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FULL TRANSCRIPT:

Karen Marklein: Hello. Welcome to the Ayers All Access Podcast brought to you by the Ayers Institute for Learning & Innovation. This podcast is a chance for us to help you access compelling people, current topics, practical tips, and innovative solutions— all related to the field of education. To find out more about this podcast and all the work of the Ayers Institute, check out our website at AyersInstitute.org. You can also find us on Twitter and Facebook at @AyersInstitute.

I'm Karen Marklein, Director of Programs at the Ayers Institute for Learning & Innovation. Thanks for joining us this week for an 'always learning' episode focused on professional learning that results in teacher ownership of learning. So much attention has been devoted to student ownership of learning, and we know that that's very important. But we would also assert the importance of planning for professional learning with teacher ownership of their own learning in mind. So we have invited Dr. Rachael Milligan, Assistant Dean for Program Innovation in the College of Education at Lipscomb University and Director of the Ayers Institute for a conversation regarding this important shift in planning for professional learning.

Rachel, thank you for joining us today.

Rachael Milligan: Well, thank you for having me. I'm so excited to be here.

Karen Marklein: Yes. So, Rachael, I know in your work, a lot of our work is focused on professional learning. That's one of the things that we really enjoy doing. And so, what is your favorite thing about leading or planning for professional learning?

Rachael Milligan: Well, you know, that's an interesting question. It's a big question because I have a lot I think I have a lot of favorite things, especially when I think back to all of our partnerships that we've had in professional learning over the years. But I think if I had to distill it down a little bit, my favorite thing is when— as a professional learning leader— you can really

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sense that what you're talking about and the way you're talking about it are making a real time difference.

It's almost an electricity in the room, you know. And that only happens through authentic community, which can sometimes be really hard to accomplish when as a professional learning leader, you might be entering into a roomful of strangers. And you have to build that community really quickly. And, you know, there's a lot of ways to do that. But once that community is built, just that those 'aha moments' that that arise from, you know, maybe a group was a little bit resistant at first, or maybe it's an individual who never thought professional learning related to them. Like they always kind of came in with, well, this is going to be about something else. You know, I can think of several individuals who might be singletons in their school, right? Maybe a construction teacher or the business teacher or something like that. But when they are in a moment and you can sense that whatever you're discussing, they're making those connections to— that can be really powerful.

So, the same way that K-12 educators get excited when students begin to get something, when those participants begin to make those connections that lead to real changes in their practice, that's so exciting. And the bonus of that is as a professional learning leader, it's really fun to learn alongside people in that experience. You know, I always come away with when I hear somebody make a connection or, they say, "Oh, this, this goes right along with this other initiative that we're looking for." I come away learning a lot and making connections myself. And so it's truly that community that's built that's so exciting.

Karen Marklein: Yeah, it's obvious that it's exciting for you. You have such a big smile on your face and you know, I've experienced a lot of that alongside you. You know, people come up at the end and they want to talk to us and just really thank us for how they have felt in this session today. So we know all of that is really, really important.

All right. So, that kind of leads us into a more focused conversation that this episode is all about. How do we make sure that teachers are owning their own professional learning? And so, in a nutshell, what do we mean by that? So, when we say, "we want teachers to own their own professional learning," what do we mean?

Rachael Milligan: That's a good question. I think a launching point is to make sure that we're not just talking about engagement in learning, because that that excitement and that palpable feeling that that I talked about a moment ago, that could that could just be engagement. Like we have created this fun experience for us to come together. But ownership is really that next step. And so when an educator is able to make an immediate connection to existing ideas, initiatives, problems they're dealing with, projects that they've already got going on. And then they're excited about taking the next step into putting that learning into practice. Whether that be forming a team or creating a plan, whatever that might be, that's when that ownership really begins to take root.

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So you asked for a nutshell and I gave you a long answer. But I would say, in a nutshell, educator ownership of learning means making those meaningful connections, being excited about it, and then translating that into concrete next steps.

Karen Marklein: Yeah, yeah. And those— to paraphrase a little bit. Those concrete next steps are really, to me, the big shift. It's not just "let's have a conversation" or, you know, ""let's all get excited about something, but "what are we going to do differently because we've been exposed to this learning?"

Rachael Milligan: Well, and something you just said makes me think back to— I mentioned individuals who professional learning didn't feel like it was very meaningful to them historically and then maybe they're able to make that connection. So I mentioned a construction teacher a minute ago. You know, I remember working with this professional learning community (PLC) of which this construction teacher was a part. And in that moment, we— in those meetings together, we decided we were going to focus on something very specific. A strategy that we could try in our various contexts as teachers, and then come back and share.

