

# Designing for Translation

## Collaborative Leadership Learning that Leads to Action

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**P**icture this: You enter a room full of fellow educational leaders, and the energy is palpable. Everyone is eager to discuss challenges, swap strategies, and learn from each other's experiences. You're inspired, taking notes furiously, connecting with colleagues who really get what you do. Now, fast-forward to Monday morning; you're back in your office, faced with the same challenges, in the same circumstances, with the same resources. Your notebook is tucked away in a drawer, and those great ideas, and the excitement around them, are somehow feeling less applicable to your reality.

If this sounds like something you've experienced, you're not alone! Research has extensively documented the challenge of translating professional learning into practice (Leger et al., 2023; Sahin & Yildirim, 2016). Research shows that professionals across disciplines struggle with knowledge translation. School administrators and educational leaders are not exempt from this phenomenon. Getting professional learning right for educational leaders is particularly challenging because of their unique circumstances. Unlike classroom teachers, administrators often work in isolation with few role-alike peers in their local environments, face competing demands that limit their time for sustained learning, and need to adapt strategies across diverse contexts within their organizations.

Learning communities, and collaborative learning experiences more generally, offer a powerful response to these circumstances. Research shows that when educators learn collaboratively, they benefit from shared problem-solving, diverse perspectives, peer accountability, and the opportunity to adapt solutions to their individual contexts (Wood et al., 2017). Collaborative learning provides access to role-alike peers, creates networks for ongoing support and shared accountability, and resource sharing (Oyewole, 2024).

However, making professional learning collaborative doesn't automatically solve the translation challenge. Even leadership communities can struggle acting on shared learning experiences, and strategies for promoting the translation of knowledge to practice remains an open question (Harris & Jones, 2019; Sims et al., 2025). Fortunately, drawing on ongoing research in translation and implementation sciences, as well efforts in professional learning and collaborative structures, there are ways to support collaborative leadership learning that leads to action (Baldwin et al., 2017).

In this article, we're going to narrow our focus on a specific challenge: **How can we design collaborative learning opportunities for educational leaders that can be readily translated into practice?** The answer lies in being intentional about how we structure these ex-presences to create conditions where learning naturally leads to sustainable change, hands-on application, ongoing support, collaborative planning, and shared accountability.

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## Lost in Translation: Where PL Fails to Become Action

Even with rigorous content and an engaging delivery, professional learning can still be a challenge to act on. Without time to consider how new concepts apply to individual contexts, opportunities to develop actionable plans, or clear processes to navigate institutional decision-making structures, PL gets lost in translation.

**Rigorous Content for Each Learner.** Without rigorous content, new knowledge is difficult to act on. Presenting broad may inspire learners or spark new ideas, but it puts the burden on educators to seek out, interpret, and contextualize the details before they can act. Further, when content isn't relevant, even the most rigorous and actionable content isn't reaching the audiences that can use it!

**Transformational Processes.** A focus on implementation, embedded in the design of the professional learning, allows educators to consider content intentionally. Without knowing how, where, or why new information is intended to be used, learners don't have clear implementation goals to work towards.

**Conditions for Success.** Without the needed resources, support, and buy-in, implementation will struggle to succeed. If educators are not provided with dedicated time (during and after professional learning), appropriate resources, and the ability to make decisions, great ideas won't make it to practice.

### BEFORE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

## Priming for Implementation

Successful collaborative learning begins before participants enter the room. The foundation starts with truly understanding your audience. Who makes up your learning community? What expertise do they bring to the table? Taking time to assess participants' backgrounds, current challenges, and areas of expertise allows you to tailor content that meets them where they are and genuinely addresses their circumstances, without imposing a potentially mismatched agenda. In doing so, you could see if an attendee recently launched an initiative and include an opportunity for them to get feedback from peers or assemble a panel of leaders in similarly resourced districts. This prep work is great pre-coordinating breakout rooms, working groups, or smaller discussions. Using “alike” groupings give individuals with shared relevant characteristics or circumstances the chance to think through a topic and reach a consensus viewpoint from their perspectives, and “mixed” groups could spark innovation through varied perspectives. Or, if time permits, use both in a “jigsaw,” where leaders start in alike groups, where they clearly explicate their shared ideas, then become representatives and knowledge brokers in mixed groups. When making these decisions, consider the amount of representation in attendance from different groups and the purpose of the groups!

