

FROM THE FRONTLINES:

Takeaways from the 2016 Blended and Personalized Learning Conference

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AUGUST 2016



INTRODUCTION

Amidst calls to personalize learning and blend K–12 classrooms, all too often we stop short of specifics. When the Highlander Institute and the Clayton Christensen Institute came together last year to plan the 2016 Blended and Personalized Learning Conference, our goal was to organize an event that focused on the tactical and practical. We also wanted an event that put practitioners at the center of the conversation so as to ensure that practices in the field are keeping pace with blended and personalized learning rhetoric.

To that end, we invited over 150 leaders and teachers from around the country to participate in a daylong meeting of the minds in Providence, R.I. These practitioners had demonstrated willingness to innovate in their classrooms and schools, and a number had already seen promising results since implementing blended and personalized models.

Over the course of the conversations, participants shared their best strategies for seeding and scaling innovative instructional models. Far and away, the refrain that came up again and again was not around any one instructional model or software tool; rather, participants continuously stressed the importance of managing change. The following report synthesizes some of the key themes that emerged as these early adopters shared their change management tips from the frontlines.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

Six themes emerged from the conference about how educators can manage change across classrooms and districts. All six touched on how best to engage teachers in new models from start to finish.

1. Embrace not knowing

By definition, innovative approaches usher in new ways of operating. As such, one tension in managing change across a classroom or an entire district is making the unknown an opportunity rather than a threat. Participants noted that schools need to make deliberate space for unknowns. As Amanda Murphy, a Highlander Institute Fuse Rhode Island fellow from Westerly Public Schools, put it, managing change across a system is about “supporting the eager, but non-expert.” “We had faculty volunteers who were interested but didn’t have expertise,” she said. “They talked about why they were nervous, and this helped people understand that there were many others in the same boat. It set the tone that it’s okay not to know. And now they’re asking for help.” In other words, by making “not knowing” the rule rather than the exception, teachers and administrators could not only nurture a stronger sense of community, but also ask questions about new models of teaching and learning without feeling exposed or undermined.

Laura Odom, a teacher in Saline Area Schools in Michigan took this idea a step further by suggesting that districts reward teachers for trying new approaches. “It’s not about whether or not it worked, but about trying and failing and sharing,” she said. Saline Area Schools celebrates and incentivizes these risks by treating next-gen classrooms as a reward for

exploring new approaches. Teachers in the district apply to become a next-gen classroom and, if selected, receive additional equipment and support. Odom explained that the lure of a next-gen classroom was a powerful motivator for her:

The new classroom design and furniture, along with the accessibility of web-based tools for enhancing instruction and assessment, would help me create both a physical space and classroom culture where students felt they were part of a larger community of risk-takers engaged in the learning process.

2. Co-design

Participants stressed that limiting the number of seats around a blended and personalized learning design table, in turn, limits the level of teacher buy-in to new classroom models. “Leaders have ideas *for* teachers, but it doesn’t work top-down,” said Julia Rafal-Baer of Chiefs for Change, a nonprofit network of state and district education leaders. “Teachers need to be part of the strategic conversation.” If a school system is overhauling its instructional model, an inclusive design team composed of principals, administrators, and teachers (including special education teachers) will be crucial for securing long-term teacher buy-in. This buy-in is especially important in environments where educators are taking bold steps that may not succeed right off the bat. “Things will not work at first,” said Cary Matsuoka, former superintendent of Milpitas Unified School District in California. “It’s about trying to create the engineering space at the school level and helping to grow design-based thinking instead of having teachers be implementers of someone else’s plan. A principal cannot be the sole designer. Teachers need to join them as a team.” By taking a team-based approach to designing with teachers, there will always be a natural support network built into the implementation process.

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Amidst change, teachers will often look to principals and district leaders for a vision—a picture of the overarching goals their designs should work to achieve. As Scott Frauenheim of Distinctive Schools, a network of charter schools in Illinois, said, as a first step toward building effective design teams, leadership should share a clear vision. “You need to first help people understand where you’re going and allow people to opt-out and then tag teachers to be part of the design process,” he said. In the case of Distinctive Schools, teachers were the ones who really started driving the bus. In other words, teachers were part of “designing the why” behind school efforts to go blended.

Carrie Wozniak of Fraser Public Schools in Michigan also emphasized the pivotal value-add of different teachers’ voices during the design process. “Listen to your teachers—their suggestions, pain points, and successes,” she said. At Fraser Public Schools, by starting design and implementation on a small scale and not across the district, the leadership team had more opportunities to engage teachers and react to their experiences and recommendations in a meaningful, fruitful way.

Others noted that successful design is not just about who is involved, but how attentive design teams are to the specific conditions in which they are innovating. Several schools found that pilots work best when approached as a replicable strategy rather than a one-off trial. To work through this tension, Aylon Samouha, co-founder of Transcend Education, a nonprofit that accelerates innovation in school design, said that the conditions in which you design matter a lot. “Because the conditions in which you pilot—expertise of staff, size, facility—may differ from the conditions of implementation, you need to construct pilots carefully,” he said. “Make sure to analyze the pilot results with those dependencies in mind and put in the extra design and training work to recreate the favorable pilot conditions in full implementation.” In other words, pilots are an opportunity for design teams to test assumptions and, from there, consider what is effective and what’s not before broadening implementation.

