LearnZillion was founded by two former teachers, one of whom served as a principal for a DC charter school. As principal, he saw the need to make high-quality reteaching materials available to teachers and students. His solution: gather together groups of teachers over the summer who would develop hundreds of video lessons, useful for students to reinforce their learning, and for teachers to see new ways of presenting content. Through their work with hundreds of teachers, the LearnZillion team learned a thing or two about how to inspire teachers to engage deeply with their professional development.

A NEW WAY OF THINKING ABOUT PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

All too often, teachers experience professional development in closed environments, separated from the realities of their work, their goals, and their constituents—students; in some cases, valuable concepts are used to frame the purpose of a session for teachers, but the content is not reconnected to the work teachers do every day. While working with educators to develop the video library at LearnZillion, Eric Westendorf, co-founder, prioritized three simple ideas for engaging teachers in development opportunities. These “Three Ps” put the focus on the creation of products that can be used directly with students, an effective process for the creation of those goods, and the necessity of having the right people doing the right work.

THE THREE Ps

PRODUCT

Eric established one simple test for high quality professional development: do teachers leave with a product they can use immediately. Some call this the “Monday morning” test—can I use it first thing at the beginning of next week? By setting this standard for every professional development experience, we can be sure that our work will have an impact on students.

In addition to being useful, the highest value products can be shared with other teachers. In fact, the idea for LearnZillion stemmed from seeing one teacher explain the division of fractions in a clear and concise way, and the desire to limit the need for others to reinvent the wheel. In short, when one teacher has a proven method of teaching a piece of content, this is an opportunity to share that strategy with others.

By focusing our time on the development of useful and shareable products, teachers’ time is spent on activities which will impact outcomes for their students and in classrooms across the school.

PROCESS

A supportive process during the development of products is essential; teachers deserve guidance and support to ensure their work is going to meet their goals. To that end, LearnZillion implements several cycles through the development of their video lessons. Teachers begin by researching their standards and recording their research on a template, and then develop their lessons with several rounds of feedback from their coaches.

PEOPLE

Even with a focus on the right people and a supportive process, professional development will not move students forward without the right people doing the right work. Teachers need to be engaged in the development of their resources—they are the ones who will implement in their classrooms. They may bring the experience of teaching a pieces of content in several subtly different ways—and with that experience, the knowledge of what worked best. Also essential to the process are coaches, subject matter experts who serve as thought-partners for teachers.

For more resources, check out the complete toolbox: tntp.org/toolbox