# The **Power** and **Pitfalls** of Virtual Professional Development

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Let's not kid ourselves: when educational professional development (PD) went virtual in March 2020, it felt like someone shut the door on our face-to-face school library conferences and workshops in an instant. As president of the Pennsylvania School Librarians Association at the time, my heart broke when our board had to cancel our annual conference, a tough decision, but one that had to be made. Who wants that as part of their presidential history? The only annual school librarians Pennsylvania conference to ever be cancelled.

For many, our state, local, and national school library conferences, workshops, and meetings are the height of our professional development each year. A physical space that is all our own where we can hang with our peeps, have PD tailored to our everyday work, and talk the talk about our profession and everyone around us "gets it."

K–12 schools tried to quickly get all teachers up to speed on remote learning. School districts developed and offered synchronous and asynchronous technology workshops centered around software

and pedagogical best practices for remote learning. School librarians, ever the leaders in education, quickly jumped in, creating and offering what was needed for their schools, students, and teachers.

Thankfully, as always, school librarians came together as a profession. AASL Town Halls and state and regional virtual spaces were available so that we could share, learn, and grow. However, the 2020–21 school year began a change in professional development for education. All professional development had to be offered virtually. Organizations, associations, and companies developed both synchronous and asynchronous professional development. This was not a new idea—it had been available before—but it was the only option for the 2020–21 school year. School librarians had to adapt and become remote learners themselves and determine exactly how to engage and use virtual professional development for their own growth, as well as for their teachers' and students' growth.

Through this forced mode of access, school librarians, like other educators, had to analyze their own learning styles. Metacognitively, they

became reflective practitioners in determining how virtual professional development would allow them to learn and grow in their teaching and best practices.

## The Pros of Virtual PD

As immediate past president of the Pennsylvania School Librarians Association in 2020–21, I was responsible for facilitating and guiding an LSTA grant for developing leaders in our association. I quickly learned that there are advantages to virtual professional development.

First and foremost, offering virtual PD provides access to so many more school librarians than ever before. School districts that in the past were not willing to pay for specific school library PD due to substitutes and travel, saw the advantage of allowing school librarians attend asynchronous virtual PD. In fact, I believe more school librarians were willing to attend virtual PD.

Mary Schwander, school librarian at New Hope-Solebury High School in New Hope, PA, took advantage of the flexibility and cost savings of virtual professional development. "I found that I attended many more

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professional development sessions since they were offered virtually. The fact that I didn't need to travel to the sessions gave me the flexibility and opportunity to more easily attend. In addition, in most cases the sessions were recorded, which gave me the opportunity to watch them at a more convenient time OR watch them a second time to better utilize the material and information" (Schwander 2021).

In Pennsylvania we saw more school librarians attending our town halls, meetings, and professional development opportunities. The Pennsylvania School Librarians Association was able to increase its leadership academy participants by 68 percent, which was 66 more participants than the previous grant cycle. It was amazing to see people more involved in the profession and in their own professional growth.

Building a professional learning community (PLC) was one of the biggest power advantages that I saw through the pandemic. Nationally, I saw more involvement from school librarians across the country who had never had the opportunity to connect with their colleagues. Statewide, school librarians felt that they were not alone, that they mattered, and that they had a voice in their association and in their profession.

Locally, K–12 school librarians who had never been able to meet regularly due to time and geographic constraints were able to form stronger and more-successful school library district programs. They not only learned from each other but also were able to forge consistent and equitable practices for their school districts. Where once we felt that we were a school librarian on an island in our school buildings all by ourselves, we now were a connected group—stronger with one voice.

Mary Schwander felt that the added time with local school librarians was a lifeline during the pandemic. "As soon as our districts were closed and we switched to virtual learning, the school librarians in our county connected with one another and did weekly Zoom meetings. We brainstormed teaching and management ideas, shared our successes, as well as vented our frustrations. I truly don't know how I would have survived if I didn't have that wonderful connection with my library colleagues!" (Schwander 2021).

Jayne Downing, school librarian at Penn Alexander School, School District of Philadelphia, had virtual professional development time each week. "This allowed groups to meet and discuss topics. The great part of this was that the specialists had the chance to actually meet, discuss, and plan together. This does not happen in the non-virtual world" (Downing 2021).

