

Learning Without Limits: Empowering Teacher Learning, the TDPL Model, & Building Self- Directed Learners



Learning in the Professions | Office of Rural Promise
Appalachian State University

Janet Johnson
Sherry Paddie
Dr. Jessie Peterson



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OUR STORY

MEET THE TEAM

HEATHER CHILDRESS

MICRO-CREDENTIAL
COORDINATOR, ETL
NAVIGATOR



JANET JOHNSON

FINANCE AND
COMPLIANCE MANAGER



SHERRY PADDIE

LEAD ETL
NAVIGATOR



JESSIE PETERSON

INNOVATION & RLPD
NAVIGATOR



JASON SNYDER

RESEARCH SUPPORT
SPECIALIST



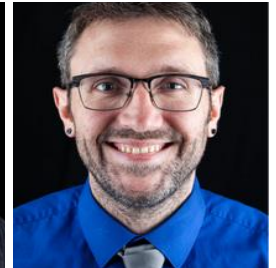
ERIN WEST, ED.D

CO-ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
FOR TEACHER OUTREACH,
ETL & GREAT STEM
NAVIGATOR



TYREL WINEBARGER

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR FOR
RESEARCH AND
EVALUATION





**Empowering
Teacher
Learning**

Appalachian State University

What is the ETL Project?

- 5-year, \$12m research project funded by the U.S. Department of Education In the Form Of An **Education Innovation And Research (EIR)** grant
- Purpose: to measure the impacts of a teacher-directed professional learning (**TDPL**) program in rural, western NORTH CAROLINA middle schools
- Teachers earn **stipends** & licensure renewal credits (or **CEUs**) by completing teacher-selected competency-based **micro-credentials** online.

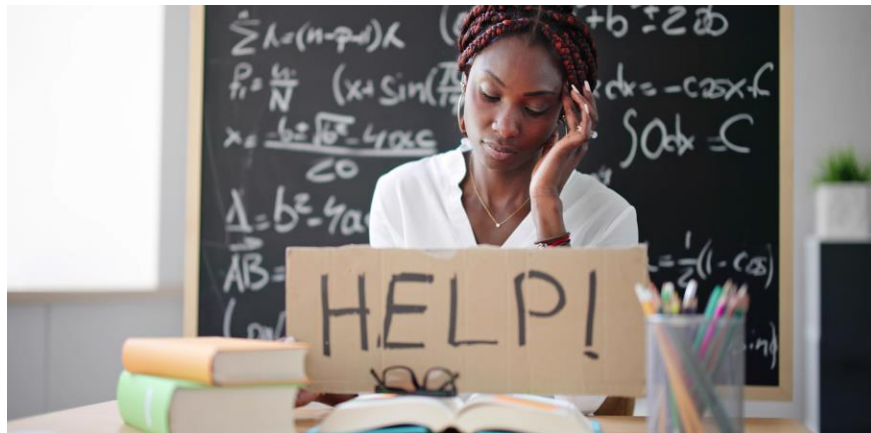
Teacher-Directed Professional Learning (TDPL)

A form of self-directed learning

*In which **the teacher is the active participant in assessing their needs, setting goals, seeking out opportunities for professional growth, and measuring their progress.***

Artman et al. (2020) & Bakhshi (2019)

The Beginning 2020



The Problem

- De-professionalization
- Increasing workloads
- Teacher effectiveness
- Teacher shortages (retention)
- Student achievement
- Reduced access to quality pd in rural areas

The covid-19 pandemic intensified these challenges and exposed major gaps in professional learning systems nationwide.

