What's Key to Sticky PD?

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The before and after of a professional learning event is as important as the event itself.

Before reading any further, take a few minutes to consider the following two questions:

> During this past year, what has been the *most* valuable professional learning experience you've had?
>
> During this same period, what has been the *least* valuable professional learning experience you've had?

As you wrap up your reflection, think about what these two events have in common and what separates them. In some cases, it will be obvious how your best professional learning experiences differ from your worst. In other cases, it won't be as clear. For instance, even a well-facilitated professional learning session may not have led to a significant change in your practice or to more successful student learning outcomes. While we know that well-delivered professional learning is more likely to be engaging and useful than poorly facilitated professional learning, there is more at play than simply how well a learning session is led.

Several years ago, I wrote a short book for ASCD titled *Professional Development That Sticks* (2016). In the book, I used the work of education researchers, as well as the experiences I had amassed as a teacher, regional coordinator of science, and assistant director of curriculum and instruction to make the case for a multidimensional view of professional learning. The way I saw it (and still do), professional learning will only truly "stick" if we allow ourselves to think beyond the event itself. Much like a hamburger with all the fixings, or a sandwich cookie, professional learning is a full-flavored experience. In both cases, the full flavor only arrives if the burger or cookie is eaten as a unit. The lettuce by itself is just lettuce, much as the cookie filling only provides one flavor and texture.

In the same way, professional learning will only be effective if work is put into what comes both *before* and *after* the facilitation of the learning itself. This points to the importance of planning for professional learning and following up on a professional learning event.

Four Ingredients for Making It Stick

Before exploring how these phases come together, we first need to consider what "stickiness" is all about. Why do some ideas stay with us? Why do others fall off our radar? In his book *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell (2000) identified this "staying ability" as a "stickiness factor," or how entwined ideas become in our whole way of being. He writes, "Is the message [conveyed] memorable? Is it so memorable, in fact, that it can create change, that it can spur someone to action?" (p. 92) When ideas, experiences, and learned practices become such a part of who we are that they force us to change, then the message (whatever it might be) has truly become "sticky." And to create learning that sticks (let's call it PDL: Professional Development *for* Learning), work by Guskey (1999; 2009), Basye (2018), and others has shown that four ingredients need to be in place:

1. **PDL needs to be *meaningful*.** The learning must be connected to the experiences and passions of not only the facilitator, but of the audience in attendance and of the learners who will be the ultimate benefactors.
2. **PDL needs to *activate* us.** The learning needs to be highly engaging (a loaded word, I know) and aligned to school and district guideposts, as well as successful outcomes for students.
3. **PDL needs to include the *voice* and *choice* of participants.** The audience of the experience must have a say in design prior to the event and an opportunity to reflect after it concludes. Also, participation itself must be optional, rather than mandated from the top.
4. **PDL needs to be *time conscious*.** Time must be treated as a valuable commodity. Facilitators need enough time to properly lead the learning, the audience needs time to build a personal connection with the facilitator (and the learning itself) and to adopt a sense of urgency, and the learners all the way down the line—often the students—need time to see how the work can impact their learning experience.

These four ingredients make the recipe sound simple. But of course, we know this isn't the case. As we've all experienced, it is often easier to build in some of these ingredients than others. Still, if we are committed to professional development *for* learning, then it is imperative that these ingredients, in their totality, become standard.

The TAR Method: Think, Act, Review

Because of the complexity of this process, I recognized that I could only apply these ingredients to my work if I broke down the professional learning process into three phases: planning, providing, and

following up. And with those three phases broken down in my mind, I realized that I would need to create steps to hold myself accountable to using the phases as effectively as possible. That's where the TAR Method comes in. The process, like the name, is sticky. "T" stands for "Think," "A" stands for "Act," and "R" represents "Review." As the chart in Figure 1 shows, by holding ourselves to thinking, acting, and reviewing each of the three phases, we can be better designers, providers, and evaluators of professional development for learning.

Figure 1. Questions to Guide Your Professional Development for Learning (PDL) Design

Phase	TAR Step	Key Guiding Questions
Planning	Think	How do I determine a PDL purpose to guide my planning? How will I go about collecting the data I need to plan?
	Act	What steps do I take to engage in planning? Who plays a role? Why? What format best fits my PDL? What logistics do I have to pay attention to?
	Review	How do I make sure I've taken all of the details into consideration as I finalize plans? Was I able to marry form and function to give this design what I believe will be a lasting impact? Why or why not? Are there any last-minute adjustments I can make before the PDL begins to achieve a better fit? Did I involve the right players? How do I know?

Providing	Think	How can I use what I know about my learning space and the participants in my session to plan for adaptability? How can I put relationship-building at the forefront of providing PDL?
	Act	What implementation steps should I take when facilitating (or leading the facilitation of) PDL? How can I be both a leader and a learner when providing PDL?
	Review	In what ways can I reflect during the process of providing so I can make course corrections as the providing stage continues? What data should I be collecting as I provide PDL?
Following Up	Think	How can I use collected data from the providing phase to come up with ideas for change?
	Act	In what ways can I use collected data to help facilitators (and myself) improve practice? How do I provide constructive feedback that fosters growth? How can I follow through with post-session follow-up?
	Review	How do I use my work in this phase to serve as a springboard toward putting new PDL into action?

Source: *Professional Development That Sticks: How Do I Create Meaningful Learning Experiences for Educators?* by Fred Ende (ASCD, 2016)

In general, educators tend to do the best job in the providing phase. All of us in the field are teachers at heart; structuring, leading, and showing a passion for learning is what we are all about. Where we often fail, however, and not in the "fail forward" type of way, is in the two phases that bookend the providing phase. To truly make learning stick, we have to give planning and following up more attention.