## The Cons of Virtual PD

The power of virtual PD is not without a price. And this is where we as school librarians must navigate our way forward. We as school librarians always want to be all things to all people. Throughout the past eighteen to twenty months, I've seen many school librarians start to burn out on the flexibility of virtual PD.

It's easy to sign up and register for more hours of asynchronous PD than you can possibly watch, listen, or engage in a week or a month's time. Our inboxes were flooded with so many virtual professional development opportunities, free and those that came with a cost. We set the bar so high on what we wanted to learn and participate in that we forgot that we only had so many hours in the day and that our professional selves had only so much capacity for attention and engagement.

Jayne Downing explained that it wasn't just the scheduled virtual professional development events that were draining. "When virtual PD is attached to too many readings, it becomes a chore rather than a pleasure. I will confess that I prefer to read and discuss in chunks" (Downing 2021).

Again, we didn't want to be left behind and didn't want to miss that one thing that would help us be more valuable to our students and staff. If you're like me, I have five to seven conferences, workshops, institutes, and such that I still need to go back and go through and organize the resources and learnings. Unfortunately, some of us spread ourselves too thin and crowded our daytime and nighttime schedules with Zoom
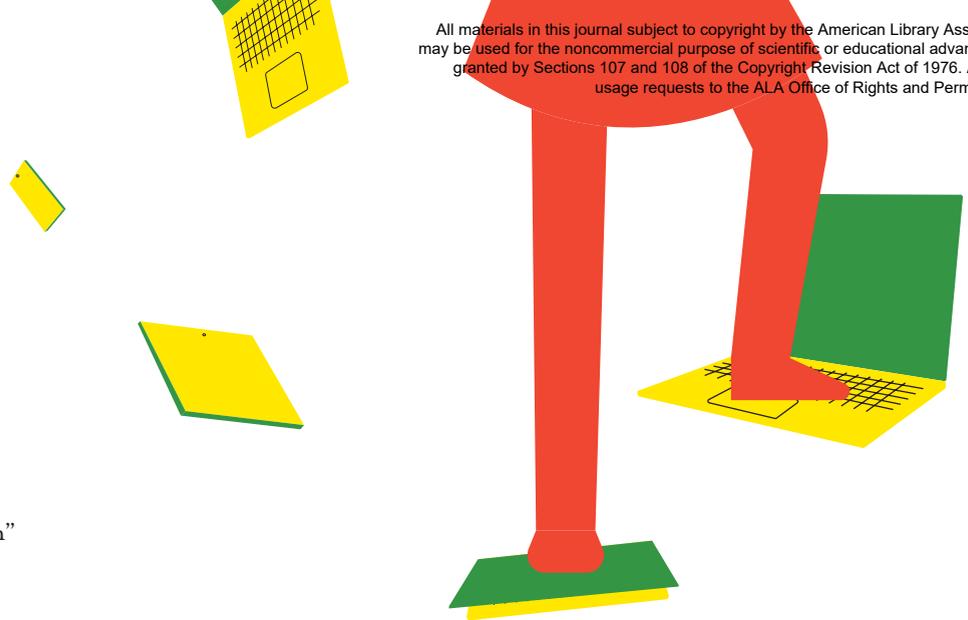
links. Try counting those Zoom events on your calendar from March 2020 to August 2021.

We also pride ourselves on organizing information. Yes, we are the experts. But I have to admit: I've got Google notes, lists of resources, a plethora of recordings, tons of PDFs and links to click on that I just haven't gotten to. I can't say that I've been able to get my head around organizing them either. I rely on other school librarians who have made Wakelets, LibGuides, Twitter hashtags, blog posts, and other means. (Thank you, friends!)

In talking with many school librarians, we might have bitten off more than we can chew and are now left feeling overwhelmed and like we have not accomplished what we set out to do. Webinars, recordings, and websites seem to blend together, and we can't remember all the places we stored those amazing resources.

## Steps to Move Forward

I'm here to say, that's okay. We did the best we could for the past twenty-two months, and we learned so much about ourselves as professionals, teachers, and learners. Now let's be reflective on what we need to do moving forward so that we ensure that the professional development we engage in, virtual or in person, helps us grow and lead beyond the pandemic.

