



# Solving the Professional Learning Crisis

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## YOUR BEST LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Consider your best learning experience in the last year. Perhaps it was picking up a new hobby, mastering a new skill, or enjoying a fresh exercise routine. Maybe it was learning to cook a new recipe or listening to the stories of a war veteran. In any case, it's likely that your best learning experience last year involved the following ingredients:

- **Authenticity** - The work had an audience that delights in or benefits from the work.
- **Relevance** - The work mattered to you.
- **Challenges** - The work was difficult, but not impossible, to master.
- **Relationships** - The work was deeply connected to other people.
- **Feedback** - The work provided natural feedback throughout the process and at the end.

While these learning design principles are familiar attributes, they are often not honored when it comes to the design of professional learning for educators. It's far too common for this group to broadly describe their professional learning experiences as boring, lifeless, irrelevant, and didactic. *How People Learn*, one of the most widely respected whitepapers on effective educational practice laments, "The point is particularly important because incorporating the principles in this volume into educational practice will require a good deal of adult learning. Many approaches to teaching adults consistently violate principles for optimizing learning."<sup>1</sup>

*"Many approaches to teaching adults consistently violate principles for optimizing learning."*

How People Learn<sup>1</sup>



## THE 21ST CENTURY LEARNING CRISIS

Given that most professional development has been deemed “totally useless” by teachers, it’s no surprise that teachers shy away from these opportunities<sup>2</sup>. In fact, more than 80% of teachers from a national sample reported that they experienced less than 14 hours of school-sponsored professional development each year. Further, more than 50% of these same educators reported that they do not engage in ANY professional development beyond what’s provided by their schools. Importantly, the Center for American Progress reports that 14 hours of professional development are needed on a single topic before successful implementation and lasting change can occur. In short, most teachers aren’t engaging in adequate learning opportunities for successful implementation.

*“Is it possible that there is an adult learning crisis in our schools?”*

Consider a few of the following data points from a national study of over 28,000 teachers<sup>3</sup>:

- 52% of teachers find it difficult to use online web tools to receive information.
- 71% of teachers have never used LinkedIn or Twitter to connect with colleagues.
- 66% of teachers never share content online.

An analysis of this data quickly suggests that we have much more than a professional development gap. Is it possible that there is an adult learning crisis in our schools?

If this is indeed a plausible representation of adult learning in schools, we risk further stagnation of the student learning experience in our classrooms, and risk our own relevance as educators. Today’s learners face a changing landscape of expectations and opportunities beyond school, and preparing them to be responsive



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and agile learners should be of the highest priority. Learning, networking, and navigating the learning environments of the 21st century, both physical and digital, cannot be left to students to learn on their own; they must form the foundation of the 21st century education schools provide.

And while the solution to this problem isn’t easy, it’s certainly tangible. Put simply, every individual who participates in the school system needs to define himself/herself as a learner. All professions require extensive learning to remain current. Education is no exception. Teachers, administrators, bus drivers, and librarians all need to be learners. We ALL have a shared responsibility to place the highest value on our own personal growth and in the development of the professional practice that will best serve students.

So, in a learning organization,

learning needs to happen all the time, both formally and informally.

A change like this requires much more attention, leadership and an emphasis on educator empowerment than a differentiated list of professional development options. It requires deep cultural change. Understanding how to accomplish this change first begins by understanding the difference between a school’s climate and its culture.

To change our schools, we need to change the culture of professional learning. We need to create shifts that increase the level of empowerment and ownership experienced by our nation’s best learners: teachers.

## **CLIMATE VS. CULTURE**

The climate of a school represents the current conditions that are observable in a school. A



*“Does your school have a culture of adult learning? Is it a learning organization?”*

state championship, contract negotiations, a change in leadership, or the implementation of a 1:1 program all can change the climate of a school. They have an immediate impact on the demeanor of a school.

The culture of a school is represented by the nuances, the language, the ceremonies and pageants, and the shared experience that the school provides. School culture takes years to develop and becomes the fabric of the school, how it acts, and how it behaves.

