

# Three Ways to Transform Ed-Tech Professional Development - By Involving Students

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Whenever I'm invited to a school or district to talk with teachers about using technology, I'll ask the principal or superintendent if I can meet with a group of students to prepare first. Often, my request is met with a puzzled reply: "You realize that we want you to come talk to our *teachers*, right? Why do you want to talk to the kids?" My experience is that involving students in both staff development planning and during workshops can lead to a much more successful implementation.

Showing teachers how to use the technology itself—what buttons to push, what features to use—isn't the real challenge in ed-tech professional development. The real challenge is helping teachers understand their students' expectations and motivation and behavior and lack of knowledge around basic technical skills that are often over estimated. Not including students in at least some parts of the staff development is like teaching surgeons how to operate only on cadavers.

Involving your students in ed-tech professional development can be very powerful. Here are three ideas for doing this effectively.

## ***Have teachers observe others as they teach with technology.***

One of the techniques I like to use is to have teachers watch as I teach a class. Not only can they see how I'm using technology as a tool to support students' learning; they also can observe how I interact with the students, and the strategies I use to elicit deeper thinking and give students ownership of the learning process. As the lesson unfolds, teachers can ask questions of me or the students to learn more about why the lesson worked or what I was thinking as I used a particular strategy.

Sometimes, what I *don't* do is just as important as what I do. For instance, instead of answering a student's question, I'll turn the question around and have the student find the answer, then share it with the rest of the class.

The interaction between teachers and students can be very rich, giving observers a better understanding of the issues they're likely to face in their own classrooms. Those are the kinds of lessons that teachers would miss in a traditional staff development session. For example, even though every student has a device, I might group students together in clusters of two or three to engage them to reach consensus

around an academic challenge. In this way, the student conversation gives teachers more insights into their thinking.

Watching students learn also removes the possibility of a teacher thinking, “This is too difficult for my kids,” or “My students already know this, and I don’t need to teach it to them.” We often overestimate what students know about technology, or we underestimate what they are willing to do—especially if they haven’t been successful in a traditional classroom setting. Seeing how students respond to instruction that uses technology to elicit deeper thinking can help change that mindset.

***Ask for students’ input before leading staff development.***

As I mentioned, I like to meet with students first before giving a presentation to their teachers. I’ll hold an advance (perhaps via Skype a few weeks in advance of my visit) session with about 20 students, along with their principal or superintendent and maybe the technology director. I’ll tell the students that I’m going to show their teachers how to use technology to make learning more fun and effective, and I need their input.

I’ll ask them, “Do you know how to find information with Google?” And all of the kids will say, “Yes.” Then I’ll give them some challenges, and very few of them are able to complete those challenges. Or, I might say to them, “What do you think about students recording video tutorials to help other kids learn?” Some might say, “That’s the job of the teacher, isn’t it?” But others will say, “Well, I often ask a friend for help. I think I might like listening to other students explain a concept.”

Having this information helps me later, when I work with their teachers. I can tell them, “You know, your students really need you, because they all think they know how to do a Google search—but it turns out there’s a lot they don’t know about finding information online.” Then, I’ll show the teachers some search strategies they can share with their students. Or, I can tell them that many students say they’d like to watch videos of their peers explaining concepts, which could cut down on some of the work the teachers do themselves.

If I had made these suggestions without talking to the students in advance, I wouldn’t have as much credibility. But because I heard from the students first, the information I’m sharing is supported by evidence and carries more weight. Gathering insight from students about how they want to learn, and what skills they lack, can help shape ed-tech professional development and make it more meaningful for teachers.

***Have students lead workshops.***

At one school I recently visited, third graders were leading workshops for their teachers on topics such as how to use Minecraft, or how to tag web pages using Diigo. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing: A third grader leading a workshop on Diigo? I didn’t think a third grader could do something that sophisticated. But I was wrong.

I asked the principal, “Isn’t it kind of insulting for the teachers to have a third grader show them how to organize their research online?” And the principal said, “Not at all—if a third grader understands how to do that, then there are no excuses for our teachers not to.”

In this example, the principal made sure all the student-led workshops were recorded to create a staff development library that teachers could access any time if they had a question. That also let parents see what was going on in their child’s school—and how their child was contributing to the learning. I thought that was fantastic.

When I’ve involved students in staff development, I’ve seen some principals who were stunned by their students’ insights. They had never thought to ask their students, “What is it you need to help you learn? What kind of learning environment can we build for you?”

Before a workshop I recently gave at the British International School of Houston, I asked students how they wanted to learn—and what kinds of technologies they use to learn outside school. One middle school student told me he used Wolfram Alpha to answer what he called his “burning questions,” such as whether there is water on Saturn. When I worked with teachers later that day, and I introduced Wolfram Alpha (which can seem overwhelming) I shared the story of their own student who uses it all the time to answer his “burning questions”. A story like this can make a new tool much more intriguing and accessible and maybe even necessary.

“It was quite a revelation for me to sit and listen to that,” said the school’s principal, Andrew Derry. “We often just tell people what to do, and that’s not the most convincing way of effecting change. But when you can say to teachers, ‘Here’s what your students say. Here’s how they want to learn,’ then it can be much more motivating for our colleagues.”