And so when you when you mentioned action steps, next steps, it's how am I going to take this strategy (that might have traditionally been used in the setting or the setting). I'm going to do it in my own setting and then come back and you're going to ask me about it. And my voice is going to be heard and we're going to share about that together. And that's when those next steps almost create that natural bridge to practice so that when we come back again, we have something very meaningful to talk about again. And again, that's where the ownership comes in.

Karen Marklein: Absolutely. It's building that relevance. And building my participation is as important as all of these other people who are either facilitating or participating alongside me.

Rachael Milligan: Right.

Karen Marklein: Absolutely. Okay. So thank you for that. So how then, based on everything that we just said, the nutshell was connections, excitement, and next steps. So when we're considering the planning process for this kind of professional learning, how do we do that? How do we keep these ideas in mind?

Rachael Milligan: Well, when I when I think about leading a professional learning session, you know, let's say we have partnered with a district or we've partnered with the school. And, you know, we talk through what the goals of the session are. I do ask several questions of myself and then of whoever we're partnering with or if we're just creating a session for a general audience. I do ask these questions. "Who is my audience most likely going to be?" Is it going to be just teachers and solely teachers, or is it going to be teachers alongside their leaders? Is it going to be only leaders? Is it going to be a mix of all of these people? Because that really drives whatever the content is, even if it's content that can be applicable across a lot of different groups, that really drives how you approach the group.

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And so another question would be, "Why are these people here?" And this is one that can be easily skipped over. Often the audience question is top of mind for anybody who's planning something like this. But the "why are they here" is really important to think about, because if they have chosen to come, that's one type of audience. If they are required to come for whatever reason, that might be a different kind of audience. And so you really have to consider that.

And then a third question would be, "What will they gain from the time that we have spent together?" So can they use this immediately? What are the next steps that are expected? Will whatever we've talked about together help them reach a goal that they already have?

And so I think asking those three questions at the beginning are really important. And again, those are pretty straightforward. But, you know, we have all encountered professional learning experience where it seems like the answers to those questions didn't seem to be figured out in the planning equation from the beginning. And so just really taking the time to ask those things on the front end makes a big difference.

Yeah, I think I'm going to leave it at that.

Karen Marklein: Okay. Yeah. And I would say even: that seems like a pretty simple list of three questions, but the answers could be complex. You know, and once you get those complex answers, then you can really start to think more specifically.

Rachael Milligan: And I think this plays out in especially in the 'audience' question and the 'why are they there' question. And things like that. You know, often, especially when you're in an education setting, you might have a new initiative where professional learning is necessary. It's required. It's very important for a large portion of your of your school building or your district. But sometimes that can end up (if you're not being intentional about asking those questions at the beginning), that could end up with a physical education teacher having to sit through a session on English Language Arts standards alignment when, you know, there could be some pieces that would make a lot of sense for a P.E. teacher to talk about, but not maybe a whole day training on something that would be more appropriate for ELA teachers. Or you know, I can't tell you how many conversations I've had with school counselors who are who just because of (and in especially in a large district) where the professional learning is taking place in the district, they're told to go here, are told to go there, and then they end up sitting through sessions that aren't relevant to them at all. And so we definitely want to avoid that if possible.

Karen Marklein: Yeah. And so even, you know, even when we ask these questions and we have answers, there are some surprises.

Rachael Milligan: Oh, yeah. Absolutely.

Karen Marklein: So, how do you plan for that?

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Rachael Milligan: Well, you know. I'm thinking of a time that, you and I've encountered several times— especially when you're doing professional learning at the beginning of a school year. There's so many logistical concerns that are taking place in a school or taking place in a district. And so sometimes announcements are made. Or changes are happening that happen at the beginning of every school year. And then we get to the session and the folks who are in there have just been given some really bad news. Or they've been given news that isn't necessarily bad, but it's going to be a big shift. And so their mind is totally somewhere else for the for the moment.

And so that's a surprise that as a professional learning facilitator, you have to you have to just kind of anticipate that those things are going to happen. I mean, you also have to anticipate that there could be folks in your session that you didn't think would be there and how can you be prepared to draw those people in? Like I said at the beginning, how can you be prepared to build that community even with people who you didn't know we're going to be there? Or maybe they tell you at the beginning of the day, I've got to go out for a couple hours and then come back or something like that. How are you going to make sure that they still get the most meaningful experience?