Put in the extra design and training work to recreate the favorable pilot conditions in full implementation.

#BPLC16 featured podcast:



Scott Frauenheim,
COO of Distinctive
Schools, Chicago

<http://tinyurl.com/scott-frauenheim>

3. Cultivate early adopters

Participants stressed that teachers who take the initiative to experiment with new technology tools or instructional models have great potential to spark changes beyond their classrooms. Whether they realize that potential, however, depends, in part, on school leaders' ability to support and motivate them and foster a culture that feeds innovation. For example, Donna Vallese, a former principal at Nowell Leadership Academy, a public charter school in Rhode Island, said she never told teachers they had to use certain tools like Google Classroom. "Instead, it was seeded with early adopters," she said. "It spread organically from the ground up, and then everyone was doing it."

Many school leaders warned that setting a regulatory culture was counterproductive when the goal was building momentum for change. They noted that administrators risked stifling innovative practices by setting specific requirements for early cohorts. Others had observed that offering stipends for pilots missed the mark in engaging teachers who would commit to change for the long haul. Instead, participants suggested that leaders could counteract this top-down tendency by supporting a small group of teachers who are enthusiastic about trying new methodologies and cultivating an environment of sharing and professional development. Gradually, more teachers will iterate the ideas that their colleagues see actually working.

Some participants noted that cohorts of early adopters evolve over time. Brian Stack, a principal in Sanborn Regional School District in New Hampshire, said that even with five years of transformation efforts under their belts, his high school staff still looks to new teachers to help forge new territory. As schools move forward with fresh phases of initiatives

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and innovations, leaders can create opportunities for a next generation of teachers to embrace and develop change. "You identify new adopters to lead in a new space," Stack said.

4. Open doors

When it comes to undertaking new approaches in the classroom, many teachers learn best from their peers, rather than from "external" innovators. Participants lauded open-door initiatives to help grow a school community that values fresh ideas and teaching techniques. Tracey Nangle, a teacher in North Smithfield School District in Rhode Island, said that an open-door policy at her middle school helped to shift schoolwide attitudes and culture in favor of collaborative learning. "Teachers are given release time to work as teams and observe classrooms together. It builds respect between colleagues and exposes all of the great work that is happening," Nangle said.

Unlatching doors can also be a powerful way to scale approaches beyond early adopters. Leigh Ann Roehm, a teacher in Saline Area Schools in Michigan said her middle school's early adopters were struggling to get others involved. To tackle this, the school introduced learning walks wherein small groups of teachers sign up via Google Sheets to visit classrooms. The walks count toward professional development hours and also allow teachers to collect feedback from their peers who visit their classrooms. "A teacher can pose a challenge and ask for input, and colleagues share positive feedback. Sometimes that positive feedback can be enough of an incentive [to grow and innovate]," Roehm said.

Others suggested making open-door policies even more overt. "Teachers put a sign on the door to indicate that they're trying something new and inviting observations," said Phil Capaldi, a teacher in Jamestown School Department in Rhode Island. When early adopters invite others to visit their classrooms and welcome colleagues' opinions, good ideas are far more likely to catch on—and become better.

Schools are also microcosms for the larger education landscape that's working on redefining the way students learn, how teachers teach, and what schools look like. Opening doors means "creating partnerships from classrooms to classrooms and schools to schools so that we can learn from each other," said Jim Monti of West Warwick Public Schools in Rhode Island. "It's then expected that people go outside the walls to share what they learn."

5. Rethink roles

As schools manage change across their instructional models, the traditional roles adults play may shift. David Richards of Fraser Public Schools described how the rollout of blended learning initiated a rethinking not just of teachers' roles, but also of roles across the schools and ecosystem. "We looked at the positions we had and then abandoned them for the positions we needed," he said. One of the potential benefits of blended learning is freed-up teacher time so that educators can spend less time grading and teaching "to the middle," for instance, and more time working one-on-one or in small groups with students. When schools go a step further—instituting instructional changes and, moreover, redesigning classrooms and rearranging learning time—there may be opportunities to retrofit where a teacher belongs and to play to each teacher's strengths.

To that end, Eric Tucker of Brooklyn Lab Charter School in New York recommended moving teachers away from the one-size-fits-all role they've traditionally played. "Embrace that educators have different skills and strengths," he said. "Think about different learning experiences and what skills teachers need to be effective within those experiences." Brooklyn Lab tries to bring the different dispositions and expertise of educators to bear in collaborative and differentiated ways in order to meet school and community needs. "Youth with great intelligence, creativity, and potential—who grow up in economically disadvantaged families—too often go unchallenged and unsupported by outmoded schools and, as a result, will be unprepared for successful transitions to college and careers," Tucker said. "This means we need to reimagine human capital so that it is consistent with goals like student agency, rigor, mastery, youth development, and personalization."