Setting a Plan

Benjamin Franklin is often quoted as saying, "If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail." And Franklin (or whoever originally stated this) couldn't be more right. One of the biggest mistakes that professional learning designers make is that we design events on a tight timeline. Often, professional learning takes a back seat to all the other elements of our work. And before we know it, there is a professional learning day looming on the horizon. Tight timelines like this challenge learning designers for a few reasons: First, we are forced to be reactive rather than proactive, which can be a challenge when designing sustained, relational, and responsive experiences. Second, if our hope is to pull from outside expertise, we limit our options by waiting until the last minute. Third, we make it more difficult to give participants the voice to help design and take ownership of the learning.

These three reasons, among others, show why professional learning planning is best seen as a long game. If we don't allow for significant time to plan, then even the best facilitated sessions will have little impact over time. This might lead you to some questions. For instance, what about unconference-style learning opportunities? Fair enough, but notice that in those situations, the event itself has often been rigorously planned with everything from a starting keynote to a monitored session board to a carefully coordinated reflection session or share out at the end. In fact, in those types of learning opportunities, the only part typically not planned is the facilitation of the unconference topics (i.e., the providing phase). So, along with setting aside ample time to design these experiences, how else can we make planning a part of our professional development for learning procedures? Here are three ways, with connection to the TAR framework from Figure 1:

1. *Think* **about the purpose.** Simon Sinek's famous TED Talk about "the why" couldn't be more relevant to professional learning design (2009). Every opportunity needs to be scrutinized for the appropriate rationale. Why is this professional learning emphasis a focal point for our school or district? Why are our speech pathologists the ones who need this learning? Why are we talking about designing it in this format? I'm a big supporter of the "5 Whys" protocol (from the School Reform Initiative), which simply

requires that we ask ourselves "why?" five times to get to the root cause of a problem or to help us refine a given rationale.

2. *Act* **with enough voice.** No professional learning event should be designed with only one input. To recognize collective design, we should incorporate different perspectives and needs assessments. Remember, that voice is meant to inform and provide context; decision making is meant to move something forward. Voice is needed for effective decision making but ultimately someone must make a call and design the professional learning with the feedback in mind. The fact is, as long as enough voice is incorporated, the decisions made will be closer aligned to needs and wants. Professional learning can rarely be designed to meet 100 percent of what 100 percent of learners need. But, with enough early feedback, it can come close.

3. *Review* **what you've got.** Reflection should never be reserved solely for the end of an event. We need to review our work and options continually throughout the process. Before implementing any professional learning experience, it is important to take a moment and "go to the balcony," as Heifetz and Linsky (2002) recommend, to observe the scene below. Ask yourself questions like: *Was I able to marry form and function to give this learning design what I believe will be a lasting impact? Are there any minor adjustments that need to be made to bolster meaning or engagement? Am I involving the right players and how do I know?* Answers to questions like these can help you determine whether you are ready to move on to the next phase.

Circling Back

When we finish something or reach a benchmark, we should take pride in our accomplishments and reflect on what we've learned. A well-facilitated professional learning session is never truly "done." We owe it to the educators who participated to determine whether the professional learning had any positive impact.

You might be thinking, *Wait a second. If the professional learning was well-facilitated, then shouldn't it have had a positive impact no matter what?* We might think so, and yet as research has shown, the answer to that is a resounding "meh." In 2015, the teacher-recruitment group TNTP released a report that was challenging for educators to read for many reasons. One of the findings of the report was that despite close to $20,000 spent per educator per year on professional learning, less than a third of educators sampled saw measurable improvement in practice. How can this be? In my opinion, it is likely because our follow-up on professional learning can stand to be improved.

What are some ways to make sure that we don't forget the third phase necessary to make professional learning stick? Here are three considerations, also connected back to the TAR framework:

1. *Think* **about giving data its due.** Whether we are collecting post-session feedback from all participants or impact inventories from a select number of educators months after a professional learning session, if we are going to ask participants to provide feedback, then we have to be willing to unpack that feedback. It will help us better understand where we hit a homerun, as well as where we missed the mark. Post-session surveys should ask participants what elements of the professional learning event stuck out to them (good and bad), as well as opinions about session logistics (e.g., Was the temperature of the space comfortable?). On the other hand, impact surveys require targeted outreach to participants to determine the learning's impact on their practice and on the students they support. Taking the time to truly analyze the data from a professional learning session empowers us to make better decisions the next time around.

2. *Act* **on the feedback you receive.** Again, whether you were the facilitator of professional learning or you worked with someone else to deliver the session(s), it is important to *act* on the feedback received. This means keeping lines of communication open, not only with team members or outside consultants who you work with, but also with yourself. Using feedback to modify future facilitation strategies or to rethink the design of the professional learning shows that you are open to change, hear the information being shared, and are focused on continuous improvement. There is also significant benefit for the educators who attend your sessions: the more their feedback is applied, the more likely they are to see future opportunities as meaningful and engaging.

3. *Review* **where you are to determine what's next.** One of the main reasons why we need to spend time in the follow-up phase of professional learning design is because we need to allow for reflection on the *entire* three-phase process. We aren't acting or changing anything here. Instead, we are giving ourselves ample time to consider how all the puzzle pieces came together, so we can draw from what we learned and use it as a springboard for what's ahead. Professional learning must always be an iterative process; it should never be one-and-done, as learning cannot exist at simply one moment in time. The information you collect and reflect on through the follow-up phase must always help inform the first step of your next professional learning design cycle.

To Stick or Not to Stick?

When it comes to leading professional learning, we have a choice. We can either create meaningful learning experiences *with* and *for* those we serve, or we can relegate professional learning to the ever-present education backburner. By forcing ourselves to carefully think, act, and review in each of the three phases of professional learning, we can come closer to making professional learning truly stick.

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