**In Practice:** During the Summer 2020 Computer Science Teaching & Learning Collaboratory Virtual Summer Institute (part of a research-practice partnership), our “developing curricular pathways” workshop included several pre-designed breakout rooms. Educators were grouped by their roles, recognizing that teachers and administrators have different responsibilities and perspectives on course offerings and sequencing and their school sizes, acknowledging that the feasibility of electives (and the size of the course catalog) looks different for schools that serve varying numbers of students. Later, educators were grouped by the decisions they made regarding their pathways; although we didn't know those groupings ahead of time, we planned that grouping strategy in advance.

Content *selection* and *delivery* deserve attention in the planning phase. Leadership learners need clear, relevant messages that speak directly to their contexts. While it's tempting to chase trending topics in education, resist including content simply because it's generating buzz. The content that is included in a learning opportunity or community meeting should have a clear purpose tied to participants' real-world needs. Beyond this, intentionally plan how that content will be delivered. Keep didactic sessions and presentations to a minimum; having educational leaders in the same place, at the same time, and around a common purpose isn't easy to do; so,

when it happens, take advantage! Leverage formats that promote engagement and exchange: round robins, birds of a feather sessions, participant-led panels, co-development workshops, and structured working groups. These formats acknowledge that leadership learners bring valuable expertise and create space for that expertise to not only emerge but to inspire action.

Perhaps most critically, establish clear, implementation-oriented goals from the outset. These goals should be communicated to participants well ahead of time, allowing them to arrive primed for action. They should understand not just what they'll be learning, but where and how it can be applied. Throughout the experience, restate these goals frequently to maintain focus and ensure that discussions and collaborations stay aligned with intended outcomes. Goal setting requires careful calibration based on who's attending, what they need, and the realistic constraints of your time together. Resist the temptation to impose externally driven objectives or set overly ambitious targets. Instead, select appropriately sized goals that can be accomplished well within the given parameters.

#### DURING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

### Creating Conditions for Exchange & Sensemaking

Once educational leaders arrive for a collaborative learning event or community meeting, the focus shifts to facilitating meaningful exchange of actionable, implementation-oriented insights. While leaders naturally bring valuable experiences and expertise, spontaneous sharing doesn't always yield the most useful information for peers. Whenever possible, go beyond simply passing the microphone: provide participants with prompts or cues to guide them in sharing the kind of information others can use. By requesting that some participants prepare specific contributions in advance, you can ensure that valuable collaborative time is used wisely.

Traditional resource sharing often falls short of its potential impact. Moving beyond the typical exchange of slides, recordings, and handouts, consider resources that can serve as living documents that emerge from collective wisdom. Modern technology tools enable real-time co-creation that captures insights as they emerge. Rather than gathering resources ahead of time to be sent out in a follow-up email, collaboratively learning opportunities can include dedicated sessions where participants actively produce tangible resources together, such as implementation guides, process maps, or decision-making frameworks. Even without explicitly dedicated sessions, resource development can happen alongside learning, such as Q&A documents that evolve throughout the day or collaborative lists where participants can vote on or comment about usefulness. The key is avoiding information overload; contextualized, purposeful resources serve leaders far better than exhaustive lists of links.

**In Practice:** During a meeting of a Community of Practice (CoP) formed around the effective use of data dashboards, after several panel discussions (with representatives from the CoP as well as invited speakers), leaders divided into three working groups to create “mind maps,” graphical tools to organize thoughts and visualize their connections, around the three key themes that emerged from earlier discussions. Afterwards, artifacts were circulated for revisions and comments from other groups. Coordinators finalized and distributed final products afterwards.

#### Questions to Guide Actionable Sharing

Move beyond surface-level sharing with implementation focused prompts:

- ✓ Who was essential? Which roles/people were critical at different stages, and when did they join or exit?
- ✓ What financial, human, time, or intellectual resources were essential versus nice-to-have?
- ✓ What roadblocks surprised you? How significant were they, and how did you pivot?
- ✓ How did context shape your approach?
- ✓ What about your specific circumstances drove your decisions, and what would change in a different setting?
- ✓ Looking back, what early signs told you whether you were on track?