Some districts, like Cajon Valley Union School District in California, have taken a first step in this direction by creating a blended, competency-based professional development program for its teachers. Participants can elect to learn through asynchronous online content, in small groups, or through projects. The model also includes a "genius bar" for those who want additional support.

#BPLC16 featured podcast:



David Richards,
superintendent
of Fraser Public
Schools, Michigan

<http://tinyurl.com/david-richards-fps>

6. Make time

Practitioners looking to adopt blended and personalized learning practices stressed that the learning curve is steep and time scarce. Yet, some school leaders are finding creative ways to give teachers and themselves more time for year-round professional growth and for adapting to new tools and techniques. Rebekah Kim of Highline Public Schools in Washington said her school aims to provide “intentional time for teachers to just explore and learn together.” Kari Hull of Cajon Valley Union School District noted that, in the past, teacher learning was cornered into a summer program with lots of stand and deliver presentations. Now, the focus is more on nurturing a culture of job-embedded development. “Teachers can now apply to be lead teachers, so we’re building leaders within our buildings,” she said. “We don’t have to wait for summer to have this kind of expert leadership because they’re already there.”

Making time to learn new tools or models and to embrace change fully can be a challenge for teachers once they are in the full swing of the school year. The trick, some administrators have discovered, may not just be adding more development time to the calendar, but also thoughtfully tweaking teachers’ schedules to spawn a continuous cycle of learning, collaboration, and professional growth. Scott Frauenheim also shared how Distinctive Schools created an unprecedented chunk of time for peer-to-peer learning during the school day by working with a scheduling expert to update where time gets allocated each day. “We found 105 minutes of planning and collaboration time by minimizing transitions between classes. This time is helping to prevent burnout and helping teachers learn to let go of what they’ve always done,” he said.

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#BPLC16 featured podcasts:



Rebekah Kim,
principal of Midway
Elementary School,
Washington

<http://tinyurl.com/rebekah-kim>



David Miyashiro
and Kari Hull, Cajon
Valley Union School
District, California



<http://tinyurl.com/david-miyashiro-kari-hull>

CONCLUSION

Although we couldn't capture each and every nugget of wisdom that practitioners shared throughout the conference, the advice and experiences chronicled in this report represent common threads we're hearing among educators in the blended and personalized learning space.

It's worth noting that technology did not define the essential strategies for designing and implementing blended and personalized learning classrooms; rather, practitioners emphasized that the crux of their next-gen learning environments is managing human resources: teachers, school leaders, and the relationships forged across school communities. Indeed, these six themes from our conversations hint that initiatives with blended and personalized learning practices may be most effective when they offer dynamic opportunities for professional growth and are framed as a process toward improvement for the entire school community.

PHOTO NOTES

Cover: Aylon Samouha of Transcend Education leads a session.
Page 2: Simona Simpson-Thomas of the Providence Public School Department tries out Nearpod.
Page 8: Chris Colson, a teacher in Pawtucket School District in Rhode Island, demonstrates robotics.

Photos by the Highlander Institute staff



About the Christensen Institute

The Clayton Christensen Institute for Disruptive Innovation is a nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank dedicated to improving the world through disruptive innovation. Founded on the theories of Harvard professor Clayton M. Christensen, the Institute offers a unique framework for understanding many of society's most pressing problems. Its mission is ambitious but clear: work to shape and elevate the conversation surrounding these issues through rigorous research and public outreach. With an initial focus on education and health care, the Institute is redefining the way policymakers, community leaders, and innovators address the problems of our day by distilling and promoting the transformational power of disruptive innovation.

About the Highlander Institute

The Highlander Institute is an education nonprofit focused on researching, developing, and disseminating innovative educational methods to improve outcomes for all learners. Located in Providence, R.I., the Institute focuses on methods that create student-centered, personalized learning environments and views these practices as a catalyst for social change.

About the Meet Education Project

The Meet Education Project is a podcast series centered on having deep conversations with the teachers, entrepreneurs, and thought leaders taking action on the future of learning. The goal is to explore innovative school, teaching, and learning models that push the boundaries of student learning—not just in formal education settings, but also informally.

About the conference

The Highlander Institute and the Clayton Christensen Institute collaborate to convene the best blended-learning leaders and implementers from across the country in Providence each year. Our 2017 Blended and Personalized Learning Conference will take place from March 31–April 1. Day 1 is an invitation-only summit where 150 high-impact implementers will share their stories. Select participants will lead presentations for a much larger audience on Day 2. The event’s focus on tactics and strategic implementation resonates with teachers, principals, and district leaders, with seats for both days traditionally selling out. To register as a Day 2 participant or to apply to participate on Day 1 and present on Day 2, visit <http://tinyurl.com/BPLC17>.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the following sponsors of the 2016 Blended and Personalized Learning Conference:

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About the authors



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