Addressing Teacher Shortages: Insights From Four States, 2025

Traditional Teacher Professional Development

- **Compliance**-driven
- One-size-fits-all
- **Disconnected** from classroom realities
- **Time**-based rather than competency-based
- Difficult to **access** in rural settings

The covid-19 pandemic intensified these challenges and **exposed major gaps in professional learning systems nationwide.**



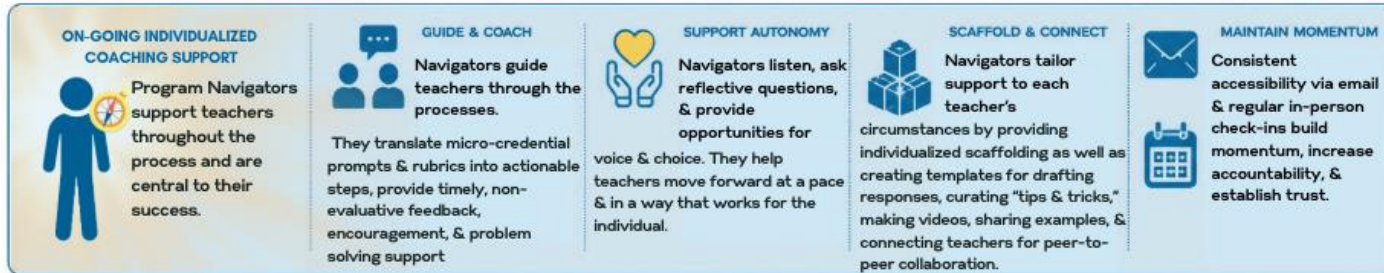
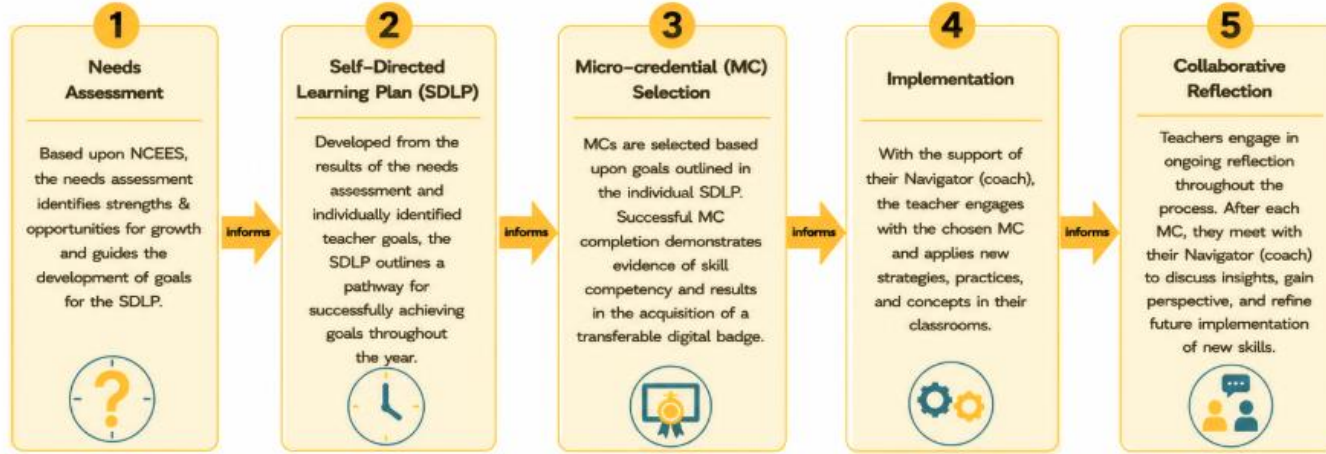
Teachers reported that conventional pd often failed to honor their expertise, time, or instructional context

THE

solution...

The Empowering Teacher Learning TDPL Framework

Framework



Five Module Implementation Model

01

MODULE 1

- Introduce SDL & TDPL
- Build relationships
- Complete needs assessments
- Create Self-Directed Learning Plans (SDLPs)
- Explore MC hosting platform



02

MODULES 2-4

- Meet with Navigator
- Complete & Submit an MC
- Complete reflection with Navigator and submit survey to Canvas
- Share learning through a discussion board on Canvas



03

MODULE 5

- End-of-year survey reflecting on the overall program (qualitative)
- CLASS observation
- Complete quantitative surveys

A Learning Management System (LMS), such as Canvas, is recommended to serve as a as the central hub for resources, communication, progress monitoring, and assignment submission.