Recognize that not everything can or should happen within a single gathering. Some insights need time to percolate, resources need to be explored independently, and new professional connections need space to develop before they can support meaningful action. Rather than forcing premature action planning, invest time in community building and strengthening relationships. These connections form the infrastructure for future collaboration and accountability. The relationships built in a learning community create the trust and channels for open and honest communication necessary for problem-solving later. This investment in community isn't a sidebar to the real work; it *is* the real work.

**AFTER PROFESSIONAL LEARNING**

**Maintaining Community & Peer-driven Accountability**

Leveraging the learning community as a built-in accountability structure transforms good intentions into sustained action. Shared accountability emerges when leaders know they'll reconnect with peers who understand their contexts... and might have follow-up questions! This isn't about creating pressure or judgment, but rather establishing supportive structures where leaders can share progress, troubleshoot challenges, and celebrate successes with colleagues who understand the complexity of their work.

**In Practice:** As part of the Regional Educational Laboratory Mid-Atlantic, the Professional Learning Research Alliance (PLRA) built sustained accountability through systematic cross-alliance collaboration. We developed a comprehensive system that created smaller working groups for multiple stakeholder groups, such as Early Childhood Education or Rural Education. In this tiered collaborative structure, leaders actively participated in group-level initiatives, maintained regular communication within and beyond their working groups, and engaged in larger cross-alliance meetings to share implementation progress and challenges. By establishing these deliberate touchpoints and creating formal structures, we capitalized on an opportunity to for collaborative work and developed inter-group and intra-group accountability.

Accountability becomes even more sustainable when paired with distributed and collaborative working norms. Actively seek opportunities for community members to work together on implementation challenges, delegate shared tasks, and provide feedback on each other's efforts. This may involve coordinating smaller follow-up conversations between leaders facing similar challenges or facilitating peer reviews of implementation plans. When coordination and logistics are taken care of by the learning community, it's more likely to happen. Without deliberate scheduling and facilitation, even good intentions can fall apart due to busy schedules.

Finally, create pathways for leaders to disseminate their experiences, takeaways, and implementation experiences both within and beyond the leadership community. From within, every member is a potential future presenter, panelist, or thought leader who can share practical wisdom with others. Beyond, look for opportunities to showcase work through academic, practitioner, and community-facing publications and presentations. Dissemination isn't limited to sharing successes. Some of the most valuable contributions come from honest accounts of implementation challenges, adapted strategies, and lessons learned through trial and error.

BEFORE	DURING	AFTER
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Consider leaders' background, challenges, and expertise</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Provide prompts and cues to guide actionable sharing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Use peer connections as built-in accountability structures</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Minimize presentations and prioritize innovative, interactive formats</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Design and create resources together in real-time</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Create and facilitate opportunities for collaborative work</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Communicate action-oriented objectives well in advance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Treat community building as essential work, not a sidebar</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Disseminate designs, implementation insights, outcomes, and reflections</li> </ul>

## Designing for Change

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Translation is not an accident, and it's also not a guarantee. The gap between inspiring professional learning experiences and meaningful implementation remains a persistent challenge in educational leadership learning. However, by approaching collaborative learning with intentionality before, during, and after collaborative learning events or community meetings, we can dramatically increase the likelihood that Monday morning looks different. When we prime participants for implementation, create conditions for genuine exchange and sensemaking, and maintain accountability through community connections, we move from hoping for change to designing for it.

Rather than thinking about learning community meetings or professional learning opportunities as discrete events where knowledge is transmitted, we need to conceptualize them within an ongoing collaborative experience. This means doing the (sometimes unglamorous) work of coordination, follow-up, and relationship maintenance. It means resisting one-size-fits-all agendas and instead leaders to bring valuable expertise and giving them the stage... with some cue cards. In education, where the stakes are high and the challenges are complex, our students, teachers, and communities deserve leadership learning that leads to action.

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