

Giving Teachers Voice and Choice

It's time to transform your teacher training from "sit-and-git" or "one-and-done" to professional learning that helps educators understand how to gain the outcomes they want for their students.

Dell EMC Education Strategists **Lauren Hobbs** and **Snow White** work with schools in developing powerful professional learning experiences to instill educator practices that make it all the way to the classroom. In this interview Lauren and Snow lay out the common problems they see with many professional development efforts, explain why the best professional learning takes place four times (or more!) every day and how teachers can make sure they get the help they need to make digital transformations in their classrooms work.

This interview was annotated for brevity. You can hear the entire interview with Lauren and Snow – including their advice about how to deal with student devices arriving before the professional learning is in place, the importance of including school leaders in PL programs and the most effective ways to use virtual and online learning – on *THE Journal's* Viewpoint podcast. [Click here.](#)

You are both former teachers. Name some of the crummy professional development practices you have experienced.

Lauren Hobbs: Oh my gosh — where do we even begin? I'd be told to go to something I'd have to learn about that day, and I'd always look at the PowerPoint presentation at the bottom left and see how many slides I would have to sit through for that six-hour session. I think we know that one approach to professional learning is that idea of one-and-done. I'm going to see you and magically transform the way you interact and design an experience with your learners with some three-hour training. I think we know true professional learning is a process. It's building this culture of understanding and professional growth that can't be one-and-done, or four times a year. It has to be embedded and a way of work that teachers and leaders undergo day-to-day.

Snow White: It's not a one-size-fits-all with professional development. Just as we talk about with students how they have different learning styles and the way they want things delivered to them can vary, we don't grow out of that just because we're adults. As adults, we have different learning styles too. It's understanding that we can't just assume that one-size fits all.

How should professional learning unfold for educators?

Snow White: I think it's understanding where they are at that specific time, and what is going to make the most impact for learning in their classroom. Something we believe strongly in is job-embedded professional development, where we are going into the classroom, working with that specific instructor or administrator in



their environment and saying, “What is it you want to focus on?” and then giving them some choices: “Do you want to co-teach or do that collaboratively?” Or, “Do you want someone to model that for you?” Homing in on a specific topic that matters most to them, and then giving their choice on how they want their professional development delivered to them.

Lauren Hobbs: We are constantly asking kids — or we should be asking — how do you learn that? What do you value? What are you interested in? We rarely transfer that when we work with teachers. This notion and idea of choice is key in helping teachers feel value and why they are even there. Designing experiences of learning where teachers can feel the way that we want them to work with students is key. So often we tell teachers, “This is what we want you to do with your kids,” but we don’t let them experience what that learning feels like and looks like and sounds like. Having teachers experience that is key to when we work with educators.

I watched a great little video that Dell EMC put together, and there is a statement in there that professional learning needs to shift from four times a year to four times a day. Teachers are really busy, so what does that mean?

Lauren Hobbs: It’s a really great question to ask because we get it all the time: “What? You want me to pull a teacher four times a day?” That’s real traditional thinking of what professional learning looks like. When we say “four times a day,” that could be a reflective conversation you have with a peer or colleague. That could be an opportunity where you’ve been given feedback from a building site administrator. That could be something you learned from a student about how to do something. I think there is this perception that professional learning has to be this whole, big to-do, but in essence when we are successful at it, it becomes [a part of the] culture. It’s not just going to this event that happens four times a year, but it’s, how do we create this on-going continuous process of learning?

Snow White: Something that we’ve seen that I thought was effective in schools in Virginia was something they called “stoplight learning,” where teachers put colors on their door, like red, yellow and green. What it means is that signals are given on when you can come into the classroom and learn, so that could be an example of that four times a day. If it’s green, it means, “Come on in. I’ve got some new things going on, and I welcome anyone to learn from the way I am teaching



today.” Then yellow is, “Hey, this might be something new. I haven’t tried it out, but I’m taking a risk, if you want to come in. It may not go very well, and I’m giving you a head’s up.” Red is, “I’m testing today. Today is not a good day to come in and observe the way I’m teaching or the way kids are learning.”

That gives those teachers a voice on when they can collaborate with each other. That’s an example of how learning can happen four times a day. If you visit just four different classrooms, the chances are you will learn four different things throughout that day. The culture has to be there first to allow that.

Okay, offer some advice. First, how can school leaders make sure they’ve got the kind of professional learning their teachers need?

Lauren Hobbs: First, I think we need to listen; we need to ask some questions; we need to be walking our buildings, seeing what is taking place in our classrooms. I don’t think we just randomly pick one because someone

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else is doing it the next district over — and that does happen; we've seen that far too often — but I think we need to listen, collect some data on current practices taking place and allow our teachers to have some voice in that process.

Snow White: A lot of school districts will say, "We're deploying a 1-to-1. Tell me what the professional plan should be..."

Lauren Hobbs: Or, give me the catalog.

Snow White: Yes, give me the catalog of courses I should choose from. It doesn't work for everyone that way. It's so key that we listen and observe. Before a school district buys technology, they should go and observe the current classrooms now. See what they're doing, what kind of activities they are focused on. That could determine what type of technology you might need in that classroom. [For example,] lower grades might be creating a lot more than we expected, so they might need a keyboard vs. just having a regular tablet. Make sure the professional learning is based on what the teachers and administrators need at that particular time vs. what was the

latest thing we saw at the latest conference. Is this right for us at this time?

