Podcast: A Technology Director's Thoughts on Meaningful Professional Learning

Eujon Anderson, the Director of Technology at Troy City Schools in Alabama, shares insights and questions to guide coaches and administrators in providing impactful professional learning for teachers. His guidance applies to the past, present, and future with a special application now as schools work virtually, hybrid, and onsite.

Keeping Professional Learning Interesting During Remote Learning

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PODCAST TRANSCRIPTAnnouncer: 00:00 Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud is brought to you by Academy for Educators. Online, professional development for teachers and leaders. Online

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Steve [Intro]: 00:25 Hello and welcome to the Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud podcast. For over three decades, I've had the opportunity to learn with educators at all levels, both nationally and internationally. I invite you to listen as I explore my thoughts and learning on a variety of topics connected to teaching, learning, and leading with some of the best and brightest educators from around the globe. Thanks for listening in.

Steve: 00:53 A technology director's thoughts on meaningful professional learning. Today, I'm pleased to be joined on our podcast by Eujon Anderson, who is a technology director for Troy City Schools in Troy, Alabama. He has a long list of Google certified training programs under his belt as well as being a Seesaw ambassador and a Apple teacher. In addition, he works with people implementing the G-suite in in education and both supporting administrators and teachers in and making the most effective use of those programs and tools. I asked him to join us because he wrote a blog post that appeared in the District Administrator on professional learning through his eyes as a technology director. And that's what I wanted him to share with us. So Eujon, thanks for joining us.

Eujon: 02:13 Thanks for having me.

Steve: 02:14 I'm wondering for starters if you could tell us a little bit about what's the current state of teaching and learning in in Troy City Schools right now?

Eujon: 02:26 So we are basically, I would say in the same situation where most people are in the state of education in Troy, Alabama. There's a lot of unknown. We are in remote

learning right now and we are just trying to figure this out. We're trying to figure out how we could best serve our students, make sure that they're still learning and they're still understanding. And we, from a teacher perspective that we could still meet the needs of those students and where they are. And so with that being said, it's a challenge, it's been a challenge and we're still trying to push forward because we have what, three, four more months of school. And who's to say that remote learning is ending anytime soon. So that's kind of where we are right now.

Steve: 03:14 Have you been in remote learning fully the whole time?

Eujon: 03:19 So we started back in August as a more of a hybrid option. We did give the option for those who wanted to do virtual, but then we also allow some students to come in. But as of today, we are fully virtual.

Steve: 03:35 And your expectation is that will last for awhile.

Eujon: 03:39 As a tech director and from what I've been seeing, I personally believe that virtual is going to last for awhile.

Steve: 03:46 And do you think that there'll be an in-between spot where it'll be a hybrid with some kids in and some kids virtual when you start up or do you think they'll stay virtual until they can bring everybody back?

Eujon: 04:01 Yeah, we're hoping so because I just believe that after everything moves forward, I do believe that that hybrid option would be there. I still think that even when you're able to bring them all back, there may still be those questions from the parents side, the community side. So I do believe that all schools, not just us in Troy, but all schools should make sure that they keep that option of virtual. So a hybrid option I see coming.

Steve: 04:29 I sensed from from the reading that I did on your post that you see a pretty important role for professional development as it connects to your role as a tech director. I'm wondering if you expound on that a little bit for us?

Eujon: 04:48 Most definitely. So as it relates to professional development, I believe that this is where we are because when you first had to make the decision to go virtual, there were a lot of questions with what technology are we going to use. How are we going to receive information from our students as relates to a learning management system? How can I turn the device on if I'm a teacher and I never used technology in my classroom? How can I all of a sudden utilize these tools? What tools are effective? So with all that being said, that's where I believe that as a tech director, or even just anybody involved in technology, tech coaches, professional development is now at the forefront of making sure that we can help everybody understand what they need, how they can help with teaching, and just to give them feedback to understand that those opportunities to be able to speak. So that's why professional development in my opinion is very important, especially now.

Steve: 05:54 It's interesting, I was just working with an international school today on teachers that are designing their own personal professional growth plans. And from studying my work, they know there's a question that I frequently use and they ended up building it into their planning. And my question is, what do my students need me to learn? And I kind of thought that the situation you described right now, that is the question for me to as a teacher to be asking. What is it that my students need need me to be learning?

