

Lexington Learns Together: Rewriting the PD script

By Zachary Del Nero
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Educators in the Lexington Public Schools experienced a professional development reboot in 2014 when the district's Office of Curriculum, Instruction and Professional Learning reimagined the landscape for such programs.

The result was a full day of workshops in fall 2015 run by administrators, faculty and staff in a variety of fields. Aptly named Lexington Learns Together, the event seems destined to become a tradition in the district.

Our goal in this article is twofold: describing our experiences as both teachers and students during Lexington Learns Together and promoting professional development that comes from *within* a district. This model of district or schoolwide PD honors the expertise of faculty and staff — and pays dividends well beyond the day itself.

Fueled by the philosophy of educators teaching educators, the workshop model is authentic, invigorating and good for school culture and morale. The enthusiastic Twitter feed generated from that day (#lexingtonlearns15) includes the voices of educators from throughout the district: administrators, general and special education teachers, liaisons, counselors and specialists.

'Session A is underway!'

While waiting outside the doorway to our classroom on a bright morning in October, we overheard snippets of conversations, such as "I had yoga for my first session" and "Do you know where 'Positive Psych' is?"

Clutching their schedules, the students — our fellow educators, actually, but students this day — talked excitedly, confirming that they had found the right room. After the bell rang and the hallway crowd thinned out, we turned to the eager faces and began the last session before lunch: "Podcasting in the Humanities Classroom."

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Every fall, this scene plays out on university campuses all over the country. It is now a familiar one for those working in the Lexington Public Schools.

The day consisted of three 75-minute sessions. Educators had submitted proposals to offer workshops for a range of courses that varied widely, from "Art and Archetype" to "A Public School's Journey with Yoga" and "Photoshop Basics." Participants signed up for sessions based on interest and availability. With 147 sessions offered, the difficulty was in deciding what *not* to take.

A two-way learning experience

We co-taught the "Podcasting in the Humanities Classroom" session, which was a valuable experience for many reasons. It was energizing to teach together and to work with teachers outside the department. Lexington Learns Together created bonds between various faculty members and administrators, making cross-disciplinary collaboration one of the day's most noteworthy aspects.

Giving participants the opportunity to *make* something was a crucial ingredient in the success of many of the workshops. As facilitators, we didn't simply tell people about podcasting.

Participants produced a multitrack audio file. After playing clips from several student models, we ran a quick tutorial on the software — the same software we provide for our sophomores. Participants found a poem online to read aloud and record. We then helped them find music to complement their recording, import it into GarageBand, and fade it into the background.

During this stage, everyone in the room was

working together and sharing his or her progress. Ultimately, the day inspired us to refine our own teaching based on real-time feedback from fellow educators.

In traditional PD settings, teachers can be the most resistant students; a common refrain runs along these lines: "We've seen it all before." Part of the problem is the term itself — professional development. The phrase sounds like something out of a management textbook.

Professional development, as term and concept, was popularized in the mid to late 20th century, and the model for it hasn't changed much since then. As Tim Walker described the problem in *NEA Today*, "For many classroom teachers, the words summon bad memories: the valuable instruction time that was wasted listening to a so-called 'expert' who hasn't spent a day in their classrooms."

As educators, we are aware of the importance of active learning. Much current research recommends project-based approaches, collaboration and student-centered classrooms. Why do these ideas go out the window when it's time to schedule professional development?

Teachers are encouraged to help students pursue their own lines of inquiry. Why should we exclude ourselves from that experience?

The Lexington Learns Together model offers other school districts a chance to create PD that doesn't feel like PD. Lexington Learns Together is easily exportable. Your experts are your educators. By empowering them to organize sessions specific to the needs and interests of their district, you provide a professional learning experience uniquely tailored to your audience.

It's OK to have fun

Having finished our podcasting workshop, we took part in the final session of the day — "Art and Archetype," in which K-12 educators learned how to use supplementary visual sources to define character

Lexington Learns Together should be a model for PD

Continued from Page 13

archetypes in myths and legends. As the session wrapped up, there was little doubt that those in the room could implement and adapt the methodologies highlighted by the instructor.

Anyone walking into the classroom halfway through would have seen a group of adults engaged in a vibrant, authentic conversation about what characters in a painting might do later that evening. But what was so striking was that we were not discussing the painting solely in terms of tomorrow's lesson plan or learning objective. We were talking about this painting because it was fun. Educators don't have to think in the language of learning objectives and Common Core all day long.

Lexington Learns Together is *fun* — and that's OK. Teachers who have fun in the PD classroom are more likely to translate what they've learned to their own classrooms.

Lexington Learns Together was first presented to us as innovative, and it is. But it shouldn't be. It should be the norm. When professional development works, we develop more than just our professional selves.

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