning leaders need to tell teachers why it's necessary to try the new approach and what it will look like; show models of the new skills to be developed; explain what resources and incentives will be available and when, such as curriculum materials and coaching support; and tie it together with an action plan that charts a path forward.

While all of these aspects must be introduced, it's important to plan how and when each aspect will be introduced to learners in a meaningful and timely manner. Respecting adult learners means that care is given to sequencing the release of information so that ample time is given for processing

TYPES OF FOLLOW-UP SUPPORT



the new information, adapting to the changes required, and integrating the new learning. A key role of professional learning designers is to understand the holistic learning map and plan a trajectory that keeps adults challenged and energized but avoids making them feel overwhelmed.

Creating a meaningful, useful workshop agenda is an important part of this communication with participants. It should include a “why” for the new learning as a road map that establishes expectations for the time together and beyond. Knowing what they’ll be doing can reduce participants’ anxiety. For example, knowing that they will be up and moving and not sitting all day can help teachers feel relaxed and energized to learn.

DESIGN THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

There are many considerations in designing a meaningful learning experience, and a full exploration of them is beyond the scope of this article. But here are a few components to keep in mind.

Community commitments, sometimes known as norms, are important for any group learning experience. Not only do they make the experience run more smoothly for everyone, but they can help build community and create an intentional learning space.

This is particularly important for workshops, when participants may not have a history or ongoing relationship with each other and may not have a lot of time to get to know one another. In fact, the shorter the workshop, the more important it is for the facilitator to take charge and create appropriate conditions for people to take in information, process what they’re going to share, and collaborate effectively.

Norms should be designed to create the community you need for this specific learning experience. It’s worth taking the time to develop a set of norms tailored to the group and the workshop rather than using a standard set. For example, if you plan to introduce a concept or initiative that’s a big departure from past practice or could make participants feel overwhelmed or vulnerable, you might

want to include a norm about keeping in mind that high-quality professional learning should challenge you to stretch your thinking and your actions or a norm about accepting the discomfort of uncertainty and lack of closure.

Many facilitators like to have the group develop its own norms, while some prefer to set the norms themselves to avoid the discussion being dominated by some perspectives more than others. In Learning Forward sessions, we recommend that groups that come together for a short period of time, such as in a workshop or ad hoc committee, use norms set by the facilitator.

This not only saves time but ensures that the facilitator will define the working conditions that are needed, whereas group members may not know what the work will look like. On the other hand, when groups are coming together repeatedly to engage in ongoing work or learning, as in professional learning communities (PLCs) or data teams, we recommend the facilitator lead the group in setting its own norms.

We also find that a hybrid approach can work well, in which:

- The learning facilitator sets expectations for learning behaviors;
- The learning facilitator identifies their needs for particular behaviors to enhance learner safety and the effectiveness of the learning;
- Participants suggest additions or revisions; and
- The learning facilitator seeks agreement and commitment.

Another important and often overlooked component of the learning design is activating background knowledge. This is an important part of setting the context. Adults, like students, learn better when they can see how new content connects to what they already know, and facilitators play a key role in this priming the new learning by revisiting past learning and existing knowledge. Here are some ways to do that:

- Situate the learning within the larger context of the subject, the curriculum, best practice strategies, etc.
- Share the challenge that is being addressed by this new learning (the “why”).
- Invite participants to reflect on and share relevant experiences or expertise.
- Facilitate independent and collaborative recall of past learning.

PLAN FOLLOW-UP

To ensure that workshops are not a one-and-done event, it is essential to plan for follow-up in advance. That means designers and facilitators have to plan how they will help participants integrate their new learning, practice new behaviors, and follow through to consistent implementation.

We recommend getting a specific, actionable commitment from participants before they leave the workshop. Overt, out-loud commitments are especially good for creating accountability. Participants can take time to reflect individually and

then do a turn-and-tell with a partner.

To increase the accountability, encourage participants to ask each other how the commitment is going the next time they see each other, whether in a formal meeting or an informal in-passing connection.

Another way to encourage commitment and accountability is to ask participants to complete a written exit ticket before packing up to leave. There are many formats for this, but it could be as simple as writing on a sticky note or a notecard: Three things I learned today; two things I’d like to know more about; and one question I still have, or using the classic sentence stem, “I used to think, but now I know ...”

Inviting participants to write down their key takeaway is not only a post-assessment for the facilitator to compare to their intended takeaways, but it also helps solidify learning for the participants.

Facilitators should also take an active role in follow-up and plan for that in advance. You might email participants to check in, set up partners or small groups to meet to discuss how they are putting the new learning into practice, or set up coaching support. Some facilitators engage in mini coaching cycles or just-in-time support to make the time commitment minimal and the coaching focused, relevant, and timely.

Before adjourning the workshop, remind participants how and when you’ll be following up. And if you’re tempted to omit this step or leave it for later, remember there is little point in devoting time to workshop learning if there isn’t a plan to help participants actually use that learning to improve outcomes for them and their students.

The table on p. 45 presents a range of strategies for follow-up support, adapted from Killion (1999, 2002).

TAKE A SYSTEMIC APPROACH

Over the last 50 years, professional learning workshops have been both celebrated and villainized. Often, they are seen as a waste of educators’ time —

a perspective supported by high teacher absenteeism on designated professional development days.

Rethinking how we, as professional learning leaders, structure and use workshop time and professional development days can shift not only how we plan, design, and facilitate learning, but how our participants think about and engage in those days.

The key is to start seeing workshop time as part of a larger, systemic, and holistic learning design that incorporates large-group learning (e.g., workshops), small-group learning (e.g., PLCs and grade-level teams), and individualized support (e.g., coaching or observational feedback).

We need to recognize that significant, lasting change takes more than a single great session. But a day’s learning can contribute meaningfully to a larger learning process. Bringing the pieces together in accordance with Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2022) takes strong instructional learnership and a clear vision of how ongoing adult learning leads to improved student outcomes.

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Sharron Helmke (sharron.helmke@learningforward.org) is senior vice president, professional services, and Suzanne Bouffard (suzanne.bouffard@learningforward.org) is senior vice president, publications & communications at Learning Forward. ■