Eujon: 06:34 Yes, that's definitely a powerful question because like you said, that never stopped, teaching to make sure that students know what they need to understand, depending on what grade level they're on. But then the next

question is, as an educator, I'm asking you, okay, so what do I need to learn so I can help you help me help you? And yes, I've seen that now. So that's a very powerful statement you may right there. One I may write down myself and take it with me.

Steve: 07:05 Take it. The other place I use that question as with professional learning communities. And you can actually even use it with a school leadership team that's looking at goals. So the school leadership team sets goals for the kids, and then that may mean setting goals for the teachers. So then the leadership team can in effect, be asking the question, what do the teachers need us to learn? So as a leadership team, what do we have to learn to support the teachers. When I read your article, you raised four questions that school leaders and coaches should be considering as they're planning for professional learning. And so if it's okay with you, I'd like to just jump in and take those questions one at a time and have you talk about why you see it as an important question. So the first one that you that you shared was are we giving the teachers voice?

Eujon: 07:56 Yes. So to me, as it relates to professional learning, I'm always a proponent of adult learning and just understanding that we are basically, I have used the word teaching in this aspect, but that's basically what it is, but teaching and coaching adults. And so, sometimes we give the idea of trying to coach them and teach them as if they were students. And with that being said, they don't have the opportunity at times for what I've seen to give their opinion. So we have a great schedule in place for professional development or we're looking at some tools or even not talking about technology, we're looking at different avenues of how remote learning has impacted us. So from the mental health aspects and all and making sure there's forced equity, we have that the things that they need, that we don't ask them questions.

Steve: 08:56 So we're making the decision.

Eujon: 08:58 The top level is has been making the decisions. And I, for one, I am a part of that group. And so that's actually why I wrote the article and I asked that question because I thought of it and I said, well, I always ask about adult learning and I always ask, do I give the teachers a voice when we are creating professional development? And a lot of times the answer is no, you know, we're not. And so we need to make sure that we're doing that. So I understand that there are some critical things that we have to share with our teachers and our educators, but we still have to have that time where we ask those questions and we ask them, does this really help you? Or could you elaborate on that as it relates to, is this meaningful? And I'm know I kinda mentioned that word a lot in the article, is this meaningful for you? And if it is, can you explain and if it isn't, can you definitely explain so we could come to together to figure this out with the professional help.

Steve: 09:54 An example that you just reinforced for me – I just worked with a a building principal, a high school principal, and about 20 of his teacher leaders this week. But prior to us getting together, he asked the the teachers to answer two questions on a Google doc and submit it to me. And the two questions were, I'm being most successful in engaging students when? And this is a school that's all virtual. So I'm being most successful engaging students when? And I'm struggling the most engaging students when? And then, he pulled a group of 35 students and he asked them to respond to two questions. The first one being, I'm most engaged in virtual learning when? And I'm struggling the most with virtual learning when?

Eujon: 10:54 Wow.

Steve: 10:54 And it was cool because when he sent all that information to me, I was able to do a a matchup so that I

could show that when teachers said they were being most successful, exactly matched when the kids were saying they were having the greatest success in virtual learning.

Steve: 11:14 So it was reinforcing for the teachers, keep doing that and do more of that.

Eujon: 11:19 That's a great correlation there.

Steve: 11:19 But then also being able to say very often, the teachers and the students were struggling on a common piece like effectively using a breakout room. So that would kind of jump out at you now that that's an area for some professional learning to occur as to what strategies and tools I might use because now the kids have told me they're struggling with it and I know I'm struggling with it. So you're just right on that that voice can turn and have a big impact back on the learning.

Eujon: 11:58 Definitely.

Steve: 11:59 The next question you raised was, does the schedule work for everyone's time and are we giving enough time?

Eujon: 12:07 So that's from personal experience, I would say. Once again, these are all from the thoughts of a tech director. And so when we first understood that we were going into this new normal and I'm know I keep mentioning that but there's this new reality of virtual or remote learning that you had to have some type of learning management system for it to work. Most people, of course, utilize one of the other. Either you're using Google classroom, you're using Canvas, you're using Blackboard and now Schoology. And so I know for us, with the numbers of our teachers who haven't really embraced using a learning management system, that was the first part that we had to understand. That's where the professional learning needs to take place. So now we're gonna look at schedule and the time.

