

Leading Thinking #3: Reimagining Professional Learning

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June 12th, 2020

Dear Educational Leader,

Why talk about reimagining professional learning now? It's the middle of June and there is little appetite among teachers for professional learning and rightly so! Many of them have been on a steep learning curve for some time now and are ready for a break. For educational leaders, however, it might be an important time to reflect on how, why and what teachers have learned during the shutdown of face-to-face schooling. Thoughtful reflection now will help us be proactive in thinking about how to best support educator learning as we plan for and enter the new school year.

In this issue of Leading Thinking, we think about questions that many leaders have begun to grapple with:

What might the future of powerful professional learning look like?
How might we use what we've learned during this time to enhance our efforts to support educators in the fall?

It has been eye opening for educational leaders to see what parts of previous professional learning has "stuck" with teachers and transferred into their approach when planning for pandemic learning despite the significant challenges that were involved in moving to a virtual learning environment. It has also been fascinating to hear administrators talk about what they've learned about various teachers' engagement in learning during this time. The pandemic has affirmed much of what we should always have known, that teachers

- can and will learn quickly for the sake of their students
- are hungry for differentiated and customized learning opportunities that address their most pressing needs and those of their students
- have a deep concern for student's well-being and students' ability to engage in meaningful learning

As we think forward to the future of professional learning, we have an opportunity to build on what we've learned and to construct powerful learning opportunities for educators that are well-adapted to blended or virtual (synchronous and asynchronous) contexts. We believe this means attending to the purpose, quality, and structure of professional learning.

--Criteria for high quality professional learning--

At TC², we have always taken a 3C approach to professional learning; we strive to provide support that is coherent, comprehensive and continuous. We believe that this working list of criteria applies in all settings—face-to-face, blended, and virtual—but it is particularly important in considering what professional learning might look like in the future. Professional learning might be most powerful when it is:

- Meaningful
 - occurs within the context of each teacher's decision making and supports their professional judgment about how to best respond to students' strengths and needs
 - relevant to the community and societal contexts in which teachers work, and reflects and honours student and community identities and lived experiences
 - thoughtfully aligns, enhances, or extends Ministry and district plans, curriculum, and various initiatives in a way that provides coherence and also connects directly to teachers' contexts and concerns
 - grounded in a deep understanding and thoughtful interpretation of relevant local and contextual data
 - differentiated to best support teachers' strengths, needs, and contexts
- Balanced
 - uses a framework/approach that blends theoretical/well-researched ideas with practical, feasible, and ready-to-play-with strategies
 - balances pedagogical knowledge and understanding with development of teachers' competencies
- Respectful and empowering
 - reflects a commitment to the importance of teacher voice, is co-constructed with teachers and enters at teachers' points of concern
 - focuses on strength-based growth by affirming and leveraging teachers' competencies and expertise
 - reflects and honours teachers' identities, lived experiences, and significant efforts
 - models excellent pedagogy and adheres to the principles of adult learning.
- Invites and provokes deep reflexivity and thoughtful engagement
 - adopts a critical inquiry approach that honours teachers as reflective practitioners
 - activates and inspires teachers' construction and integration of new knowledge and meaning supported by appropriate time, space, and resources
 - supportively but intentionally creates some level of discomfort or dissonance that invites educators to challenge assumptions, biases and habits
 - actively interrogates the status quo (curriculum goals, Ministry/district practices) to uncover, challenge and disrupt oppressive paradigms, perspectives and structures
 - provides educators with time, place and community to grow and define their own thinking, and engage in critical, collaborative and creative thinking about possibilities that might lead to better lives and outcomes for all learners

In addition to input from our facilitators in constructing this list, we also worked with Ian Pettigrew, Director, Curriculum and Assessment at the Ontario Teachers Federation (thank you, Ian!).

We'd love to hear from you as well about whether this list of criteria might guide you as educational leaders as you construct, organize and assess professional learning opportunities. What additional criteria might you add? Is there anything you would refine or change? Which of these criteria do you feel that your organization regularly attends to well in thinking about professional learning and which do you aspire to pay closer attention to?

--Structure of powerful professional learning--

We've been fortunate that throughout the pandemic, districts and schools have continued to turn to us to support their professional learning. We're thrilled that our framework for nurturing high quality thinking can be so well adapted to any educational challenge and can support the thinking of all members of the educational community from students to the leaders of school districts. If you'd like to learn more about our approach to professional learning, feel free to get in touch or visit us at:

<https://cts.vresp.com/c/?TheCriticalThinkingC/207f33d20d/1117454e68/fcda6f7cab>

Here are a few things we've learned about different learning formats and structures that we believe will be crucial in providing powerful professional learning, particularly in blended or virtual learning environments.

Large group learning sessions:

Important learnings: Large group learning in virtual settings can and must be structured for thoughtful interaction and engagement of all participants. Webinars, just as face-to-face sessions, can take an iterative approach that deepens understanding and builds competency.

