Creating Your District's Digital Hub

Think about your school district's professional development and all of the resources that constantly accompany all of that learning. Where can you go to get the materials from the learning that was last week? Last month? A few months ago? Last year? The year before that? If all of these answers are different (or if you don't have all the answers), somewhat of a problem exists.

Knowing where to find resources from particular professional development sessions should be nothing short of second nature for educators. However, as we all know, this is not the norm.

In a previous blog post, I briefly touched upon one way in which administrators can tackle this issue: by creating a user-friendly digital hub that contains *all* worthwhile materials from *all* professional development sessions (think, one-stop shop).

Now let's look at how such a hub could be established.

The End in Mind

Begin with the end in mind, not with the technology in mind.

Here are a few guiding questions to consider while establishing your endgame:

1. Do we want separate hubs for elementary, middle, and high school levels?
2. How will the content be organized? By grade level? Subject? Teacher?
3. Will the hub be open to the public, or will it be accessible only in-district?
4. Other than district educators, who else is part of the hub's targeted audience?

There are advantages to open access. By targeting students, parents, and your community, you can promote transparency with the work that your district is doing. According to Dr. Tony Sinanis, the 2014 New York State Elementary Principal of the Year, "Transparency about our PD equates to transparency about our preferred instructional approaches, priorities, beliefs, and vision for the future. This is directly connected to culture."

Document Uploading

Dealing with several different kinds of documents could be intimidating, as all of these variations can easily turn your hub into a hot mess. The result could be countless files that do not appear as they are supposed to. Here's a look at options for handling some of the

more challenging formats.

Slide Decks

PowerPoint (Microsoft) and Keynote (Apple) typically do not play nice with one another. For example, I prefer to create all of my slide decks in Keynote, and there are almost always issues when colleagues try to open them on their own computers. Consider converting these documents to PDFs prior to upload. Another option is to start a district channel on something like SlideShare.

Videos

From what I've experienced, the majority of videos shown during professional development are pulled from somewhere on the internet. Why not simply link to them from your digital hub? The workflow for custom videos (like those created in iMovie) is a bit more complicated. In this case, you can upload all of your content to the cloud (Google Drive, Dropbox, etc.) and then link to it from your hub. Also consider starting a channel on YouTube or Vimeo.

Cloud-Based

Google Apps for Education can function on its own as your district's digital hub through a carefully organized hierarchy of folders. However, in my opinion, all of these folders can get a bit cumbersome, and sifting through folders is not the most user-friendly way to manage and find content. Nonetheless, all materials can be stored in Google Drive and then accessed from a website or learning management system (LMS).

Social Media

It would be impossible to discuss a district's digital hub without bringing social media into the equation -- there's no reason why the two cannot work hand in hand. Furthermore, it's now a non-negotiable that all schools and districts consistently communicate with stakeholders via social media. As stated by Brad Currie, middle school assistant principal and author of *All Hands on Deck*, "If school districts do not utilize social media to tell their story in the virtual world, somebody else will, and it could be wrong."

As previously mentioned, school districts can leverage social media through such tools as SlideShare, YouTube, and Vimeo. By using these services, not only do stakeholders gain access to content, but everything becomes simpler to share via Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc., and much more easily discovered by those outside of your district.

Platforms

Just like with classroom instruction, we need to start with the why, not with the tools. Nonetheless, we need to choose a platform sooner or later, so here are a few ideas.

For websites, three of the more popular options are WordPress, [Weebly](), and [Google Sites](). With WordPress, you can have the company [host your site for you](), or you can [host it yourself](). While the former is easier to set up, the latter offers an unlimited level of customization -- which can be both good and bad. I think it's important to choose a platform and establish workflows that will foster contributions from as many stakeholders as possible.

Another option to consider is an LMS. Currently, the more popular possibilities are [Schoology](), [Canvas](), [Edmodo](), and [Google Classroom](). One of the primary benefits of leveraging an LMS as a digital hub is that they usually come embedded with options and opportunities for collaboration through discussion forums, blogs, wikis, easy ways to upload teacher and student content, etc.

In the End

There is no step-by-step "how to" guide for creating a digital hub. When drilling down to the specifics, school districts will take different actions depending upon particular histories, cultures, and contexts. Nevertheless, the majority of school districts should most likely consider these questions, thoughts, ideas, and resources when establishing a hub.

What are your experiences with digital hubs? How does your school or district share out content? Are there any major points to consider that I may have missed?