Eujon: 12:56 And so when did you train these people? Do you train them during the summertime when this was all occurring or happening? Do we wait until we come back in August? And if that's the case, what does that look like now? So when I referenced time, it's also make sure that we understand that time on the teacher's schedule because sometimes I think that we misinterpret how much time we need to put into a particular lesson. And so you may give two days on a particular lesson that should have taken maybe a week or so or two weeks to really grasp the attention. And so that question that, when I think about the time, is just to understand how can we make more time for certain situations. So from switching your PD over from face-to-face to virtual, doing recordings, so podcasts. That's another way to give people opportunities to say, I know we don't have the time to do it here, but here's some of the avenues that we can take. And so that's why I just thought that time is very critical, if given enough time to the teachers so that they could really grasp what we're trying to show them.

Steve: 14:05 Yeah, that's been a forever issue.

Eujon: 14:11 Yes.

Steve: 14:11 Says the man who is in his 50th year in education.

Eujon: 14:16 [laughter]

Steve: 14:16 So it hit me in my beginning teaching days and certainly everything I've studied in in teacher training and coaching since, the need for building in practice and time to reflect back on a change that I'm making is really is really critical and important. I have to just – a story's jumping out at me here. I'm learning German on Duolingo right now. And I just shared with my wife, some of the messages that don't directly translate. So the English message was, "practice makes perfect." And the German for practice makes perfect is,

“a master does not fall from the sky.” That’s kind of like what we’re expecting. A master is going to fall from this two hour workshop session that I did.

Eujon: 15:20 Yes, you’re going to master that assignment. Master that task. Yes, I see that, but you really hit something on key right there, but with the reflection part. And that goes back to time as well, that I thought about that as far as my role, I try to make sure that that not only do we get the professional development and then we get the time, but we also want to give them that time to, I guess you could say, that play time. That time to really figure out, okay, how can I make this work for me? And I think that works best when you can get into those teacher groups. And I know we’re saying things that are still more face-to-face references, but this could be a Zoom, this could be a meet.

Steve: 15:59 Absolutley. Absolutley.

Eujon: 15:59 And then a few teachers get together and say, okay, after we talked about this learning management system, or after we discussed this digital tool or a strategy, how can we utilize this in our workplace right now? So we got to give them that time versus just saying, hey, go for it. They want to get started. So like you said, the master is falling from the tree – from the sky right down. Hopefully we can slow the master down so they can slowly fall gracefully. That’s is the goal. So I like that idea.

Steve: 16:35 You’ve really described there an important role for coaches to play in that follow up from the PD activity and giving the teacher that opportunity to reflect and draw meaning from, from their learning. The next question you ask is are we creating the space for teachers to share what they know and have learned?

Eujon: 16:59 Yeah. So the word that I think you mentioned earlier, of course, is that professional learning community.

And I just think that it's great to offer professional learning. From the tech coach perspective, it is great to come in there and show those educators just different things as it relates to digital tools, a particular strategy and whatnot. But then on the other side of that is kind of similar to what teachers are doing with our students. How do I know that you understand what you are learning without – you know, I have to give you some opportunities to be able to show that. Like, you understand how to create a Google slide or you understand how to use another tool out there and you could show us how can it benefit yourself and then how it could benefit your your students.

Eujon: 17:50 And so I'm going to back to the the instructional leaders, our administrators, they have to understand that as well. So not only are you offering the professional development, but let them show you what they learned. And you'd be surprised. And I'm saying that for myself as a tech director, when I receive emails from teachers that say, hey thank you for this workshop, or thank you for this recording. I want to show you what I've done. And you'd be amazed at what you receive. Give them that opportunity.

Steve: 18:23 Just terrific. And the the last question that you had raised in the article was, are the teachers allowed to give constructive feedback?

Eujon: 18:33 Yes. That's, once again, that's a personal question for myself, as well as I think for other leaders as well, that sometimes we may not get the answer that we're looking for. And so, I could probably put together a great professional learning opportunity based on a survey I may have received from my teachers and all. I may construct something for them and I may get some feedback of, we didn't get that quite well, or I didn't understand that, or I'm moving a little slower than how you presented information to me. And so we got to try our best to understand that we need that constructive feedback so we can understand how we are still

helping our teachers. Because we have to remember, like you just said earlier, the end goal is to still make sure that our students are learning and we're trying to figure out how we could better equip our teachers to help those students.

