Podcast: Providing Effective Professional Development

Liz Gallo, the CEO of WhyMaker, joins the podcast to explore the planning, delivery, and follow up of effective professional learning. Often, the **knowing-doing gap** is caused by insufficient support for teachers as they experience the learning dip during the implementation of new instructional practices.

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Podcast Transcript:

[00:00:00.000] – Steve [Intro]

Welcome to the Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud podcast. As instructional coaches and school leaders, you are tasked with guiding continuous teacher growth to create student success. This podcast looks to support you with strategies from

experienced guests, as well as my own insights that I've gathered over the years. I'm thrilled to have you with us. Thanks for tuning in.

[00:00:29.830] – Steve

Providing Effective Professional Development. Joining our podcast today is Liz Gallo, the CEO of WhyMaker. Having taught technology and engineering education for over a decade in all types of schools worldwide, Liz now has a focus on helping students learn how to solve problems and understand the human-made world. Through WhyMaker, Liz is on a mission to bring meaningful and authentic learning into all classrooms. Welcome, Liz.

[00:01:01.320] – Liz

Thank you. Thank you for having me.

[00:01:03.700] – Steve

Great to have you here. I'm wondering if you'd start with a little bit of your history on how your teaching experiences have led you to the mission of creating WhyMaker.

[00:01:15.520] – Liz

So when I was in high school, I didn't know what I wanted to be when I grew up. And I was thinking, maybe I'll be a meteorologist, maybe I'll be a hotel manager. I really didn't know. So my mom said, "why don't you just go to school for teaching?" And I said, Okay. And I decided to go to school for biology and elementary education. And I started out in my biology classes, and I just wasn't hacking it in my biology classes. And it just didn't make sense what I was learning in biology and what I would be teaching first, second, third, fourth, fifth graders. So at the College of New Jersey, I stumbled upon the Maths, Science, Technology Department, and I took my first technology education class, and I learned all about design thinking. And I had this aha moment where I was

like, this is how we should be teaching our children using design thinking. They should be learning to solve problems, be creative and it's a really beautiful process to help do that. After college, I got a master's in math, science, technology, elementary education as well, and I started teaching. I taught kindergarten through eighth grade technology education, and we were doing a whole bunch of different technology, engineering, science, computer science, education with all different types of kids, and I loved it.

[00:02:55.070] – Liz

Kids would come running to my classroom. They loved the work we were doing. And I attributed it to having kids do meaningful work, engaging work. They saw the purpose of it. It was relevant. And after teaching for 10 years, I just didn't understand what was happening in the rest of kids' school days. Why did they love spending 45 minutes in my class every day, every week? What about it was different than what they were doing? So I stepped out of the classroom and I decided to provide professional development to help other teachers teach in this hands-on problem-solving way to make all kids' school days exciting like it was in my tech class. And that's how WhyMaker started.

[00:03:46.250] – Steve

Thank you. So we're going to build the focus of this podcast around that work that you're doing with professional development. So I'm wondering, during that span of of being a teacher, what experiences did you have related to professional development and professional learning that influence the work you do with PD, with teachers today?

[00:04:14.260] – Liz

One of the schools I taught at was a school for students with learning disabilities and ADHD, and I was teaching technology education there, K through eight. And while I was at that

school, I learned and really took on this understanding that every kid shows up with a different set of skills, experiences, and situations that you, as the teacher, have to accommodate for. That not everybody in the room is one size fits all and can get the same thing out of everything you're doing, that all of our kids need need something a little different to connect to. And as a teacher, it's your responsibility to provide that for them. So that was really one of the most influential experiences in my career. And there was a whole bunch of professional development I got that year that I was teaching there that led me to that. And also really great PD comes from learning from your peers and your colleagues. So watching all of the other teachers in the building and how they work with students really helped me be a better teacher as well. And that is still the ethos that we carry through our professional development now, a really universal designed approach to educating our children with this empathetic mindset that It is our responsibility as teachers to make sure that our students are learning, and we need to do everything in our power to help them.

[00:05:54.730] – Steve

So I'm wondering if we could look at your approach to a PD through three stages: a planning stage, a delivery stage, and a follow-up stage. So when you're designing a PD, talk a little bit about what considerations you put into the planning aspect.

