

TEACHING TEACHERS

Why PD for teachers is paramount to successful edtech integration
and how to ensure every teacher gets the best training

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Introduction

Professional development is an essential part of the teaching profession – teachers are expected to constantly improve their own skills, learn new pedagogies and develop new strategies to engage their students. They need to be lifelong learners themselves. Naturally, this benefits their students because their teacher continues to stay abreast of the latest developments and trends in education, and it also benefits the teacher who gains certifications, and improves their earning potential.

Educators and policymakers are increasingly looking to teacher professional learning as an important strategy for supporting the complex skills students need to be prepared for further education and work in the 21st century. For students to develop mastery of challenging content, problem-solving, effective communication and collaboration, and self-direction, teachers must employ more sophisticated forms of teaching. Professional development (PD) is key to teachers learning and refining the pedagogies required to teach these skills.



Successful PD training needs to first focus on teaching strategies associated with specific curriculum content, support collaboration, use models of effective practice, then to offer timely and targeted feedback, provide coaching and expert support and finally, is of sustained duration. Rome wasn't built in a day and neither is successful PD.



Improving professional learning for educators is a crucial step in transforming schools and improving academic achievement. Despite its advantages, PD is also a challenge for many teachers. Not only do they not necessarily have the time to complete the required PD hours, but in many instances PD courses offered by their districts and schools do not necessarily fit with their particular professional interests or are not nuanced enough to address specific professional goals.

Professional development is a vital part of improving teachers' performance. Learning best practices and practicing best practices are both important.

Professional development for teachers with a focus on edtech

Everyone seems to have been captured by a whirlwind of discussions about including technology in the classroom, whether we're talking about a learning management system, educational apps, online collaboration and productivity tools, and of course, access to more tech devices and BYOD programs. The use of technology in the classroom is almost equal to providing students with the best ways of reaching success.



However, with all the focus being on students, many decision makers within educational institutions overlook one detail: in order for technology to be effectively introduced in the classroom – and contribute to the positive academic outcomes everyone expects – it needs to go through the teachers' hands first.

Teachers face tremendous pressure from school management, students, parents, local communities and society to adopt technology in their instruction, yet many of them lack critical digital media literacy. Or, if they know how to handle educational technology, many don't understand its value and how it can be best used to boost student performance.

We can't really blame these teachers for not being able to keep up with the rapid pace of technological developments in education. People from various other industries face similar challenges. What teachers need is help and support.

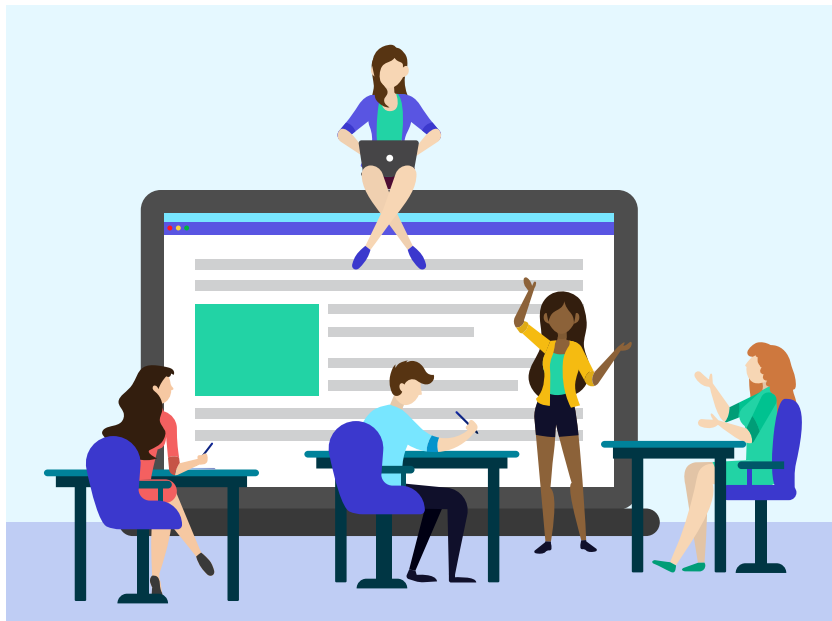
What teachers need is professional development targeted on edtech.



