

Mix it up

BLENDED STRATEGIES FOR HIGH-IMPACT PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

*One of the most promising and robust strategies used by the Teacher Practice Networks is **blended learning**, which combines face-to-face and online professional learning to provide teachers with multiple opportunities for interaction and engagement.*

In eastern Kentucky, high school history teacher Sue Herbert* travels two hours from her rural K–12 school to attend a training on developing literacy-based lessons aligned to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). In southern California, Ana Wesley is the only foreign language teacher at her large, urban middle school. Ana wants to connect her lesson plans more closely to the CCSS, but reworking her curriculum feels daunting on her own. With few opportunities to exchange ideas with same-subject peers, both teachers look to professional learning to help them improve their pedagogy and align their instruction to the CCSS.

Regardless of their geographic location or the content area they teach, teachers want access to high-quality professional learning that is relevant, interactive, teacher-led, and sustained over time.ⁱ Effective professional learning can help teachers develop the deep pedagogical content knowledge they need to prepare their students to meet rigorous standards.ⁱⁱ However, such professional learning is not often readily available or accessible to teachers.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Teacher Practice Networks (TPN) initiative works to expand teachers' access to high-quality professional learning opportunities focused on CCSS-aligned instructional practices. Based on lessons learned by the networks over the last few years, the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning (CFTL) at WestEd has pinpointed promising strategies that can help school and district leaders, as well as professional development providers, develop effective, high-impact professional learning.

This issue of CenterView describes the blended professional learning model, what it looks like in action, and steps to take to develop effective blended learning offerings.

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Blended learning supports teacher growth

Teacher-to-teacher connections are powerful. A blended professional learning model gives teachers multiple opportunities — both in person and virtually — to connect and learn from one another. It offers teachers professional learning experiences that include peer-to-peer engagement and just-in-time information that is actionable and relevant to teachers' current instructional needs.^{iv} A blended learning approach can be particularly helpful for teachers facing some degree of professional isolation, like Sue and Ana. Blended learning allows them to build a foundation of knowledge

* Teacher names are pseudonyms.

What is the Teacher Practice Networks initiative?

The Teacher Practice Networks (TPN) initiative is facilitated by the CFTL and supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The TPN is made up of 35 local and national organizations working to accelerate and support teachers' CCSS implementation through teacher networks. The networks use innovative strategies to deliver professional learning that connects teachers to teachers, deepens teachers' understanding of instructional practices, and builds teachers' confidence as they prepare students to meet rigorous standards. The networks are seeing increased knowledge and use of CCSS-aligned practices among the teachers they have worked with. The networks serve teachers in rural and urban areas; in elementary and secondary schools; and across all disciplines, including classrooms with English language learners.

To learn more about the Teacher Practice Networks, including a complete list of the participating networks, visit <http://tfn.wested.org>.

and a sense of collegiality at the in-person events, while giving them access to ongoing, follow-up support through a variety of online activities and resources.

In-person events

In blended learning, face-to-face meetings foster the development of meaningful working relationships with colleagues. These professional relationships are the basis of peer collaboration, deeper learning, and trust-building for shared problem-solving that can lead to changes and improvements in teachers' practices. At face-to-face sessions, teachers meet to engage collegially — for instance, to learn new strategies for student collaboration in algebra, to understand the role of formative assessments, or to modify curriculum aligned to the CCSS.

Online learning

Teachers use an array of digital platforms, including Edmodo, Google+ Hangouts, Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest to extend their learning.

Unlike traditional, stand-alone trainings that don't offer teachers support after they have returned to their classrooms, blended learning gives teachers multiple opportunities to reinforce and continue their learning through virtual events and activities. Online learning and collaboration that complements the in-person events is especially significant for teachers coming from areas or schools that offer few or no opportunities for professional collaboration.

Just-in-time activities. Between in-person meetings, teachers can choose to participate in virtual activities relevant to their current needs. For example, teachers grappling with a new instructional practice can upload a video of their classroom instruction and solicit real-time online feedback from a coach. Or teachers struggling with how to align particular content with the CCSS can bring their challenge to their online learning community, perhaps using videoconferencing, to problem solve and learn new ideas.

Asynchronous learning. For asynchronous virtual learning, teachers might explore collections of teacher-curated resources on a platform like Pinterest or contribute to a discussion thread on a relevant topic started on Facebook, LinkedIn, or Twitter. In addition to using social media tools, teachers can access digital libraries, such as those created within the TPN. These libraries contain vetted instructional tools and resources — including videos, modules, rubrics and assessments, and units of study — to support CCSS-aligned instruction.

Blended learning in action

The TPN use blended professional learning to develop the capacity of teacher leaders and to help teachers across the country implement effective CCSS-aligned instruction. Below are descriptions of specific approaches to blended professional learning being implemented by two networks in the TPN.

