Growing Practice and Skills through Technologically Enhanced Conferring

Elaine Simos, Downers Grove North High School, IL: CEL member since 2011

In Christopher Bronke's office at North High School in Downers Grove, IL, two areas vie for center stage: the comfortably padded chairs dominating the space allotted to in-person conversations and the system of computer monitors, speakers, and microphones that inhabit an entire corner of the room. Both areas represent two sides of a trend that has resurfaced in different forms in Bronke's work since the start of his career: a willingness to engage in the process of deliberation, both in person and via digital modes, with fellow practitioners and with all students to build a network of increasingly stronger learning, both professional and personal.

For me it all started when I was coaching volleyball; I used to love meeting 1:1 with athletes to break down films of our games as a means of teaching. I would ask questions in an effort to guide the athlete to a better understanding of the game. This approach has transferred over to my work with students and teachers. The power inherent within a 1:1 conference is immeasurable, so it seems not only obvious but critical to growth and learning to use this technique when working in any teaching setting.

Growing Pedagogical Practice

The ironic part is that I got into ed leadership hoping to greatly shape curriculum, but I have found that my bigger passion and impact is in shaping and transforming pedagogy. My favorite technique when leading conferences/consultations with teachers is to ask the question, “In order to get to where you are at currently, what have you tried?” I have found that this question can open teachers to thinking about other approaches to the task at hand, and it forces them to take ownership of change as a process that has success and failures: both are needed for change that matters and is lasting. It also opens the door for nonthreatening suggestions because each suggestion is just another possible way to approach the challenge at hand.

Another approach is to film a class, but to focus on what the students are saying as opposed to what the teacher is saying. The ensuing discussion revolves around questions like “Is this what you expected to hear from your students? Why or why not? If not, what could you do differently to help them get to sharing what you expected to hear? . . . Using a recording aide like Swivl can allow teachers to better record what their students are saying and store that film for future reference.

Building Student Learning

I love to use the phrase, “Tell me more . . .” These three simple words force students to continue and extend their thinking which, in turn, helps me better identify gaps in their understanding.

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October 2018 Call for Manuscripts:
Student Agency

“Agency is the capacity and propensity to take purposeful initiative—the opposite of helplessness. Young people with high levels of agency do not respond passively to their circumstances; they tend to seek meaning and act with purpose to achieve the conditions they desire in their own and others' lives.”

—Tom Vander Ark, 2015

“10 Tips for Developing Student Agency,” Ed Week

This issue reflects on student agency in the classroom. How does a teacher, department, or school foster agency in students? What approaches and practices can help cultivate agency? What resources are needed to support this process? How does the exercise of student agency affect a student's everyday learning practices? What is the role of the teacher in this environment? What are some short- and long-term effects of agency on the student? On the teacher? On education? Deadline: June 15, 2018

August 2018 Call for Manuscripts:
Personalizing Professional Development

“With an energized focus on empowering the voices of educators through connection and sharing, the participatory learning movement has brought personalization to the forefront of professional development in education. Today, educators with a desire to develop their practice are taking charge of their own professional growth by designing customized anytime, anywhere experiences. Focused on optimizing learning and growing as professionals, teachers and literacy leaders are finding great value in peer-to-peer sharing as part of professional learning networks, or PLNs. Together with emphasis on both voice and choice, these inspired groups are reinventing traditional models of professional development, allowing teachers to explore, collaborate, and continuously reflect in meaningful and transformational ways.”

—Jennifer William, 2016

“At the Center of Your Own Learning,” Literacy Daily

This issue explores the many ways in which professional development is becoming increasingly personalized. What conditions must be present to support this type of professional learning? What changes have occurred in your school's or district's PD practices? How have teachers embraced these shifts? What successes and realizations about professional learning are guiding next steps? Deadline: April 15, 2018

Next Steps

I have two hopes for these sorts of conversations. First, I hope that they happen more often, with more regularity. More importantly, I hope that they start to happen across schools. The infrastructure is there for teachers and students from different schools to engage in meaningful conversations, so I hope that this becomes a much more accepted and embraced way for teachers and students to continue to grow.

Chris Bronke is codirector of the National Blogging Collaborative and joined CEL in 2012.

Join the conversation!
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