Challenges

Destruction Left By Hurricane Helene: Valle Crucis School

- Covid-19 pandemic
- Senate bill 49
- Hurricane Helene

Resilience

Despite widespread disruption:

- ✓ Teachers continued engaging in professional learning
- ✓ Flexible structures allowed ongoing participation
- ✓ Coaching relationships remained intact
- ✓ Schools maintained access to no-cost PD



Stipends & CEUs Earned



			
2025-2026	\$224,950	216	236.8
2024-2025	\$236,950	343	170.0
2023-2024	\$286,550	385	233.5
2022-2023	\$209,850	310	248.5
2021-2022 Pilot Year	\$17,700	34	50
TOTALS	\$976,000	1288	938.8



Remote Learning

Appalachian State
University



Out of the Rubble

APPSTATE

Learning Without Limits: Building Self-Directed Learners



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Dr. Jessie Peterson
Tyrel Winebarger

Today's Focus

Self-Directed Learning

Why it matters

Malcolm Knowles

5-Step Self-
Directed
Learning Model

Practical Strategies

Classroom
application

Collaborative Application

Interactive
session

Reflection & Planning

Action steps

Session Objectives

Strategy Identification

Identify at least three strategies that support self-directed learning

Instructional Design

Develop one actionable instructional component for their own context

Think–Pair–Share

How much ownership do your students currently have over their learning?

Consider:

Decision-making
opportunities

Reflection and
feedback

Goal setting

Student voice
and agency

Why Self-Directed Learning?

The Need

Students often:

- Depend on teacher-directed instruction
- Wait for answers instead of seeking solutions
- Struggle with ownership and independence

The Shift

Instruction helps students become:

- Independent learners
- Problem solvers
- Reflective thinkers
- Adaptable and resourceful

Self Assessment

Reflect on Your Current Practice:

- Student ownership/voice
- Goal-setting opportunities
- Reflection and feedback
- Choice and autonomy

Identify:

1 Current Strength

What is working well right now?

1 Area for Growth

Where can you improve the most?

1 Personal Goal

What do you want to achieve today?

Context: Leading Through Disruption

The Challenge:

- Impact of Hurricane Helene (Fall 2024) and COVID-19 on Western North Carolina schools.
- Disruption of traditional schooling created a need for adaptable, resilient teaching strategies.



Context: Leading Through Disruption



The Opportunity:

- Reimagining classrooms where learning continues even without the teacher present.
- Shift from crisis management to sustainable, learner-centered models.

The Innovation Cohort

Who: 34 teachers, 2 administrators, and 2 coaches from 12 rural schools.

What: A year-long professional learning initiative to integrate SDL strategies.

Core Components:

- Self-directed learning
- Teacher leadership
- Networked learning communities
- Job-embedded learning
- Competency-based microcredentials



The Innovation Cohort: Program Structure

Module 1: Teacher reflection on SDL readiness & goal setting.

Module 2: Introduction to student-centered strategies (e.g., goal tracking).

Modules 3-4: Designing and implementing SDL units/lessons.

Module 5: Reflection on impact and student outcomes.



Classroom Impact

Ownership & Agency

Educators designed lessons with increased opportunities for student ownership and agency.

Metacognition

Educators built in more self-regulation and metacognitive strategies for students.

Valuable Investment

While SDL took instructional time, educators acknowledged it was valuable to teaching their content.

What is Self-Directed Learning?

Self-Directed Learning (SDL)

Students take an active role in:

- Identifying learning needs
- Setting goals
- Finding resources
- Choosing strategies
- Reflecting on outcomes

IMPORTANT REMINDER

SDL is *not* “hands-off teaching.”

