Secrets of Effective PD: The 3 P’s

An educator and edtech company founder discusses a few key strategies.

GUEST COLUMN | by Eric Westendorf

When people ask me for the secret to great professional development, I share our 3 P’s.

Funny enough, we discovered these 3 P’s by accident. In the summer of 2011, thanks to a Next Generation Learning Challenge Grant, we brought 20 teachers from around the country together to work on the first batch of LearnZillion lessons. For two days, we sat in a cramped room with math books, computers and treats, working on lessons. At the end of the two days, we were surprised to hear several of the teachers say that it had been “the best professional development” of their careers.

And when we analyzed why that was, it boiled down to 3 P’s: product, process and people.

One year later, it happened again. This time we brought 123 teachers to Atlanta and called the event TeachFest. On the second night, after a full day of working on lessons, we gave everyone a few options. They could go out on the town, watch Ferris Bueller’s Day Off on a large screen or continue working on lessons in the basement. At 11 p.m., half of the teachers were still working in the basement! Again, the feedback at the end of the event was, “This was the best professional development I’ve experienced.”

The feedback from participants – and the subsequent explosion in applications to our Dream Team – led to the revelation that our content creation process was, in fact, the key to incredible professional growth, satisfaction and impact. And when we analyzed why that was, it boiled down to 3 P’s: product, process and people.

Product

The experience must be based in the content teachers need to understand, and focused on developing a “publishable” product. Regardless of whether it’s a lesson, discussion guide, text-dependent questions or math tasks, the key is for the content product to be practical, meaningful and challenging to create. Most professional development is offered in one-time, sit ’n get formats rather than rooted in content and embedded into a longer, habit-shaping experience. When you focus professional development on creating something useful, professional learning happens. For example, our Dream Team teachers know they are going to use the lessons, and they know other teachers and students are going to use them, too. Professional growth and learning are by-products of creating a product.

Process
Focusing on a final product isn't enough. We need to set teachers up for success. There needs to be a roadmap that provides them with the guidance and resources they need to accomplish the goal – from initial research, to outlines, to drafting. At TeachFest, we don’t say, “Here’s a block of time to plan, go for it.” We carefully think through every step of the process and ask ourselves, “What does the teacher need to be successful now? What about now? What about now?” And then we equip them with the tools, resources and coaching talent they need for success.

People

The final P stands for people. The 20 teachers at that initial event helped each other out. When one of them had a question about their lesson, they would talk it through with a colleague or a coach. They had opportunities to get feedback and then make revisions to their work based on that feedback. This happened in person and then continued online over the summer as teachers worked on their lessons. As a result, most of the experience was collaborative and “owned” by teachers, as opposed to an expert standing in front of a large group of people.

When you put the 3 P’s together, you have something great. McDonald’s talks about its “secret sauce,” but when it comes to professional development, we believe the sauce shouldn’t be secret. In fact, we’re now working with states like Delaware and Connecticut to implement our TeachFest model at the state level – in addition to our national TeachFest that will take place in New Orleans June 4-7. Teacher feedback from this year’s Delaware TeachFest is tremendously positive. The key is the 3 P’s. Put those ingredients together and you can create amazing lessons, build the capacity of teachers and have a lot of fun along the way.

---

*Eric Westendorf incubated LearnZillion at E.L. Haynes Public Charter School, in Washington D.C., where he was Chief Academic Officer and principal. While he was principal, E.L. Haynes posted three-year student achievement gains of 50 percentage points in math and 26 percentage points in reading. In each year the school was named a national Silver Award winning school through the federal Effective Practice grant program. Prior to leading E.L. Haynes, Westendorf founded a non-profit focused on teacher leadership development; was the Assistant Principal of St. Joseph’s School in Harlem, where he raised over $1 million dollars for technology and other programs; and taught for seven years in North Carolina, New York, and Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Eric is the CEO and co-founder of LearnZillion.*

---

**Related**

- [Parallel Universe](In%20%27guest%20column%27)
- [Interview | Eric Westendorf: How Much Can You LearnZillion?](In%20%27interviews%27)
- [Of Course](In%20%27guest%20column%27)

---

This entry was posted in [guest column](http://example.com/guest-column) and tagged [Eric Westendorf](http://example.com/eric-westendorf), [LearnZillion](http://example.com/learnzillion), [professional development](http://example.com/professional-development), [TeachFest](http://example.com/teachfest). Bookmark the permalink.