How to create powerful learning experiences:

- Start with a challenge, invite participants to record initial thinking in a Thoughtbook (for which there are many useful digital tools), and build in multiple opportunities for them to refine and share their thinking along the way.
- Regularly ask thought-provoking questions for participants to respond to orally or in the chat box. Frame them as critical challenges using our 6 prompts to encourage thinking and multiple perspectives.
- Use visual prompts, audio files, short video, etc. to provide concrete catalysts for thinking not just as alternative ways to convey information. Frame invitations to think (challenges) that invite participants to think through rather than simply absorb information.
- Use digital tools to encourage meaningful online collaboration.

Many tools are used to merely invite participation during a webinar.

Structure opportunities for participation so that they immediately inform the direction of the facilitation, contribute to a shared knowledge-building exercise and support the growth of everyone's thinking about the core challenge that is the focus of the session.

Small group collaborative planning sessions:

Important learnings: Teams who identify a clear critical inquiry question or challenge are more likely to spend their collaborative time together productively co-creating an effective way forward.

How to create powerful learning experiences:

- Invite team members in advance or at the beginning of a session to identify the challenge they would like to grapple with. For example,
 - How might we most effectively...? For which students are we successfully...?
 - What are the most powerful next steps we can take to...?
 - What is the data we have gathered telling us and not telling us about...?
 - How effectively does our current approach achieve...?
- Decide which intellectual tools might be helpful to support your team's thinking. For example, do you need to co-construct criteria to make a decision? Would a thinking strategy like a graphic organizer or a framework help? What background knowledge might be helpful to acquire or access to support the team's decision making?
Consider using a virtual whiteboard or a shared document that helps structure thinking, capture background knowledge and/or apply criteria.
- Think through and discuss what routines and expectations will ensure that the team becomes a community of thinkers. These are more than merely norms of a virtual meeting. Online sessions especially require intentional and explicit attention to practices that ensure that thinking is truly collaborative.

Individual conversations for planning and support:

Important learnings: Online coaching and mentoring conversations with individual teachers require deliberate practices to ensure teacher voice is truly heard and that time spent leads to transformative learning.

How to create powerful learning experiences:

- Ask questions that surface the teacher's point of concern and allow time and space for teachers to "think out loud" and clarify their thinking with you.
- Avoid the inclination to fill the silences. It can be more difficult to be patient through silence in a virtual conversation.
Honour think-time and pay attention to whose voices dominate conversations.
- Be prepared with observations about students that you have both noticed and can think about together. Consider holding your meeting "inside" the teacher's virtual classroom so you can have concrete discussions about student responses.
- Help make connections to previous learning and effective practices that the teacher has employed. Name and label those practices in a way that lifts them to a general approach that can be applied to support different teaching and learning challenges.
- Support metacognition and transfer of learning by ensuring time throughout and at the end of the conversation to label the learning that has happened for both of you.

Although it's true of all learning contexts, it's so important to remember that virtual or blended learning professional learning may require additional attention to maintaining and enhancing relationships. Professional learning—like student learning—can't happen in the absence of positive, supportive relationships but those relationships are built, maintained, and enhanced through the structures and approaches that we take to professional learning.

As we all reimagine professional learning for a future in which face-to-face gatherings of teachers might not be as easy or as frequent, we hope that the criteria we've started to frame above and the learnings we've gleaned from our experiences might be helpful to you.

If you are interested in learning more about the ideas outlined here or would like to explore ways that we might help support your thinking as leaders, please don't hesitate to be in touch with me at usha.james@tc2.ca or with our Director of Professional Learning, Victoria Campoli at Victoria@tc2.ca.

We're excited to announce that we are planning a Leading Learning Summit.

Join us for this highly interactive series of FOUR 2-hr sessions in early July to plan for the new reality and to uncover the opportunities it offers. Add your voice to the collective wisdom of talented educators from across Canada and internationally to develop approaches and conceptualize materials that will help teachers confidently navigate the challenges ahead.

The Leading Learning Summit will:

- bring together educators from a variety of jurisdictions and contexts to share their challenges and ideas
- explore preliminary approaches and ideas for adapting to a blended learning environment
- facilitate focused conversations on important pedagogical considerations for ensuring students flourish in a blended learning context with a particular focus on preparing for the first weeks of school

We'll be sending out registration information in a few days so keep an eye on your inbox or please get in touch if you'd like more information.

Please feel free to pass this message along to your colleagues or post on social media. If you find any of the wording or ideas in this email useful, please feel free to use it in your communications with others.

Previous Issues:

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If you or your colleagues are using any of our resources (www.tc2.ca/online/), we'd love to hear how it's going! Please drop us a line by email or tag us on Twitter @TC2thinks. Take good care and stay safe!

On behalf of our whole team at The Critical Thinking Consortium,

Sincerely,

Usha James,

Executive Director
The Critical Thinking Consortium
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For questions about facilitation and professional learning, please contact Victoria Campoli:
Victoria@tc2.ca

For questions about resource development, please contact Andy Nesbitt: andy.nesbitt@outlook.com

For all other inquiries, please contact us at: Administrator@tc2.ca

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