Karen Marklein: Yeah. Yeah. So it's really it's just like a classroom, you know?

Rachael Milligan: Exactly. Exactly.

Karen Marklein: You do the planning that you can do and then you're flexible with what you can be flexible with. And, you know, you just really focus on those outcomes.

Rachael Milligan: Right.

Karen Marklein: Absolutely. Okay. So that does kind of lead us to— Okay, then where do I go if I'm if I'm tasked with planning professional learning? Where could I go as like a go to for some information? So what is your go-to source or maybe even a few go-to sources, you know, and you think, okay, this is best practice in professional learning. Where would you suggest our listeners go to?

Rachael Milligan: Well, I think when I think of best practice and professional learning, I immediately think about the Learning Forward as an organization. And, you know, they have actual standards for professional learning that have recently been revised that it's important to look to when you're thinking about providing professional learning to a group of adults.

You know, there are a lot of articles from organizations such as EdWeek, Edutopia, ASCD. But then also the practitioners in the field like Marcia Tate and Malcolm Knowles, who is kind of the father of adult learning theory. These are important ideas. Their ideas are important ideas to ground anything you're planning— in their ideas— and really make sure that you're sticking to those principles as you're planning for your professional learning sessions.

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Karen Marklein: Okay. So once I've found these sources— so what do I do? Like, how, how would you suggest that I distill that into maybe some tips that you have learned some important information that you could give for people who are planning this.

Rachael Milligan: Well, you know, we could talk a long time about the foundational principles of adult learning theory, especially.

Karen Marklein: Yes.

Rachael Milligan: And in fact, that is something that the Ayers Institute offers is our sessions on engaging and keeping that adult learning theory in mind. But I think, you know, distilling all of these different resources down to a few tips: One big one I think that the evidence shows up in research across many different researchers and many different works— is the importance of connecting to the prior knowledge of those that you're working with. We know this with K-12 students that it's important to do that. But especially when you're in a professional learning setting, connecting with adults, to honor that prior knowledge, to honor the background and experience of your learners, and to ask questions that make it known in a very authentic way that you are honoring that prior knowledge, that prior experience, that background, that all the people in the room are bringing to the table. That is critical in building that community early and then allowing the professional learning experience to feel more like it's being led by the collective group. Right. And that's what you want. You want to be a community of learners, not 'the sage on the stage,' right? And so I think that would be the first tip that in everything you read, it's that connection to that prior knowledge, background and experience.

Karen Marklein: Yeah. Okay.

Rachael Milligan: Closely connected with that, I think would be ensuring that whatever content you're presenting is relevant and practical to the learners in the room. You know, we've said this several times already, but if the learners in your professional learning experience— You will have the gamut of learners, right? Those who really love the theory behind whatever you're talking about, those who really love thinking deeply about big picture. But you will also have folks who don't love that and want to get right to the nuts and bolts. And regardless of how many people you have in either of those two camps, everybody one wants to walk away with something that I can use. You know, we get in our feedback forms often, it's like, "I enjoyed this because it's something I can implement tomorrow or I can even implement tonight when I'm working with— going to whatever meeting." And so I think that relevancy and practicality is critical as well.

Another tip, I think, that kind of combines those first two is as you are planning for your professional learning, sometimes I know I tend to over plan as far as content goes. Because you know, you start researching a topic, you start thinking about all the experiences that you've had and you just want to share all of it. And just be like, this is, you know, this is such great information. But sometimes we don't build in that margin to allow those that we are interacting

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with in the professional learning session to be able to discuss and connect with others. And so that is the only way that you're able to ensure that you are connecting to prior knowledge and that you are building in the practicality is if you make sure that you allow for plenty of discussion moments in your professional learning session. So that that can look like everything from a 'turn and talk' to a small group discussion and then a whole group share out. You know, we've done things like a standing conversation, a walking conversation. But, you know, there's so many times that the big questions you posed to the group and then the time and the space you give them to discuss those, that's where the learning and the connection happens. And that's just so powerful.

Karen Marklein: Yeah. And I was also thinking like some concrete things that we have— tools that we have made for ourselves. You know, all those graphic organizers where we've got "here's a launching point, here's a discussion point, and here's my own thinking about that." You know, how can we make that thinking that they're doing really relevant to them?

Rachael Milligan: Right.

Karen Marklein: So we've even done some work in that way. Okay. Any more tips?