“Teachers are hungry for a sense of like-minded community that offers ideas and support.”

— ASCD administrator,
Teacher Practice Networks

Blended Learning in Action: Extending collaboration through virtual coaching and learning communities

Arkansas Public School Resource Center (APSRC) conducts in-person monthly trainings to teachers in rural districts across five regional centers. The distances between remote, rural districts creates a challenge for providing ongoing face-to-face professional learning. Thus, to augment in-person sessions, APSRC uses videoconferencing platforms (e.g., Google+ Hangout). For one-on-one virtual coaching, an instructional coach in one district can observe and guide a teacher who is instructing in her classroom hundreds of miles away. For small-group learning communities, an expert or coach facilitates via technology and simultaneously, a trained teacher leader is onsite to provide in-person assistance to the group.

Other technologies enable teachers — especially those teaching in isolation — to come together in a virtual hub for continuous collegial learning related to improving instructional practice. For instance, APSRC uses Edmodo as a platform to enable teachers in job-alike groups (e.g., grade level, content area) to meet virtually and communicate about current issues. APSRC instructional leaders also use social media like Twitter to facilitate town hall-style meetings for sharing information or Facebook to lead group discussions.

Blended Learning in Action: Developing teacher leaders to facilitate peer learning

The Center for Teaching Quality (CTQ) has successfully established a virtual learning community through its Collaboratory. Teachers that are interested in education policy and leading change efforts at their school or district can join the Collaboratory for virtual mentoring, teacher-led professional learning, and collaboration with educators who share their interests. Teachers learn teacher-leadership strategies from colleagues with deep expertise through a variety of online methods, including webinars on Blackboard Collaborate, Twitter chats, and group discussions in CTQ’s private online community.

Teachers then apply their knowledge and skills with peers at their respective sites using blended learning. As teacher leaders, they facilitate face-to-face workshops for their colleagues; sustain virtual learning communities; engage stakeholders from the community; and leverage a myriad of digital channels — such as email, blogs, and social media — to share useful information. CTQ teacher leader-in-residence Sarah Henchey reports that these virtual channels have greatly improved collaboration: “Our work has brought teachers together literally from all across the state. Teachers who didn’t know each other before have now found a network of kindred spirits for collaboration and collegiality.”

CenterView action steps for effective, high-impact blended learning

Based on the TPN's blended professional learning models, the CFTL has identified action steps for maximizing teacher engagement and buy-in when implementing blended learning strategies, including:

- **Identify what teachers want and design the professional learning to meet those needs.** Teacher input is essential for designing meaningful professional learning. Accordingly, develop a process for collecting teacher input and use this data to inform intentional planning of blended learning activities.
- **Leverage existing platforms and communities to sustain online learning.** Decrease teachers' learning curve by utilizing familiar digital communication channels like Google+, Facebook, Pinterest, Twitter, or a district-based platform that teachers already use comfortably. Use the digital platform to grow an existing community that already functions as a group.
- **Build teacher leadership capacity.** Train teacher leaders on pedagogical strategies, CCSS-aligned content, and leadership skills to deliver knowledge to peers at their respective sites through workshops, learning communities, and/or coaching. Peer-to-peer professional learning lends credibility, improves buy-in, and provides continuity across a school or district.

Teachers deserve quality professional learning, and schools, districts, and county offices of education are primed to provide these transformative experiences. With intentional planning and replication of blended learning strategies, schools and districts can engage teachers more deeply and frequently in meaningful professional growth to improve their practice and prepare our nation's students for 21st century success.

This issue is part of a series on the Teacher Practice Networks initiative and its efforts to broadly support teachers for college- and career-readiness instruction.

Endnotes

- i Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. (2014). *Teachers know best: Teachers' views on professional development*. Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.
- ii Yoon, K. S., Duncan, T., Lee, S. W.-Y., Scarloss, B., & Shapley, K. (2007). *Reviewing the evidence on how teacher professional development affects student achievement* (Issues & Answers Report, REL 2007–No. 033). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Southwest.
- iii Darling-Hammond, L., Wei, R. C., Andree, A., Richardson, N., & Orphanos, S. (2009). *Professional learning in the learning profession: A status report on teacher development in the United States and abroad*. School Redesign Network at Stanford University.
- iv Killion, J. (2013). *Meet the promise of content standards: Tapping technology to enhance professional learning*. Oxford, OH: Learning Forward.



The Center for the Future of Teaching & Learning at WestEd is dedicated to strengthening teacher practice. For more than a decade, the Center has been steadfast in the pursuit of its mission to ensure that every child learns from a fully prepared and effective teacher.

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