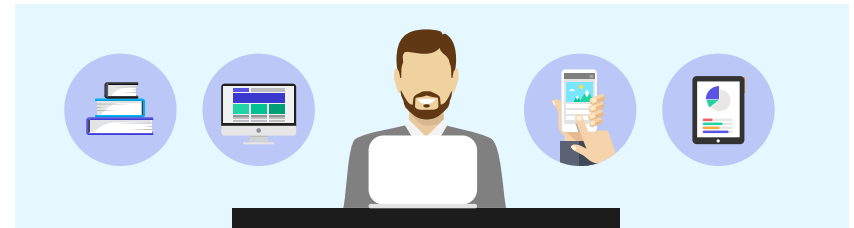
This kind of PD needs to include courses that are designed to enable teachers to integrate technology into their instructional practices. These courses can range from those that are explicitly focused on technology: Digital Citizenship, Enhancing Instruction with Technology, or Classroom Device Management to those that focus on general theory and practice of 21st century education: Collaborative Learning Environments, Understanding Competency Based Instruction, or Instructional Coaching, to give just a few examples.

The role of ITC (Instructional Technology Coaching)

Teachers can fully integrate technology into their classrooms through authentic learning experiences that include collaboration, creativity, and innovation, and preparing students to be productive digital-age citizens. Technology can also support educators in affirming and advancing their relationships with students, shrinking equity and accessibility gaps, and adapting learning experiences to meet the diverse needs of all students.¹



Educator coaching in instructional technology provides a number of benefits. Most importantly, teachers who have the support of a coach or mentor are more likely to make curricular changes and utilize technology in the classroom



Instructional Technology Coaching (ITC) is a prevalent method of deploying on-going professional development for teachers, with a specific focus on the integration of technology into both the curriculum, as well as the method of instruction.

Typically, districts have technology offices or departments that then deploy coaches to individual schools and campuses on a scheduled, or as-needed basis. However, more and more schools are opting to have in-house ITCs, to better formulate and deliver on their tech integration programs.

The purpose of the Instructional Technology coach is to support teachers with effective ways to integrate technology into their instructional practices. Technology coaches usually have a Masters in Education, and are seasoned teachers who have taken their passion for technology to the logical next step, and become specialist coaches for instructional technology. They focus on providing professional development for teachers by providing them with the additional support needed to integrate technology into daily lesson plans.

Coaching for technology integration should be based on the understanding that technology is in service of specific content and supports developing higher order skills as well as effective teaching practices.

The role of PLCs (Professional Learning Communities)

Professional learning communities (PLCs) or networks (PLNs) are groups of teachers that share and critically interrogate their practices in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, and growth-promoting way to mutually enhance teacher and student learning.

Teachers are greatly impacted by the work of their colleagues. The shared stories, projects and reflections of one teacher are often the “sparks”, or starting points, for another. Learning is collaborative in nature. Coaches guide teachers into these collaborative opportunities or other appropriate professional networks knowing that teachers will find the resources, support and encouragement necessary for success.



PLCs unite their members through a shared vision for improving education through the integration of instructional technology. Members come together to share ideas, problems, and solutions. This helps to reduce teacher isolation and provide the intellectual support and confidence that many teachers need to make significant changes.

These communities go a step beyond professional development by providing teachers with not just skills and knowledge to improve their teaching practices but also an ongoing community that values each teacher's experiences in their own classrooms and uses those experiences to guide teaching practices and improve student learning.

Professional learning communities empower educators to access relevant knowledge through the Internet, share knowledge with each other without being bound by the limits of face-to-face interaction, create knowledge, as like-minded teachers can work together even though they are geographically distant, and finally build their professional identity, relationships, and collaboration; communities provide a sense of place and camaraderie for teachers who may otherwise feel disconnected or alone in their profession.²

Teacher-to-teacher observation enables low-stakes, high-frequency feedback from people who are in the same position as the observee. Peer feedback is not only beneficial to the teacher receiving it, but the teacher providing feedback also benefits and learns from the process.

When a community comes together in such a way that teachers respect and trust each other enough to see themselves as teachers of teachers and as learners at the hands of other teachers, they are able to create an atmosphere where anything is possible.



Using the school LMS to deliver PD for teachers

Having a learning management system is almost a given in many schools today. From kindergarten to high school, and also at university level, educators of all subjects use a school LMS to manage all aspects of student learning. They create courses, give access to all sorts of learning materials online, use gamification features, design learning paths, encourage online collaboration, monitor student progress, grade student assignments, and so on. There are many ways in which an LMS with a comprehensive feature set can assist teachers in delivering their best instruction.

Many districts have started to turn their attention to providing PD for teachers in the ever more tech-infused learning environments we have today. School leaders are looking into ways of creating successful professional development for educators and develop strategies and policies. And there's one simple solution that is sometimes hidden in plain sight: to use the already available school LMS to teach teachers.



With the same LMS that manages all aspects of students' learning, schools can create master courses for teachers to improve their skills, certification training programs, enhance collaboration between teachers within a district, and so much more.

If professional training courses are delivered through the same LMS that is used for teaching students, there's no need for extra resources to get new software. An easy solution is to create a new learning portal dedicated to teachers and training, so as to avoid any confusion or overlap instruction.