Now, offer some advice for teachers. How can they make sure they are getting the learning they need to empower that achievement and change in their classrooms?

Snow White: I would say one of the first things is make your voice heard in some areas that you want to focus on. The other advice is that there is going to have to be some work that they do on their own to see what is out there. A lot of times we don't know what we don't know. We feel like we want to learn about this specific app or this specific software or this latest and greatest technology, but also what about collaborating with peers, seeing what they are focusing on, what has worked for them? There are so many great resources for learning that doesn't have to be in a "professional development workshop."

Lauren Hobbs: I think they need to not be afraid to try new things. Fail, fail often, fail forward is something we live

by. Making mistakes is how I grow my brain and get even better at what I want to do. With our teachers, there's a lot of stuff out there to help them. There are a lot of resources. There are a lot of great things through Twitter and online where you can connect with educators — not just within your own school, but with educators outside your own school in your district to grow and develop other practices as you work with your students and design experiences too.

Snow White: We see so much fear from the teachers who say, "But the kids know more than I do." I say, "That's OK. That's great because you are going to learn from those students." Just knowing you can have this collaborative learning environment, not just from other teachers and other peers, but from your students, too. As a teacher, you don't have to know everything about everything, especially when it comes to technology.



Building Purposeful Professional Learning

A technology refresh gave this school district the opportunity to reboot its approach to professional development and help its teachers learn how to ask for instructional support as they need it.

When **White Settlement Independent School District**, with 7,000 students, undertook its first 1-to-1 program, which focused on the nuts-and-bolts of deployment, the effort didn't get the broad pickup it wanted. So, the district convened a taskforce of stakeholders and reconfigured the approach, with an emphasis on instructional goals. Instructional Technology Coordinator Carla Nored shares the story of how her district transformed its professional learning to help its educators gain the confidence they needed to "fail forward."

Your district has had some stops and starts regarding how it does professional learning for teachers in school years. Can you share some of those early memories about how the district used to do professional development?

Carla Nored: It was approached more as a stand-alone where each department had its own goals and objectives. Training would be offered from the technology instructional specialists as well as the instructional coaches. There was no alignment of the goals and objectives on what we were both trying to accomplish. They would come in for the training, but we weren't seeing it carried into the classroom. We did have pockets of success, but the problem was we were not seeing the results we wanted across all the partners in all grade levels. The mindset still needed to be changed. Teachers feared failing in front of their students due to not being an expert in technology.

What happened to compel the district to reconsider its approach to professional learning and development?

We started losing buy-in on the use of the devices in the classroom. We began to rethink how technology was being used in our district and how we could do a better job helping teachers understand how to use technology as more of an instructional tool instead of viewing it as a distraction. We created a steering committee incorporating administrators, school board members, student technologists and parents to develop our, "Why technology" plan. Then, we met with each department on how we could improve teacher support and what professional learning they needed for this to occur. This helped with buy-in moving forward.

This interview was annotated for brevity. You can hear the entire interview with Carla – including how educators learn the ins and outs of blended learning, share their training with each other, tap students for technical assistance and pursue advanced learning through Dell EMC's Educator Certification Program – on *THE Journal's* Viewpoint podcast. [Click here for that episode.](#)



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Fast forward to today; how does the school system approach professional learning currently?

The philosophy of professional learning needs to always address why we have technology and why in White Settlement. The three “whys” are:

- 1) to empower learners to have the skills and resources necessary to be globally competitive;
- 2) to engage all learners and build a capacity of problem solvers; and
- 3) to ensure that our students are responsible users of technology and are future-ready.

What kinds of activities were introduced to the district to help with the professional learning efforts?

First, we continually meet with the instructional department for alignment with our tech department, and some of the training is co-taught within our two departments. Second, we've changed our philosophy: We go where and when the teachers need training. It could be through professional learning communities, just-in-time training,

staff development days, teacher conferences and online. We also now run two full days of straight-up instructional technology academies where teachers instruct teachers on where they've seen success in their classrooms. This has been a great way to build the culture.

We also make courses on the use of social media and the use of the LMS available on Canvas, our learning management system. We model blended learning in our face-to-face training. We have all of our presentations and resources in our online course that teachers can refer back to.

How would you describe the results that you are seeing by making this change in professional learning?

There has been a shift in mindset; there has been a shift in our entire culture of how we view technology. We view it more as an enhancement to instruction. We don't view it as a distraction anymore. We are more comfortable when it comes to the four Cs. It's a norm for our students, whether they are in the Google Drive world, or Office 365 to be able to communicate, collaborate and write in



the cloud. We've made huge strides over the years on how we use it.

How can teachers make sure they are getting the learning that they need to empower that achievement and change in their classrooms?

I think teachers — and I still see myself as a teacher, so I say this for myself — need to believe in the motto of “failing forward.” We tell our students all the time it is OK to fail, but we struggle with this concept ourselves. Teachers need to make sure they understand the “why” of the professional learning and to visualize the concept in their classrooms. Some things look great on paper, but how does it look in the classroom? We need to make sure that we vocalize the support; we need to visualize the professional learning. What will you take away from the training and implement in your classroom tomorrow? The only thing you should be afraid of is not changing with the needs of your students.

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