Emerging Insights

The Current PD Landscape: Progress with More Work to be Done

Most products can be accessed anytime and anywhere. More than 89% of the 28 tools we profiled can be accessed remotely and without a commitment to a specific time. This can be extremely helpful for learners who want to go at their own pace and learn when the time is right for them. On the other hand, it also means that many of the learning activities happen without direct support. The inconsistencies in how tools are used means that their effectiveness can vary dramatically.

Video is a popular tool. However you slice it, video plays a big role in emerging PD tools. Over 64% of the tools we examined involve some video component in the learning process, whether video modules, videos of other teachers modeling best practice, or self-made videos for feedback. Tools such as Teaching Channel and Teaching Channel Teams use videos of master teachers to spark conversation. Others such as Teachscape and PD In Focus make videos and reflections on those videos a key component of learning. Still other tools including Talent, SmarterCookie, and Edthena, focus exclusively on making it possible for teachers to share self-made videos with one another for feedback. It’s clear that video is a powerful tool that can facilitate some powerful relationships. However, just watching a video can be extremely passive. Therefore, questions about how to link these videos with active, engaged learning persist.

Teacher choice is an overwhelmingly prevalent way to assign learning. Almost all of the PD options on our list leave it up to the teachers to choose what they learn. This definitely puts the teacher in the driver’s seat when it comes to learning. But teachers who don’t know what they need to learn may have difficulty picking the most relevant tools. Only a few tools offer differentiated pathways or adaptive content. For example, edWeb builds groups around specific topics, while PD In Focus allows administrators to assign specific content to specific groups of teachers.

“Measurement” usually means observations or evaluations. Tools that help teachers measure their learning often involve someone else observing a teacher or evaluating his or her practice. Observations can either be facilitated by an administrator, with tools like BloomBoard and TeachBoost, or by a colleague, through tools such as Talent or Edthena. But no matter who’s doing the measuring, the predominant type of measurement available consists of narrative third-party observations. Measurement tools that collect data including student feedback, student test scores, or even a teacher’s own reflections are scarce.
Emerging Insights (continued)

An Emerging Set of Valuable Products and Features

Set goals and measure whether those goals are achieved. This seems to be a valuable way of giving teachers ownership over their own learning. Whether teachers set goals by themselves or with the assistance of coaches or administrators, setting goals and then measuring whether they’ve been achieved is a solid step on the road to continuous improvement. Tools that facilitate this, such as BloomBoard, TeachBoost, Teachscape, and Truenorthlogic give teachers a chance to track what they learn and to engage in a continuous cycle of learning.

Demonstrating mastery is crucial. While many traditional professional development experiences simply ask a teacher to reflect on their learning, asking teachers to demonstrate their mastery of a concept is an authentic way to ensure they’ve learned something new. Tools that support this, such as Adobe Exchange, ask educators to go through a set of learning tasks and then submit a piece of work related to those tasks that shows mastery. Those artifacts are then stored in Adobe’s community marketplace of resources, so others can comment on, critique, and ultimately use them. Such opportunities are rare but important techniques for surfacing learning.

Make it an assignment. Many tools are open to a teacher’s choice, but sometimes too many choices isn’t such a great thing. Tools that allow an administrator to choose a learning opportunity and assign it to specific groups of teachers are important. These tools allow instructional leaders to provide differentiated learning pathways which is one step closer to personalized learning. One great example of this is PD In Focus, which allows administrators to create different assignments for different groups of teachers based on their needs or interests.

Adaptive is rare but happening. While students increasingly have access to curriculum and learning materials that adapt to their skill levels, this feature is hard to find among professional development tools. A few virtual experiences are building a case for adaptive learning for teachers. One of these tools is TeachLivE. TeachLivE presents the user with a virtual classroom of students whose behaviors and interactions adapt to the teacher driving the simulation. Virtual students respond to voice, body language, and even a teacher’s clothing. It’s an intriguing virtual experience and a great example of what adaptive learning might look like for teachers.
Emerging Insights (continued)

What’s Needed to Succeed Today + Tomorrow

Informal learning needs to play a role. Teachers say again and again that they get the most value out of informal learning opportunities such as EdCamps and Twitter chats. That suggests these activities need to be leveraged and included in their professional development. Such informal learning needs to be demonstrable, measurable, and go beyond reflections. In addition, informal learning needs to be recognized in some way—through badges, certificates, Continued Education Units or other incentives. Teachers who put a lot of time and work into these opportunities should get some sort of acknowledgement for this work.

Connecting teachers is important, but it should be done with a purpose. Teachers acknowledge they get significant value from their colleagues. Toolmakers have responded by including features such as social networks and the ability to make connections within their products. However, these features need to be leveraged strategically. Just putting up the ability to connect with each other doesn’t mean teachers will find value in connecting. Don’t adopt a tool because it has a social network and think teachers will use it. Adopt a tool with the social network that’s integrated strategically or expect to create a solid implementation plan for how it will be used.

Teachers need time. It is important that teachers get time to do professional development within their typical work day. While tools give them the opportunity to learn anytime and anywhere, it’s hard for them to prioritize their learning among the other pressing needs like grading papers and contacting parents. However, if you intentionally provide teachers with time and space to focus on using these tools, the tools will be more effective.

School leaders need support, too. Often times, newly appointed school leaders have very little experience managing people and coordinating operations. And yet, there are very few tools that give these leaders the support and training they need. Only one tool on our list targets these school leaders as learners: Delivering Performance Feedback to Teachers leads school leaders through a simulated conversation with a teacher, helping them practice and learn how best to give feedback. This community could use many more tools to support the wide range of demands they face.

Pick products that meet one or two of your needs really well. Introducing technology is challenging; it’s also hard to find products that do everything for every user. That’s why it’s important to pick products that meet one need well. Don’t expect to see the answers to all your PD bundled into one product. Chances are if you hope for one product to meet all your needs, it’s going to fall short in one way or another. That means savvy teachers and administrators will likely mash together different PD products and approaches. Find products that really appeal to you, that excite you, and that you believe in. And then seek out solid ways to implement them. Don’t look for the panacea, because chances are it will let you down.