### Set Professional Development Goals and Evaluate Them

"Lifelong learning...permeates every aspect of an effective school library" (AASL 2018, p. 148). Chapter 13 in AASL's *National School Library Standards* provides an excellent roadmap for professional activity. It's worth the time to go back and read or reread this chapter. "Self-reflection is an essential starting point for self-assessment and assessment by an administrator" (AASL 2018, p. 167). That means that we must take the time to evaluate our professional practice and determine our specific needs that will impact our students, staff, and schools. Now that virtual professional development is a permanent part of our culture, school librarians can consider areas of learning that we never thought we'd have an opportunity to pursue. We've always been in front of the curve, so we shouldn't limit ourselves to topics that are the traditional school library PD.

In *Think Again* Adam Grant reminds us that we need to be open to rethinking our future. "Building a sense of purpose often starts with taking actions to enhance your learning or your contributions to others" (2021, 257). Grant also points out that we need to constantly be checking our professional learning and growth. "Just as you schedule health checkups with your doctor, it's worth having a life checkup on your calendar once or twice a year. It's a way to assess how much you're learning, how your beliefs and goals are evolving, and whether your next steps warrant some rethinking" (2021, 257). Evaluating your professional goals should be something that is done honestly, regularly, and with purpose.

### Give Yourself Space—Virtually and Physically

Virtual professional development is certainly convenient. You can wear your earbuds and use your computer, phone, or tablet. Asynchronous learning is even easier to participate in 24/7. However, just as the speaker who delivered the face-to-face workshop asked you to turn off your phones and stop answering e-mail on your laptop, so too you need to set those expectations for yourself in the virtual PD world. Mentally, allow yourself to be in the moment of the professional development experience. Trying to participate in or even just listen to a synchronous or asynchronous event while you're between classes, supervising your library during a study hall, making dinner, or putting your kids to bed will leave you feeling like you didn't get anything out of the workshop or learning. We've all done it but think about the best practices we espouse to our students during lessons. We know they get more out of learning

when they are focused and engaged. Let's follow that same expectation for our own learning as well.

It goes without saying that when you set your professional development goals you need to be realistic. We've been through the intense months of the pandemic when we shifted to remote learning in a heartbeat and had to work hours and hours virtually in order to meet our students' and teachers' needs. Now is the time to also evaluate the balance of your work and personal life with your virtual learning. Just because you can fit virtual PD into your budget (free many times) and the hours in a day, doesn't mean you sacrifice your family, hobbies, or sanity. You don't *have* to do every free PD that's offered. You didn't attend a face-to-face workshop every week pre-pandemic, and you don't need to schedule something every week virtually either. Be strategic based on your goals. When you start to feel as if you can't do one more Zoom meeting, one more recording, or one more webinar, DON'T. Set your boundaries and stick to it.

### Advocate with Administrators on the Importance of School Library PD

Education is rethinking so many aspects because of the pandemic and the remote learning that was a necessity in March 2020. The delivery method for professional development is just one of those aspects. I've heard from many school librarians throughout the country that school districts will not allow or pay for teachers and school librarians to attend face-to-face conferences and workshops this school year. However, school librarians must continue to advocate for and request professional development (whether in person or virtual) that is school library specific. Additionally, when you participate in a virtual or face-to-face event, follow up with your stakeholders and administrators with a brief summary and how this particular PD will allow you to positively impact students and staff. Frame those points based on your district's or school's goals and mission. Then, when you feel comfortable attending face-to-face professional development, you've laid the groundwork for future learning.

# School librarians with a **growth mindset** focus on the **process of learning**, not the outcome.

There are many free, no-cost options for professional development for school librarians. However, in line with the previous point, these opportunities aren't without a cost. Educate your administrators on why needing the professional time during the day is important so that you can maximize the professional learning and focus solely on what is being offered, especially if the event is live and not asynchronous. School librarians shouldn't be expected to spend hours and hours of personal time to grow as leaders and teachers.

Don't be afraid to advocate for professional development that has a registration cost either. Spell out to your administrators and stakeholders that the time and the dollars are worth what will pay dividends to all the students that you impact. Your administrators will see you as an educator who self-evaluates their own learning. This advocacy reinforces your leadership role in your school and district.

In *Leadership: Strategic Thinking, Decision Making, Communication, and Relationship Building* Ann M. Martin and Kathleen Riopelle Roberts state, "School librarians are leaders when they take time to practice self-awareness in order to develop their professional skills and create stronger relationships with stakeholders. This self-awareness leads to more effective clarifying questions in conversation and lessons, better interactive professional development sessions for educators, and strong resource decisions based on data" (2019, 130).