Both administrators and teachers should already be familiar with how the system works, so the time to adapt to it and learn what each click and button does should be minimum. This way, teachers enrolled in a training program can focus on what they need to learn from the very beginning, not on figuring out how the new system works.



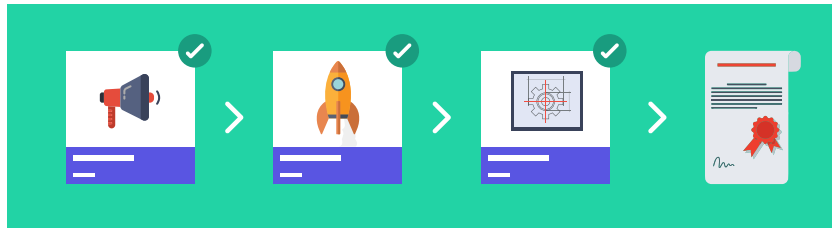
Using the same LMS, but from a different perspective – that of a student – makes teachers experience all aspects of such a learning platform. Afterwards, they'll surely be able to empathize more with the students and provide them with the best teaching experience.

Using the school LMS to deliver PD for teachers can therefore be a great solution because at its core, learning is the same, no matter how old a learner is.

What LMS features are best for teaching teachers

A cloud-based LMS usually comes with a variety of features that can be used to create the most engaging online courses. Just because teachers are a different age than their students and have to complete different courses, it doesn't mean that they don't need a learning path or could not enjoy gamification or diversity in terms of learning materials.

A learning management system is supposed to be a complete solution that supports both teaching and learning, thanks to a comprehensive set of features. While no two LMSs on the market are exactly the same, here are a number of features that should be included:



Learning paths

Schools can set up learning paths in PD training, which are sequences of courses that must be completed in a certain order. This feature is useful for creating training courses with different levels. For example, a learning path on Teaching Methods could have the following courses: Communication techniques for teachers, Motivating students to learn, and Instructional planning for successful teaching. When the learning path is completed, teachers can receive a certificate of completion.



Classes

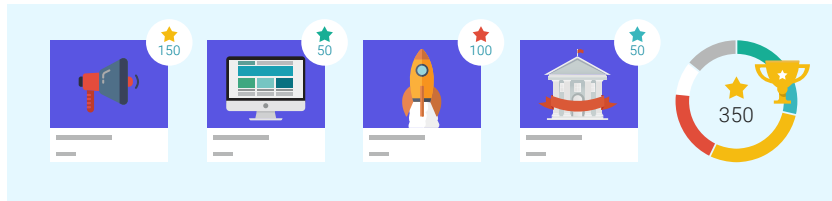
Schools can choose from a variety of delivering styles such as instructor-led, self-paced, blended, or micro learning. Each class, whether in a learning path or not, can be customized to suit the learning preferences of teachers. For example, there can be a mix of face-to-face training, self-paced classes allowing teachers to learn at their own pace, and micro learning classes.

Mastery

To make sure teachers are learning everything they need, the LMS should provide a mastery feature to set the skills that each class must cover. Then instructors can tag class content with the skills it should be teaching and assessing. For example, in a training on how to do BYOD in the classroom, a skill that teachers must learn is how to use mobile apps in classroom activities. With a mastery feature, you can tag the class content that should teach and assess that skill, then track how well teachers understood the concept.

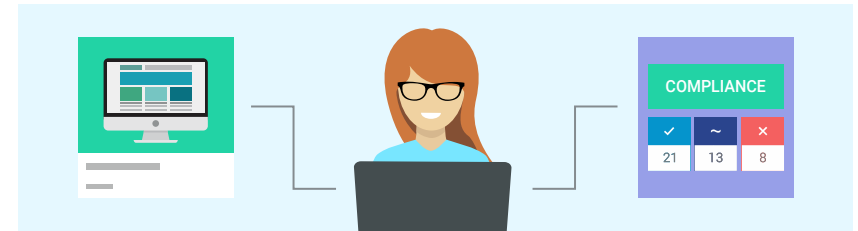
Automation

This feature allows schools to trigger actions throughout the platform when teachers do certain tasks. For example, you can set up a rule to automatically add new teachers in a Faculty group and send them a personalized welcome message. You can also automatically enroll teachers in classes and learning paths that train them on various pedagogies or in a support group where teachers can collaborate and exchange ideas.



Gamification

To make the training more engaging, schools can create games where teachers can earn points and badges as they advance through classes. If you want teachers to take these classes periodically, you can use the compliance feature to make the classes mandatory by establishing for how long teachers are compliant once they've completed the courses and when they need to renew their compliance. You can set up an action to automatically enroll teachers back in classes when compliance is almost due.