Does your school have a culture of adult learning? Is it a learning organization?

Perhaps you answered yes, perhaps no, and perhaps somewhere in between. What we know, from our earlier exploration of data, is that most likely, your school, and the adults within

it, can improve how they learn individually and collectively. For this we have to build the expectation that professional learning is expected and prioritized.

Altering the perspective of every person in a system is hard work, and building culture doesn't happen overnight. However, school leadership can begin the process of shifting a school's culture by first focusing on changing the climate of a school, and by introducing changes to a school's climate that, over time, become part of its culture.

## **A PATHWAY TO CULTURAL CHANGE FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING**

We believe that the journey to a dynamic professional learning





***“To begin building a culture of empowerment, start with changes to the immediate climate of the school that promote teacher agency.”***

culture ultimately is based in empowerment, where learners have been given the “power” or agency to design and create their own learning experiences. This is the direct opposite of school systems where teachers perceive that they have little power over their professional learning. Shifting this perspective is the first step forward.

To begin building a culture of empowerment, start with changes to the immediate climate of the school that promote teacher agency. Consider these initial steps in establishing a culture of empowerment:

- Encourage educators themselves to identify and define topics of study
- Model a system of personalized goal setting
- Encourage and reward risk taking

Empowerment isn’t binary. Instead, it’s a delicate process that is

nurtured by all—administrators, teachers, staff—really the entire school organization. And as empowerment becomes actualized, the locus of control of the organization can shift.

The “locus of control” is a construct that defines an individual’s ability to exert influence over others to achieve specific goals. By empowering people, organizations can impact the size and scope of the locus of control. Over time, and as educators realize a greater locus of control, they have an opportunity to choose their own learning paths and to be agents of their own learning.

As the locus of control shifts, you may notice the following:

- Willingness to share practice and open their classroom door
- Increases in formal and informal peer coaching
- Willingness to present at



faculty meetings and conferences

- Experimenting with informal professional development during their off hours

Once the locus of control reaches a tipping point, transformation occurs. This transformation happens because learners see themselves as having the agency to make direct change. Instead of waiting for someone else to provide learning for them, they'll see themselves as responsible partners in the learning process.

To summarize this pathway for change, consider the roadmap below:

Empowerment → Locus of Control → Transformation through Agency to Act

## GETTING STARTED

Making a commitment to transforming professional learning can be something that you do singly at first and then with your entire learning organization. Put simply, become a model learning organization and share it proudly. The journey that lies before us is long, but it is also exciting. There has never been a better time to be an educator. Every day, we have the ability to connect with our colleagues, ideas, and our students like never before. As we start to shift how we learn, we can better design learning experiences that are relevant for kids. We can better prepare them for college and career by teaching them to network, connect, collaborate, and publish.

*So, how might we reimagine our schools in ways that sustainably help ALL learners grow and share?*



## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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An educational leader and curriculum writer, Kristen is a renowned teacher, professional developer, writer, speaker, and consultant on impactful learning designs. She has worked directly under the tutelage of Dr. Grant Wiggins and authored both *Professional Learning in the Digital Age* (2013) and *Teaching the Common Core Speaking and Listening Standards* (2013). A founder of the Edcamp movement, Kristen is also passionate about effective teacher education. Kristen has a doctorate from Widener University in Educational Leadership.



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David Jakes is a lifelong educator with a passion for connecting learners through digital content. He has spent nearly three decades in education as a teacher, staff developer, technology coordinator, and digital designer and strategist. He is an internationally sought-after speaker and thought leader on educational technology topics, including design thinking, digital storytelling, mobile learning, and the physical design of learning spaces. In David's current role with CannonDesign and The Third Teacher+, he collaborates with schools across the country to enhance their design of physical learning spaces, cloud-based learning environments, mobile learning, and professional development. Jakes also contributes his thoughts and ideas on educational technology through his blog [DavidJakes.me](http://DavidJakes.me).

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