



For professional learning to fulfill its promise, facilitators need to be well-prepared and steeped in best practices.

Val Brown (vbrown@carnegiefoundation.org) is director, future of learning at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and a former member of the Learning Forward board of trustees.

EQUITY & IMPROVEMENT

Val Brown

A MANTRA FOR FACILITATORS: 'FEEDBACK IS MY FRIEND'

In 2024, I will celebrate my 20th year as an educator. I am grateful for my winding path, from alternatively certified teacher to professional learning facilitator to organizational leader. As my roles have changed and educational trends have come and gone, I have learned that professional learning can be a constant companion on the journey. Professional learning can sustain us, even when the work feels uncertain, as it often does. It can also open new career pathways when we're ready for the next step.

But for professional learning to fulfill those promises, facilitators need to be well-prepared and steeped in best practices. They need to be grounded in adult learning theory and Standards for Professional Learning, skilled at helping educators engage in reflective practice and implement change. When they do, all parties are able to thrive, and students benefit. When they don't, the effects are not only disappointing, they're lasting.

A few years ago, at a particularly active time for educator engagement on X (formerly known as Twitter), I found myself cringing at educators' accounts of low-quality professional learning experiences. In fact, educators seemed to report far more negative experiences than positive ones. As a practitioner-scholar of adult learning, I toyed with the idea of going on the defensive and starting the hashtag #NotAllProfessionalLearningFacilitators. But I did not want to dismiss anyone's experience, and truthfully, I knew many of the complaints were probably warranted. So I decided instead to do what a good facilitator does: I listened.

The constructive feedback these educators shared included lack of differentiation to teachers' experiences and skills, failure to provide ongoing implementation support, too much content to learn without enough time to process, high or prohibitive cost, and impatience with mandated workshops on noninstructional topics like bloodborne pathogens. Honestly, I could understand where their comments were coming from. What I read on social media about professional learning was not new to me.

More than a decade ago, during the summer I transitioned from classroom teacher to professional learning staff member, I shared my excitement about my new role with a veteran teacher from a different district. She looked me in the eye and said, on behalf of her teacher colleagues, "We hate you."

I was shaken, and I wondered if I had made a terrible mistake accepting the position. But what she said next made sense. She explained that, in her experience, smiling professional learning facilitators would attend a staff meeting at the end of the school day — when the teachers were tired and depleted — and tell teachers what to do, discounting their expertise.

I never saw that woman again, but she strongly influenced how I approach adult learning. She reminded me to be humble and listen to teachers' wisdom. She spurred me to treat adult learning as the specialized, research-based discipline it is to make sure that teachers' time is well-spent.



Around the same time, one of my mentors shared a phrase that I repeated to myself my entire first year: “Feedback is my friend.” I did not have formal training in professional learning, and I knew that becoming a good facilitator would require study and intentionality. The feedback mantra became an affirmation that enabled me to seek all forms of feedback and use them to continue refining my practice. I have continued to take that mentor’s advice to heart, and I encourage other professional learning facilitators to do the same.

In 2021, I conducted doctoral research on professional learning for

educators working toward educational, racial, and social justice. I examined what educators want and need, and the findings are illuminating for facilitators:

- All educators, regardless of how long they have taught, arrive with expertise that should be honored.
- There is a desire for community in which educators can improve their practice and impact the outcomes of their students.
- Facilitators don’t have to have all the answers. Educators value a collaborative facilitation style and authentic leadership. It’s especially important now for

us to listen to these lessons and lead accordingly. With the introduction of artificial intelligence in education, the pace of change over the next five years is likely to move faster than ever. As expectations of educators and students change, it can feel daunting to keep up, especially if one chooses to go it alone. So I suggest we hang on to each other and listen to each other. As leaders of adult learning, we have a responsibility to support educators in all phases of their careers and in all the needs they bring. If we remain open and responsive, we can continue to work together for the advancement of the profession. ■

NETWORKS AT WORK / Elizabeth Foster

Continued from p. 12

During the kickoff meetings, participants also learned about continuous improvement strategies. They dug into plan-do-study-act (PDSA) cycle planning and engaged in structured conversations to narrow the focus of the problem they want to solve, generate change ideas, and begin planning for an inquiry cycle. They learned how their change cycles yield data that can help them decide whether to adopt the change going forward, adapt the idea or strategy and retest, or abandon an idea that seemed promising but did not yield any improvement. Over time, multiple PDSA cycles build a body of evidence about what works, especially when there are multiple teams in each district and multiple districts in a network, as there are in the network.

As with the math content, participants explored these continuous improvement strategies in interactive, experiential ways. For example, to practice PDSA cycles, teams worked together in an iterative process to assemble a toy. As they did so, they talked about how small-scale changes

can impact the desired outcome and how important it is to articulate your prediction for how the change might improve the outcome and reflect on what actually happened so you can learn and adjust for future cycles. Calling on *Learning to Improve* (Bryk, 2015), the Learning Forward Networks team emphasized the value in learning from clearly identified change ideas, failing quickly if you are going to fail, and documenting what the team is learning along the way so that hindsight does not cloud anyone’s perception of what happened.

Each team is now receiving frequent technical assistance and support from the Learning Forward Networks team, as well as virtual opportunities to discuss and learn from the other participating districts. All of the district teams came together at a full-day session at the Learning Forward Annual Conference to share data and reflections from their PDSA cycles, discuss what they are learning, and have role-alike conversations with educators from other districts in addition to collaborative work time with their own

teams. The district teams are already poised to make important contributions to the emerging field of curriculum-based professional learning.

REFERENCES

- Bowman, M. (2023, October).** Network advances curriculum-based professional learning. *The Learning Professional*, 44(5), 12, 14.
- Bryk, A.S., Gomez, L.M., Grunow, A., & LeMahieu, P.G. (2015).** *Learning to improve: How America’s schools can get better at getting better.* Harvard Education Press.
- Klein, E.J. & Riordan, M. (2011).** Wearing the “student hat”: Experiential professional development in expeditionary learning schools. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 34(1), 35-54.
- Loucks-Horsley, S., Love, N., Stiles, K.E., Mundry, S., & Hewson, P.W. (2003).** *Designing professional development for teachers of science and mathematics* (2nd ed.). Corwin Press.
- Short, J. & Hirsh, S. (2021).** *The elements: Transforming teaching through curriculum-based professional learning.* Corwin. ■