Rachael Milligan: I think a tip that's often overlooked, but one that I know I really appreciate and we know from the data that we get from all of our participants is that people really connect with humor, with storytelling, with lived experience and sharing those things. I think it's a way to build empathy among a group. It's another way, you know, again, to build that community instantly. Because when you have a shared experience or you're able to, you know, give an illustration through a story and people say, "Oh, I've, you know— that that really resonates with me." Or they're able to laugh. You know, that's just that that's part of the joy of teaching. I mean, I love doing that and that works well in the K-12 classroom as well.

But truly, when adults are able to get together and talk about important and meaningful things and also intersperse humor and storytelling and just loving to hear other people's ideas through that, that really helps the information that you're trying to share to stick with the person long term. Because they might not remember, you know, the five main points that you gave. They might not remember the ten steps toward X, Y, Z. But they will likely remember the story you shared to illustrate those points. And then they can connect that back to that later.

Karen Marklein: Absolutely. And I know, like just one real simple thing that we always do is on our objective slide: We have we list our objectives very clearly. They're measurable, they're clear. And then we always put "have fun" right at the bottom. And so it's just important to say, like, we're setting the stage where we're going to enjoy the day. As your facilitators, we want you to enjoy the day. This is a joyful learning space.

Rachael Milligan: Right.

Karen Marklein: So, yes, easy to do that.

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Rachael Milligan: Yeah. When we view one another as human beings who are learning together and give permission, like you said from the very beginning, that we're going to have fun today. It just sets the expectation that this is going to be a good time.

Karen Marklein: So absolutely. Okay. So I know something that connects. Something that a lot of people talk to you about when they come up to— either at the beginning or during the break. We always have music playing. When people are coming into the room or taking a break. And so how important is the incorporation of music and how do you go about doing that?

Rachael Milligan: It's really important to me. I use music all the time. I use it in the graduate courses I teach. I used it when I was in the K-12 classroom, and I use it every professional learning session. So it feels awkward to not have music now. And I think that it goes a long way into creating that warm environment. You know, this is a space where we're not uptight, we're not stuffy. We're going to talk about important things. But we are going to come in and enjoy engaging in these sometimes hard conversations together. And the music helps set the stage for that.

You know, if practically if you are, you know, setting up for a full day professional learning, maybe you're, you know, getting your PowerPoint ready, you're setting out your materials. If the room is dead silent and people are filing in, they will continue to be dead silent until it's time to start. But if you have some fun music playing in the background, and it can be from a variety of genres. People, people usually like that too, because they, you know, it kind of gives them a window into your personality. It's a launching point for a conversation to be like, "Oh, I went to so-and-so's concert," you know, and, "Do you like them, too?"

And so and it also just practically is a low level kind of a noise so that people don't feel like they have to just be silent until the session starts. Because if they feel that way, then it takes it takes at least three times as long to get them warmed up, talking. And that's what we want. We want them warmed up and talking in the professional learning session. So we play music at the beginning, we play music during the breaks and we play music at the end of the day. Even instrumental music during discussion times when we're asking folks to produce a product like something on a chart paper or something like that. When you've got several groups talking at once, just some soft instrumental music in the background is helpful, too.

Karen Marklein: Okay. All right. So it's just like setting the stage.

Rachael Milligan: Right!

Karen Marklein: That's what it sounds like to me. Okay. So thank you so much. So we've talked about a lot of different things. A lot of different tips. Ways that you have felt you're focusing on teacher ownership of learning in this. Is there anything before we close that you would want to add?

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Rachael Milligan: Well, I would say that— you know, I mentioned this before. In this podcast, short discussion about this, we can't name everything that that has to do with best practice and professional learning. There are, in fact, at Lipscomb University we teach a whole course in principles of adult learning. And the Ayers Institute does a lot of work in this space on preparing leaders, whether they be principals, whether they be leaders in other aspects of school— on grade level chairs, professional learning coordinators— in how to create the best professional learning experience for the educators in your district. And so, the Ayers Institute has some full-day trainings on that, customizable trainings on that. So we'd love to connect with any of our listeners if they would be interested in pursuing more discussion about this.

Karen Marklein: Yes, yes. So it is hard to just capture in this short conversation, but lots of great ideas. And we thank you so much for sharing the information with us today, and especially thank you for all your work in education.

Rachael Milligan: Well, thank you.

Karen Marklein: And to all our listeners, be sure to check out the show notes for this episode where you'll find links to helpful resources and anything we've mentioned today. I hope you've been encouraged and inspired. You can find more episodes of Ayers Institute podcasts at <https://podcast.AyersInstitute.org>, on Apple Podcasts, and anywhere podcasts are found.

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