

THE RIGHT BLEND

SEL SKILLS SUPPORT
TEACHER LEARNING
IN PERSON AND ONLINE

BY LAURA L. SUMMERS

The COVID-19 pandemic required that nearly all P-20 teaching and learning move quickly to virtual formats.

In many cases, educators were teaching exclusively online for the first time in their careers. Schools suddenly needed to train and support all educators on how to teach, engage students, and support families from a distance. This created an urgent need to provide meaningful professional learning in a virtual learning community.

The sudden move to remote learning exposed longstanding educational inequities in teaching and learning practices. One important goal that has emerged is to find ways to create more inclusive and equitable learning environments.

Although technology access is one part of the equation, building equity is about far more than providing laptops and internet hotspots to students



who don't have them. It is also about creating "learning environments that welcome and support all students" (CASEL, n.d., p. 4). It is about recognizing each student's individual needs, interests, and worth, and ensuring that everyone gets what he or she needs to succeed, wherever the learning occurs.

Yet, in the rush to prepare educators for virtual environments, today's professional learning does not always model or embody the responsiveness and relational focus necessary for equity. A common flaw with virtual professional learning has been to take content that was facilitated in person and simply move it to an online lecture, even though research has shown that the sit-and-get mode of professional learning is the least effective way to impact teacher practice.

Professional learning that is relationship-based, empowering, and grounded in social and emotional learning (SEL) will prepare educators to build equity and self-efficacy for re-engaging learners in the coming school year, whether teaching online or in person.

LEARNING GROUNDED IN SEL

All professional learning, including virtual professional learning, should be grounded in an understanding of social and emotional learning. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines SEL as "the process through

which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions" (CASEL, n.d.).

Decades of research have shown that SEL is critical for the success of all learners from childhood to adulthood (Durlak et al., 2011; Markowitz et al., 2018; Yoder et al., 2020). SEL matters regardless of whether teaching and learning occur in a face-to-face, virtual, or blended environment.

In fact, SEL may be more important now than ever because it helps educators, families, and students manage stress, develop resilience, and maintain a sense of optimism during challenging times (Markowitz et al., 2018; Wanless & Winters, 2018; Yoder et al., 2020).

Educators can lead with SEL and foster it in students if and when they engage in professional learning that is grounded in SEL skills. Educators need to feel psychologically safe to learn new skills just as much as students do. And they need to understand SEL skills in a deep way to model, teach, and support those skills in students. This was highlighted in the SEL-focused August 2018 issue of *The Learning Professional*.

For example, in that issue, the Center for Reaching & Teaching the Whole Child shared a framework for developing educators' social, emotional, and cultural competence so that they can support students' competence

SEL-SUPPORTED ONLINE TECH POINTERS

- **Keep it simple.** Learning online is a new experience for many teachers. Use a minimum number of tools and use them consistently. Provide a guided demonstration of each tool that can be recorded for later review. Many vendors have online videos already available.

- **Check in with teachers.** Create time to check in synchronously with each teacher to gauge comfort levels and determine stress points. This can happen in a scheduled one-on-one or in consistently scheduled virtual office hours.

Teachers have varying levels of comfort using technology or even learning from home, where home responsibilities may be competing for their attention. During COVID-19, I have used a brief, weekly check-in survey asking teachers to let me know how they are doing emotionally and physically with the shift to working and learning new skills while also helping their own families and significant others at home.

- **Ask experts to help.** If online professional learning is new to your school, reach out to a faculty member of an online learning design program at a university to design an effective online professional learning structure template.

Graduate students often need to complete unpaid or low-cost internship hours to show their mastery of instructional design. Programs such as the Learning Design and Technology program at the University of Colorado Denver employ student concierges, who earn internship credits or work-study hours by supporting instructors and organizations new to online teaching and learning.

(Markowitz et al., 2018; Center for Reaching & Teaching the Whole Child, 2020).

The Anchor Competencies Framework consists of seven competencies that can be used in any learning setting, including a virtual learning environment, along with examples of moves educators can use to embody these SEL competencies. The competencies are:

- Build trusting relationships;
- Foster self-reflection;
- Foster growth mindset;
- Cultivate perseverance;
- Create community;
- Promote collaborative learning; and
- Respond constructively across differences.

These competencies are important for leaders as well as teachers. Leaders can model this approach through

professional learning with teachers, who in turn can share this approach with students.

Indeed, a critical component of virtual professional learning is to have instructional leaders model how they would like teachers to engage with students. Penuel (2015) explains that professional learning needs to anticipate and address how students will think when learning a new concept.

This same strategy should be used in teacher professional learning. By using this proactive, student-focused strategy, teachers can learn just as effectively online (Fishman et al., 2013) as in person.

FOSTER SELF-EFFICACY

Self-efficacy is the belief in one's capacities to be successful. My interviews with educators have shown that their level of self-efficacy influences

their motivation and behavior to make changes within their teaching practice.