[00:06:18.040] – Liz

In our planning stage, when we're typically talking to school leaders, we are asking lots of questions of those school leaders. What's happening in the school? What's the culture, the atmosphere in the school? What types of teachers are we working with? What are you seeing from your students that needs to change? How are our students not performing and we need to make changes? School leader, what do you believe is the best strategy for teaching? What are you seeing? What

aren’t you seeing? So we’re really probing the school leaders to give us as much information as possible about the teachers that we’re going to work with. We often think about those student behaviors as what we need to be doing professional development on. So what are our students doing in our class? What do we want them to be doing? What do they need to be doing in order to show that they’re learning? And then what teaching strategies need to be changed so that students are producing those behaviors and producing that learning? So as we’re planning, we’re thinking through all of that. When we’re creating professional development, we really think about three things in our professional development.

[00:07:37.580] – Liz

Why are we learning this as educators? What does the research say? What do our peers say? What do our colleagues say? Then how am I going to implement this in my classroom? So that why, what, how strategy is how we build all of our professional development in a way that feels relevant to teachers. When we deliver ever PD, we follow that structure as well. We make sure everyone understands the why. Why are we here? Why are we talking about this? What does the research say? What do your colleagues in this building say? What do your colleagues across the state say? What do your colleagues across the world say? And how are you going to make this happen? Giving teachers lots of time to talk about the how and talking with their peers and colleagues about that.

[00:08:23.630] – Steve

You started on the experience, and I thought it was interesting that your planning your part and your questioning of the school leader, you’re big on what it is that the kids are doing, and that that’s being built into your design. So talk a little bit more. If I came in and I observed the PD that you’re providing. What are the experiences you want teachers to have during the PD experience?

[00:08:55.200] – Liz

Yeah. So in our PD, we ensure and make sure that we treat our teachers like professionals and like adults, and we don't treat them like children. So we're never really modeling a classroom environment for teachers. That's not how we provide professional development. We recognize and understand that they are experts and professionals, and we encourage them to act like experts and professionals. So in our PD sessions, we'll be talking about, okay, our students aren't getting deep into the depths of knowledge. They are not really mastering our learning standards because they're not going deep enough. Okay, so if we backtrack through that and kids aren't thinking critically or creatively, we can backtrack in many different directions. But one way we can go is what questions are teachers asking? Maybe teachers aren't asking higher order thinking questions, and they're just asking questions that are on the lower and a bloom's taxonomy. In our PDs, we'll identify why it's important to ask higher-level thinking questions. We'll give some examples of lessons and projects that include higher-level thinking questions, and then we'll give teachers the opportunity to take one of their upcoming lessons and modify it so that they can include more higher-level thinking questions.

[00:10:29.040] – Steve

So the teachers are actually working on an application within the workshop that they leave there. That's great. So you were ready to go to follow up, and that's always a struggle for a lot of PD providers.

[00:10:47.810] – Liz

Yes. So we know that the best professional learning happens in schools when we have at least six touch points with a teacher throughout a school year. We can make improvements in instructional strategies and student outcomes if we have at least six touch points. One-off workshops are great, but

there’s really not a ton of sticking points with that. So our follow-up with school leaders is to encourage either coaching, one-on-one coaching or small group coaching, either virtually or in-person, and then potentially more workshops after that. To keep working on this strategy, Keep encouraging teachers to learn and grow and try something new. Because teaching is a really vulnerable subject, a really vulnerable job. And those teachers need support when things get tough and things get tough and things get scary and they feel like they’re out of control or being vulnerable. So our coaches step in at that moment to support them, to encourage them to keep going, to encourage them to take a risk and to be their safety net. So that’s our follow-up. We really don’t love doing one-off PDs. We’ll do them. They’re fun, they’re exciting. They hit the mark. But it is important to build consistency, continuity in professional learning, build trust with a provider that’s always going to be there and always going to show up and knows the teachers and knows the school culture, really helps improve teaching strategy and student outcomes.

[00:12:32.080] – Steve

It’s interesting. I was just writing a piece today about the knowing-doing gap. What are the issues that lead to us not doing what we know is the right thing to do for students or to impact learning, but we’re not doing it. And one of the issues that was raised is that the teacher gets that one-shot PD that might deliver the knowing part of it. So now I’m back in the classroom with the knowing piece, but that’s insufficient to get to the doing piece. That really needs to be part of the plan for professional learning.

[00:13:20.460] – Liz

Yeah. That’s why in our one-shot workshops or one-off workshops, we really try to leave teachers with the “how.” How are you going to start asking higher order level thinking questions. Just try it one time. How are you going to increase the vocabulary strategy? Here, you have 40 different

strategies you can try. You're left with this resource bank. Let's talk with your colleagues about a lesson you have coming up and how you're going to implement a new vocabulary strategy. So in our one-off workshops, we try to leave teachers with a really tactical thing that they can do and a plan for them to do it.