It is an **intentionally taught structure** that develops student independence.

Malcolm Knowles's Five-Step SDL Model

- 1 Diagnosing learning needs
- 2 Establishing learning goals
- 3 Identifying resources
- 4 Choosing strategies
- 5 Assessing outcomes

Goal

Move students from **dependent learners** to **independent learners**.

Step One: Diagnosing Learning Needs

Definition

Students identify:

- Strengths
- Gaps
- Interests
- Learning preferences

Examples

- Learning profiles/portfolios
- Rubrics and checklists
- Exit tickets
- Student-teacher conferences
- **Digital tools:** Kahoot, Blooket, Gimkit, Quizizz, Quizlet, Padlet, etc.

Step Two: Establishing Learning Goals

Definition

Students create:

- Clear
- Specific
- Measurable goals

Examples

- SMART goal templates
- Digital goal-setting tools
- Student-teacher conferences
- Goal-setting rubrics/templates
- Journals

Step Three: Identifying Resources

Definition

- Students select tools and supports that help them learn effectively.

Examples

- Google Scholar
- YouTube
- TED-Ed
- Online simulations
- Audiobooks
- Library databases
- Discussion forums

Step Four: Choosing Learning Strategies

Definition

- Students choose learning approaches that best support their needs.

Examples

- Graphic organizers
- Learning profiles
- Portfolios
- Choice boards
- Learning menus

Step Five: Assessing Outcomes

Definition

Students reflect on:

- Progress
- Learning outcomes
- Goal completion

Examples

- Learning journals
- Guided reflection prompts
- Flip/video reflections
- Concept mapping
- Self-assessment rubrics
- Conferences and discussions

SDL in Action

What We Observed

Teachers reported:

- Increased student engagement
- Greater ownership
- Improved reflection
- More intentional goal-setting

Student Impact

Students became:

- More independent
- More confident
- Better problem-solvers

"I saw higher engagement, better quality of projects being turned in, and it's kind of cool to see their own internal growth as we look to build those lifelong learners. I feel like aspects of education like this enable them to really see it and value what they can do and what they can get out of their time here with us in these walls."

Collaborative Application

Small Group Discussion

1. Reflect on your self-assessment and find an area for growth.
2. Choose at least ONE step of the SDL model.
3. Discuss:
 - What would this look like in your classroom?
 - What scaffolds would students need?
 - What challenges might arise?
4. Prepare to share one idea with the group.

Reflection and Action Step

1

Strategy

What is one SDL strategy you will implement?

2

Action

What is your first step?

**Self-directed learners are
developed through intentional
design — not chance.**

QUESTIONS?

Conclusion



*The **ETL project** confirmed the need for educator professional development that is:*

- *Relevant to each teacher's classroom*
- *Values teachers' time*
- *Emphasizes autonomy*

*The **Innovation Cohort** represents the next generation of the ETL project and showcases **TDPL** as a sustainable, scalable alternative to traditional professional development.*

Key takeaways

- ✓ **Teacher agency drives engagement and growth**
- ✓ **Micro-credentials support authentic classroom application**
- ✓ **Coaching support is vital for TDPL implementation**
- ✓ **Flexibility increases sustainability**

Resources

Effective Teacher Professional Development

Darling-Hammond, L., Hyler, m., & Gardner, m. (2017). Learning policy institute.

https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/effective_teacher_professional_development_report.pdf

Digital Promise

Micro-credentials. (2025)
<https://digitalpromise.org/initiative/micro-credentials/>

Self-Directed learning: a Guide for Learners and Teachers

Knowles, m. (1975). Cambridge book company.

The Impact Cycle: What Instructional Coaches Should Do To Foster Powerful Improvements In Teaching

Knight, j. (2018). Corwin.

Reflective Teaching: An Introduction (2nd Ed.)

Zeichner, K., & Liston, D. (2014). Routledge.