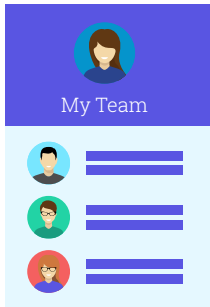


Compliance

Compliance is a useful feature for schools that wish to track teacher compliance. You can select the classes that are required for compliance, then set up for how long the teacher is in compliance once they've completed the class, and whether they need to renew their compliance periodically. For example, if you want teachers to take a class on Digital Teaching Skills every year, then you can make the class mandatory to take and automatically enroll teachers back in the class at the beginning of each year.

Certificates

Professional development for teachers usually involves getting various certifications. Schools can design courses and learning paths for certification and can award certificates to teachers upon completion of courses or learning paths. Once teachers finish all the classes in the learning path, they can be awarded a custom certificate of completion.



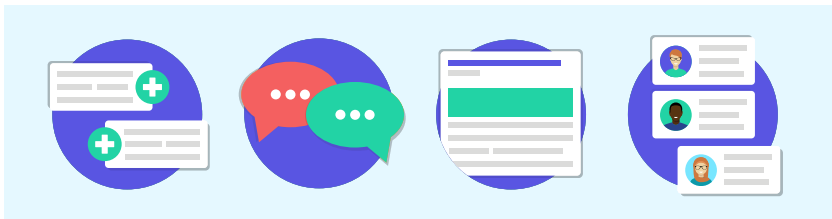
Teams

Teams are a special kind of group that includes the concept of "team leaders". You can allow leaders to enroll team members into classes, to run reports on members, and use automation to trigger actions. Teams can be used to organize teachers from various departments. For example, a team could be all the math teachers in a school. Then you can trigger various

actions such as enrolling all the teachers from this team in a training course on teaching high-school mathematics.

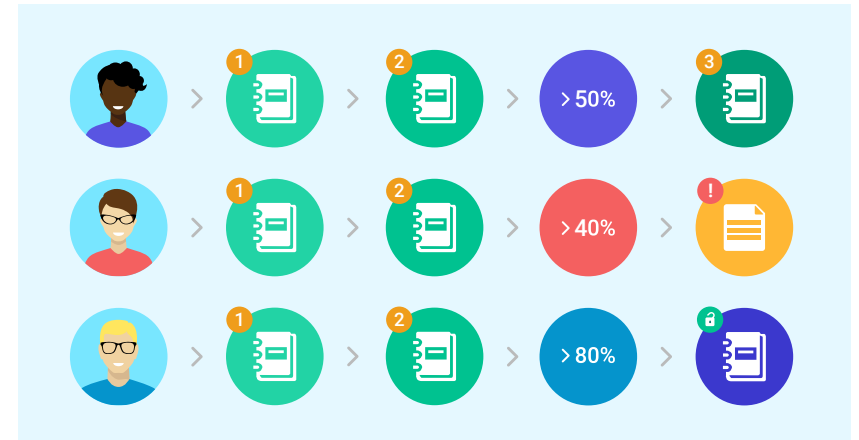
Collaboration tools

Tools such as groups, chat rooms, blogs, wikis, and forums are a great way of enhancing collaboration between teachers and faculty members across the institution. You can create groups for educators that teach the same topic, faculty groups to discuss school issues, or groups for teachers that are going through the same certification. Groups boost communication between teachers and can be used to share ideas and resources, plan school events, prepare teaching material, and more.



Adaptive learning

Using adaptive learning you can personalize what content you make available to teachers based on their progress. For example, if a teacher scores below a certain level in a module, you can show them some additional modules that other teachers won't see. Similarly, if a teacher scores above a certain level, you could give them a harder assessment in the next module.



These are just 10 features that should be available in the LMS that manages both student learning and teacher professional development. Depending on your exact option, other LMS features can join this list and enhance the learning experience of its users.

Conclusion

At its core, professional learning is the key component to improving educator practice and providing new perspectives on an ever-changing profession. While most content has remained consistent throughout time, instructional design, educational policy, and classroom tools and structures have been in constant motion.

By targeting all these changes and focusing on the role and impact of edtech in the academic success of students, schools can design and deliver professional development for teachers that sets them up for success in their professional journey. Effective PD supports teachers on every step of the way, both within their organization through Instructional Technology Coaching and outside of it through Professional Learning Communities. And if the formal part of training comes in a familiar form, that of the LMS teachers already use to teach students, even better.

If you're looking for a tool to help you get started with creating and delivering professional development courses for your teachers, try out CYPHER Learning, a learning management system for schools and universities with a comprehensive set of features. To the best of our knowledge, CYPHER Learning is a complete learning and teaching solution that can be used for normal classroom activities but also for professional development programs for teachers.

www.cypherlearning.com