[00:14:02.030] – Steve

I've been playing with the thought as a minimal of people leaving a PD session with an observation tool that they could give to a colleague. So when I go back to practice implementing this in my classroom, this is what maybe the teacher behaviors are, this is what the student behaviors are. And I can actually just hand that over to a colleague who could come in they know exactly what to look at what's happening and record it for me. Consciousness is the critical part. And it's so easy to get caught up in what has to happen tomorrow and get on to the next curriculum And I'm four weeks away from that PD session I attended, and nothing of impact has happened in changing within my classroom.

[00:14:56.950] – Liz

Yes. We've been talking with a school or working with a school that is really trying to increase the amount of teacher-to-teacher feedback. Historically, teachers only receive feedback in a formal observation, a job performance review, and there is no teacher to teacher feedback, when in reality, that teacher has the same students that you have. They're teaching different content, but there's a lot of similarities in what we're doing. So how can we support each other and help each other learn and grow with this cross-teacher constructive feedback? The school we're working with also said that teachers seem to have this culture of kindness, where every teacher is aware that every other teacher is overwhelmed and overworked and in a rush. So they don't want to provide constructive feedback to each other. They just want to say, Oh, you're doing best you can, which I understand, and I feel

that, and we're grateful that there's a culture of kindness in a lot of our schools. But that constructive feedback is really going to make a difference in our student outcomes.

[00:16:14.030] – Steve

Yeah. That's why something like an observation tool gives them the specifics, and they can provide the specifics without being evaluative at all. Here's the questions you asked. Here's the student response. And I don't have to be evaluative. You know the kinds of questions you wanted to ask. I recorded them. You can look at the list and decide whether you feel good about the way it came out or whether you see something there that you want to change.

[00:16:51.560] – Liz

Right.

[00:16:53.150] – Steve

The research from John Hattie talking about collective teacher efficacy being the highest indicator of the likelihood of a school being in success. I don't think we can get to collective teacher efficacy until teachers are in each other's classrooms. When I'm in your classroom and I get a chance to see the value and the impact of what you're doing, I get to see your commitment to kids. That really builds that belief system of collective efficacy through the school.

[00:17:25.800] – Liz

Yeah. And I know what you're teaching, so I can add on to that. I can make it relevant, it can make it meaningful. I mean, time after time, again, our most effective schools are ones that are interdisciplinary, project-based, where multiple teachers are working together on a project. And the reason that they're effective is because all of the teachers are all working together at the same time on this same project-based learning experience using their own content area expertise.

But they’re all in their classrooms rooms together. Their doors aren’t closed, doors are open, and encouraging multiple teachers in the room at the same time.

[00:18:09.730] – Steve

Critical. I’m wondering if you might want to just take an example or two of a PD program that you’re currently offering and just walk us through it.

[00:18:22.640] – Liz

So in New York State, we are part of the Plan Pilot. We are a professional development provider for the Plan Pilot. Lots of P’s. And we are working on helping teachers create performance-based assessments. This is a statewide initiative, and we are working with a ton of schools on how do you create rigorous, meaningful performance-based assessments that match the standards and can prove that your students are meeting the standards? So this is a work in progress. Performance-based assessments are a term that has existed in our vocabulary for a while. But delineating the difference between a project-based learning experience, performance-based learning, and almost an activity is important for teachers to understand. And then, how do you make it rigorous so that it is meeting the standards. And this is something that we’re working through now. We’re doing a bunch of research because lots of great things are happening around the country and around the world with performance-based assessment. So we’re trying to pull that all together and make it make sense here in New York and helping teachers develop that. So with every school, we have a bunch of hours allocated to this professional learning and a small group of teachers.

[00:19:57.410] – Liz

And we’re working one on one with those teachers to build out their performance-based assessments for their math class, for their music class, for their ELA class. And it’s going well.

[00:20:11.550] – Steve

Great. Well, thanks so much for joining me, Liz, and sharing your insights and your experiences. What's the best way that listeners might follow up with you with questions they have or find out about the work that you're doing?

[00:20:28.560] – Liz

Yeah. So we're all over the internet on all the social media platforms. Very easily googlable. We are whymaker.com. You can head there, you can fill out a contact form on the website or send us an email. Also very active on LinkedIn. You can find us there, find me there, just Liz Gallo of WhyMaker, and send me a message. I'd love to chat.

[00:20:58.320] – Steve

Great. We'll be sure to put the link to your website into the podcast lead-in. Thanks again.

[00:21:05.440] – Liz

Thank you.

[00:21:08.130] – Steve [Outro]

Thanks for listening, folks. I'd love to hear what you're pondering. You can find me on Twitter or LinkedIn at Steve Barkley, or send me your questions and find my videos and blogs at barkleypd.com.