Eujon: 19:32 And so, if I am still – if my strategy on professional learning is still the same and I'm not allowing a teacher to tell me that was good, this is not good, need help with this, then we're basically doing professional development in vain. And I also challenge the administrators as well on that same concept, that even if you deliver things for your teachers, do not be afraid to ask them openly, like, what do you think about this? So if you are afraid to receive that information, I just say, do a survey. Do an anonymous survey and just get that information. Tell them please be honest because that helps me grow as well. And I think for the tech coaches here that should help them grow also so they will understand.

Steve: 20:18 And you're modeling what you'd be wanting teachers to do in the classroom with their students as well.

Eujon: 20:25 Mhm.

Steve: 20:25 I'm wondering I'm wondering if you'd have an insight or your future predictions here. How do you envision this time that we've spent learning virtually during the during the pandemic, how do you envision it impacting teaching and learning as students return to to classrooms?

Eujon: 20:54 So that's a very great question and I have several views on it because, and I'm always gonna try to look at the positive of things. I do believe that during this time, right now, it is an opportunity to really understand how we could better communicate with each other, how we could better collaborate with each other and understand those digital skills, those digital tools that are needed. And so what I'm looking at right now for the future that you mentioned is for

us to really truly understand educational technology and instructional technology. And that's just me speaking from the tech director side, but whatever other avenues or areas that were never addressed before remote learning, we can look at it now. We can look at equity and really have those conversations and be able to plan accordingly.

Eujon: 21:50 We can make sure that, like you mentioned one of the questions, we understand how to give voice to teachers, students, community members, parents, how we could get that voice now. So I think that this is the opportunity to be able to put all that information together so we can reflect, hopefully we have the opportunity to reflect on this later on down the line. So that's kind of where I see we're going with this, that, we hopefully will be better prepared and I'm speaking of education in general. We would definitely understand more of an understanding of the needs and thoughts of everybody from the community members like I mentioned to the students, to the parents or the teachers. I think all of that work is about if we could take this opportunity and use it for a positive reflection.

Steve: 22:42 Yeah, you really pushed a piece in front of me. I've been starting to bring the term out to people that, as we come out of this pandemic, there's going to be a group of students who are going to be missing some skillsets from learning that got missed in this time. And I see those students as needing acceleration, not remediation. And I'm hoping that some of the instructional technology strategies and tools that we've developed during this time and the teacher skillsets that have been developed can be used to to address that issue.

Eujon: 23:26 I definitely agree with that.

Steve: 23:29 Well, Eujon, thank you so much. I want to give you an opportunity here if there's kind of a last word of wisdom you'd like to leave with teachers and instructional

leaders regarding their learning with technology during this time. I will put your email address and a link to your article in the lead-in to this podcast so that folks can find you but you want to close us out with a thought you'd like to leave us with?

Eujon: 24:05 Yes, most definitely. And this is going to be to our teachers. I first and foremost want to tell them, thank you. Because I know they may think they've heard that enough, but we're going to continue to tell them thank you for what they've been doing. Stay in it. We understand that this has been hard. I was going to put a tweet out there a while back to say, remote learning is terrible but education technology is not. And, you know, I was going to kind of try to explain it. And so hopefully we try not to tie the two together. So that's why I'm talking to the teachers right now. For those that you never really were involved in education technology and this was the way that you had to embrace it, just remember that remote learning and education technology are two different entities in my opinion.

Eujon: 24:53 And so with that being said, start small. I know there are a lot of tools out there. I know that there are a lot of resources and strategies. Always look to find maybe one or two tools that you could really dive into and just stay there. Engage with your students as best as you can with those students and then when we come out of this, that could be your landing page. That could be the point where you start when we want to come back into this education technology. Because that's not going anywhere. Technology is here. I do hate that remote learning is the way that we got here but there is light at the end of the tunnel. And for those tech coaches out there, we appreciate you all to help the teachers to understand the different tools and how they could move on. And then of course, at last, the administrators that had to make sure that they keep it all up under one roof. We want to, you know, we want to thank you all too, but also be mindful of

what we just mentioned from the article, be mindful of understanding the different strategies that you got put in place, especially with educational technology. So that would be my message, I guess to all three components now.

Steve [Outro]: 26:12 Thanks again for listening. You can subscribe to Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud on iTunes and Podbean. And please remember to rate and review us on iTunes. I also want to hear what you’re pondering. You can find me on Twitter @stevebarkley, or send me your questions and find my videos and blogs at barkleypd.com.