Self-efficacy builds for teachers and students when their voices are affirmed, and when they feel included in establishing how the learning community operates. Professional learning with in-person coaching support fosters self-efficacy (Summers, 2010), but virtual professional learning can do the same.

Professional learning leaders can empower educators and build self-efficacy by offering choices of virtual learning approaches. Just as there are often multiple ways to teach to state standards in an evidence-based curriculum for students, there are multiple ways to structure and facilitate professional learning, especially online.

Collective resources are available to help educators adapt to the current environment, such as *Teaching,*

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Technology, and Teacher Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Stories From the Field (Ferdig et al., 2020) and *From Response to Reopening: State Efforts to Elevate Social and Emotional Learning During the Pandemic* (Yoder et al., 2020).

A virtual professional community of inquiry supports collaborative construction of knowledge, which can build teachers' self-efficacy and their use of continuous improvement of practices within their classrooms. Face-to-face learning labs or lesson studies can be valuable, but the need to be out of one's classroom for a period of time can be a barrier to participation.

A virtual learning community allows participants to learn new concepts at convenient times and at their own pace. They can view filmed examples of best practices, with exemplars available through professional associations and school districts. They can observe and discuss best practices and ask questions of their peers who are also trying new strategies.

In addition, teachers may film their own practices and get coaching feedback through a virtual coaching protocol, which can increase self-efficacy as coaches give feedback from cycles of inquiry verified using evidence of student learning.

VIRTUAL LEARNING CHALLENGES

Follow best practices for structuring professional learning in an online setting. Asking a teacher to attend a synchronous, virtual session for more than 45 minutes at a time is not conducive to learning. It's important to allow for breaks from sitting at the computer if the professional learning takes place over hours or days.

Ideally, schedule 15-minute segments for activities. For example, a common practice for a webinar is to present a topic for no more than 15 minutes, then pause to allow participants to ask questions, share examples, or engage in small-group discussion in breakout rooms.

To engage teachers in virtual or

HOW TO SUPPORT SEL IN A VIRTUAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

BUILD COLLABORATION ONLINE.

Give teachers opportunities for small-group discussions in breakout rooms where they can share their own experiences. This practice demonstrates the anchor competency of creating a classroom community that ignites engagement and an opportunity to practice cooperative learning skills through active listening.

OFFER A MIX OF SYNCHRONOUS PLC SESSIONS AND OFF-LINE ACTIVITIES.

Teachers can meet together in a video conferencing platform paired with off-line activities that can be completed between synchronous sessions.

An off-line cycle of activities may include reading additional text or watching video examples to support how to implement the new skills in one's classroom, followed by practicing with coaching and feedback support, then returning to the next virtual session to provide reflective self-feedback with examples and student evidence from the in-class practice sessions.

An effective PLC fosters self-reflection and growth mindset and cultivates perseverance by monitoring goals and providing formative feedback among its members (Center for Reaching & Teaching the Whole Child, 2020).

BUILD TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS AND COMMUNITY.

Foster authentic, informal learning conversations with the use of a third-party message app (e.g. Slack, Google Messenger, What's Up, Microsoft Teams) where conversations can occur in real time with an app that is accessible by phone, tablet, or computer.

The Learning Design and Technology program at the University of Colorado Denver uses a free version of Slack to foster relationships between faculty and students and among students. Students feel more connected to us and each other even though they live worldwide. Slack has become a virtual hub for discussions because of its easy access using the phone app.

INSPIRE AND ENABLE LONG-TERM COMMITMENT.

Make the logistics work for participants. A virtual PLC can cultivate the SEL competency of perseverance when the community members make a long-term, focused commitment.

This commitment allows community members to hold each other accountable to established data-driven goals that aim for continuous improvement in their practices. But to make this commitment appealing and feasible, PLC leaders must make it accessible.

When PLCs operate within a virtual environment, learners can come together at times that are more conducive for their schedules and energy levels. Record sessions for those who cannot attend live.

I use a Doodle poll to ask participants for the times that are conducive for meeting. Then, if possible, I facilitate the PLC session at two different times or days of the week to meet the majority of schedules within a large school community.

blended learning, they need time to talk, collaborate (Wolpert-Gawron, 2020), and practice what they are learning. Miller and colleagues (2013) note that technology such as polling and backchannel communication increases learners' participation in lectures, promotes connection to the content, and provides immediate feedback to the facilitator.

These same practices should apply to our students. It's a good reminder that if a teacher is disengaged during a virtual learning session, it is likely that their students will also be disengaged.

PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE

Leadership expert Margaret Wheatley (2003) writes, "It is possible to prepare for the future without knowing what it will be. The primary way to prepare for the unknown is to attend to the quality of our relationships, to how well we trust and know each other."

This is vital for professional learning and high-quality virtual teaching and learning. As the school year begins, we need to prepare for the unknown. We have the opportunity to shift practices, even with limited background in online teaching, if our professional learning approaches prioritize social and emotional learning, empower educators through self-efficacy, and pay attention to adult learners' needs.

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