### No Shaming—Give Yourself Grace

School librarians were at the forefront when remote learning became a reality in March 2020. School librarians all over the country demonstrated to the entire field of K–12 education why we are so valuable based on our ability to not only have the digital resources needed

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to support students learning from home, as well as our creativity and unique perspective to reinvent school libraries during the pandemic. During those first few months, we were able to share with our fellow school librarians so many different new ways to present instruction, resources, and new ideas for engaging our students virtually. In true school library tradition, everyone shared their lessons, ideas, projects, boards, images, videos, and more. All our professional peers became more visible. School librarians told me several times that when they looked at what other librarians were doing, they felt that they weren't keeping up with everyone else.

What we need to remind ourselves is that this isn't a competition. We don't have to implement every new idea, new app, new project, or new technology that we saw on Twitter or Facebook. Yes, we want to explore what other school librarians are doing. No one needs to reinvent the wheel. However, stay focused on your professional goals and what you set out to accomplish in your own learning. We know that best practice in teaching is to meet students where they are and look for growth. We don't want our students to compare

themselves with other students, but to realize growth. "[Carol] Dweck explains that a mindset is a theory that people hold about themselves. Our mindsets profoundly impact learning, achievement, relationships, and overall success and well-being" (Big Life Journal 2020). School librarians with a growth mindset focus on the process of learning, not the outcome. Give yourself grace to learn and implement new ideas at your own pace, not someone else's or who you envision as the rockstars of school libraries.

## Use Virtual PD to Get Involved

Virtual professional development brought together school librarians who would never have been able to meet with face-to-face conferences and workshops. Connections were made that were invaluable for all of us as we navigated our way through the pandemic. As our school library world continues to evolve, continue to use the flexibility of virtual communication and professional development to stay connected and to stay involved. Virtual town halls were a lifeline back in March and April of 2020 and can remain an avenue for you to join a committee or get more involved with your state school library chapter or AASL or ALA. If you're not finding what you're looking for, create your own professional learning community virtually. There is no reason any longer to feel as if we are isolated or on an island in our school because we're the only school librarian in that physical space. Get involved—that's how we continue to grow our school library profession.
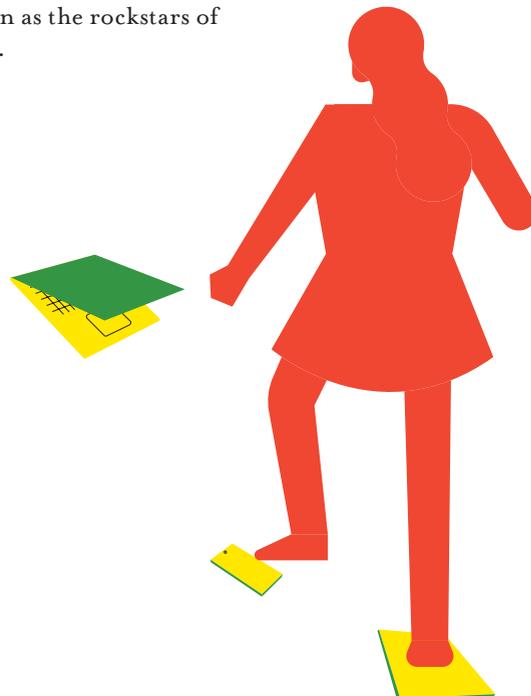
## Share!

I am always so proud when I speak with other educators and administrators and those outside of the education world when I talk about how school librarians are always so willing to share what they've learned, created, or used in their libraries. I know that when the aftermath of the pandemic is behind us, my school library peers will continue to share freely. It's the nature of what we do each day with our students. Continue to share what you're learning, how you're organizing it, your reflections, and the questions that you don't have answered. Somewhere out there, there is a school librarian who needs your help!

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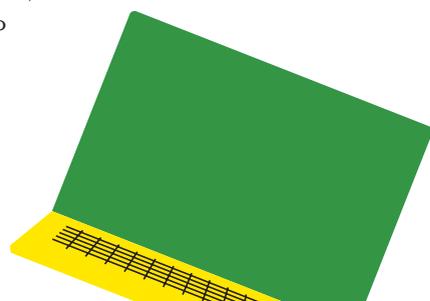Big Life Journal. 2020. "Introduction to Growth Mindset Teaching." *Empowering Education*. <https://empoweringeducation.org/blog/what-is-growth-mindset/> (accessed Sept. 19, 2021).

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