EDLD 5317: Resources for Digital Environments
Publication Rough Draft
Building a Supportive Partnership through Blended Professional Learning
Shannon Bowles

INTRODUCTION

Picture a room full of educators desperate to improve their students' reading skills and test scores. Their district has adopted a new foundational literacy program; today is their chance to learn about it. How will it be different from what they have done in the past? How will they teach it? What new materials will they have? At the end of the full-day Professional Learning (PL) event, these same educators are tired, brains full of new information, practices, and routines; yet they still aren't feeling ready to teach their students using the new program. Why not? They didn't get enough time to practice.

Blended learning could be the solution to this issue. What if teachers could access the information they need, right when they need it, on their own devices and on their own schedule? This would free up valuable face-to-face time with an expert PL facilitator to focus on active learning experiences, including practice. Let's take a closer look at what blended learning is and how it can benefit educators in order to make PL more effective and allow Reading Horizons to truly show up as a supportive curriculum partner.

BLENDED LEARNING - What is it?

Perhaps you have heard of blended learning or even attempted to incorporate blended learning in your classroom or school. There are a variety of ways educators think of blended learning. For our purposes, we will use the definition provided by Staker et al. (2014) in the book Blended. Blended learning is when "a (learner) learns at least in part through online learning, with some element of (learner) control over time, place, path, and/or pace" (Staker et al., 2014, p.

34). As educators, we typically only focus on the idea that the learner learns in part through online learning without considering that true blended learning must give the learner control of some aspect of the learning as well.

EDUCATOR BENEFITS of blended learning

The element of control that blended learning provides is especially crucial when considering blended learning in a PL setting with educators. In education, time is precious. Giving educators control over the time, place, and pace that they engage with PL can go a long way in improving both attitudes toward PL and the learning itself. Giving learners choice, ownership, and voice through authentic learning opportunities allows facilitators and learners to create significant learning environments together (Harapnuik et al., 2018).

Within the New Reading Horizons Discovery digital teacher tool, multiple resources are designed to support ongoing PL for educators. The first resource is the Implementation Essentials videos that provide educators with short, easy-to-understand guidance around various aspects of teaching all lessons within the program. The second resource is Real-Time Coaching videos. These lesson-embedded support videos provide information about the content taught in each lesson, common student misconceptions, and more. These video resources make up the online learning portion of Reading Horizons PL. Online resources, in combination with in-person facilitator-led PL and job-embedded coaching, round out the Reading Horizons blended learning approach to comprehensive PL support.

MORE EFFECTIVE PL with blended learning

In addition to improving educator attitudes towards PL and creating significant learning environments, blended learning has the added benefit of improving the effectiveness of PL. Research from Gulamhussein (2013) shows that PL is most effective when it is of significant

duration and ongoing, offers robust support during implementation, is engaging, utilizes modeling, and is specific and relevant to the learner.

With the Reading Horizons blended learning approach to PL, learning about the program is ongoing from before the start of implementation and throughout the school year. An expert facilitator leads a full-day in-person PL event before the start of the school year. This event is focused on orienting educators to the program and resources, providing modeled instructional best practices, and facilitating active learning experiences like think-pair-share activities, reflection, and peer-to-peer practice with new instructional practices. Educators are also guided to utilize the online Implementation Essentials and Real-Time Coaching videos as they begin implementing the program in the classroom.

While this is a good start, it is insufficient to truly be effective. According to Gulamhussein (2013), effective PL is ongoing and requires sufficient support during the implementation phase. Therefore, in addition to ongoing online support, Reading Horizons provides a second in-person PL event that focuses on grade-level-specific practice. During this PL event, educators meet with their grade-level band to practice a grade-level-specific lesson with feedback from peers and an expert facilitator. This event also gives time for reflection on how implementation in the classroom is progressing and for questions. Educators are able to move beyond the surface and dig deeper into the content and practices that they need support with at each individual site.

As implementation continues, the next step is to invest in the opportunity for educators to work one-on-one with a Reading Horizons coach. This job-embedded support is crucial to a successful implementation. Observational and supportive coaching allows teachers to focus specifically on their unique classroom and students. Coaching provides focused resources and

information to support each teacher while building sustainability within the building and district by working alongside administrators and instructional coaches to identify overall trends, successes, and areas for growth. This cycle of support continues into year two and beyond of implementation to allow for program reflection and refinement.

CONCLUSION

Now that you can visualize a better way for educators to engage with PL, think about how you can utilize digital resources to provide a blended learning experience to educators in your school or district. Remember, blended learning means that some portion of the learning takes place digitally and should allow for learner choice in as many aspects as possible (Staker et al., 2014). For PL to be effective, it needs to be ongoing, offer support during the implementation phase, utilize engaging active learning strategies, including modeling, and be specific and relevant to the educators participating (Gulamhussein, 2013). As these concepts are put into practice, you will have a front-row seat to both teacher and student growth.

References

Gulamhussein, A. (2013, Sept). *Teaching the teachers. Effective professional development in an era of high stakes accountability.* Retrieved from Center: http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/system/files/2013-176_ProfessionalDevelopment.pdf

Harapnuik, D., Thibodeaux, T., & Cummings, C. (2018). Choice, ownership, and voice through authentic learning. Creative Common License.

Staker, H., Christensen, C. M., & Horn, M. B. (2014). Blended: Using disruptive innovation to improve schools. Wiley