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Appalachian
STATE UNIVERSITY

Office of Rural Promise

TEACHER-DIRECTED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING (TDPL):

Reimagining Professional Development for Teachers



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Empowering Teacher Learning (ETL) Project was developed in response to growing concerns regarding the effectiveness of traditional professional development (PD), teacher burnout, and instructional inequities in rural schools.

Supported through a five-year, \$12 million Education and Innovation Research (EIR) grant from the U.S. Department of Education, ETL explored how Teacher-Directed Professional Learning (TDPL), grounded in competency-based micro-credentials, could strengthen instructional practice, increase teacher engagement, and improve student outcomes across rural Western North Carolina.

This white paper outlines the ETL framework, implementation structures, coaching model, challenges, and lessons learned to support organizations interested in replicating or adapting the model.



Key Outcomes

- 659 total participants
- 1,253 micro-credentials completed
- 65% of participants completed at least one micro-credential
- 30% completed all three micro-credentials
- \$975,401 distributed directly to participating educators
- Preliminary indicators suggest significant growth in self-directed learning and teacher self-efficacy

Unlike traditional compliance-driven professional development, ETL centered teacher agency, flexibility, and classroom application. Teachers identified their own professional learning goals, selected micro-credentials aligned to their needs, implemented new strategies in real classrooms, and demonstrated competency through evidence and reflection.



THE CHALLENGE

Traditional teacher professional development has long struggled to produce sustained changes in instructional practice. Many educators describe conventional PD as:

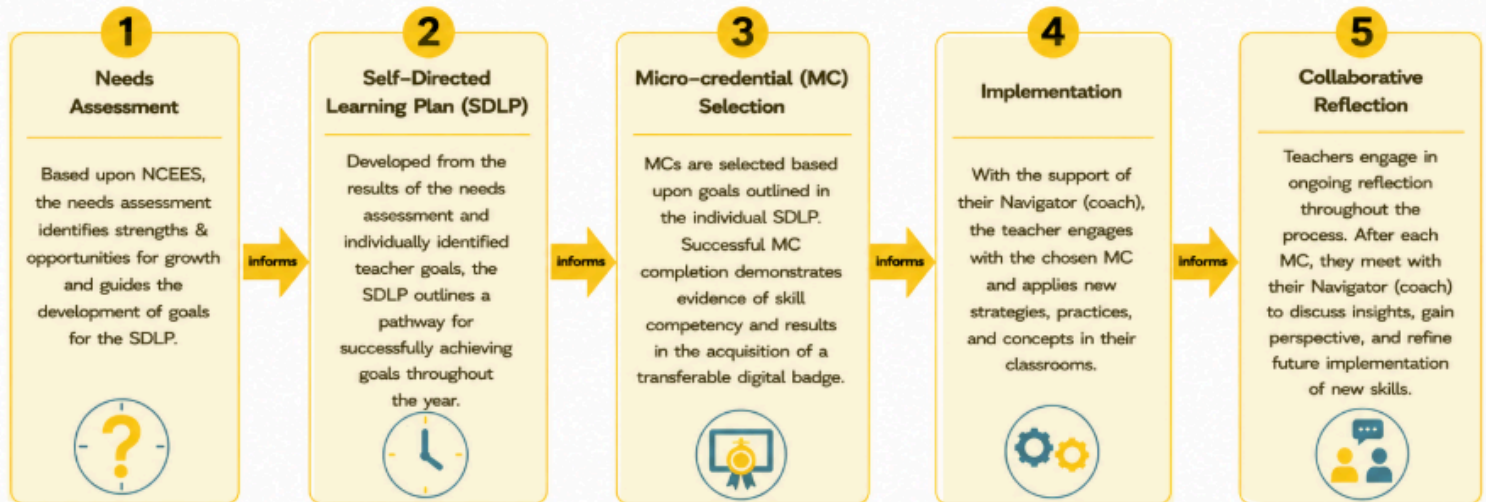
- Compliance-driven
- One-size-fits-all
- Disconnected from classroom realities
- Time-based rather than competency-based
- Difficult to access in rural settings

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 FRAMEWORK

Teacher Directed Professional Learning (TDPL) Framework



KNOWLES'S DEFINITION OF SDL

- 1** diagnosing learning needs
- 2** formulating learning goals
- 3** identifying resources for learning
- 4** implementing appropriate learning strategies
- 5** evaluation learning outcomes

ON-GOING INDIVIDUALIZED COACHING SUPPORT



Program Navigators support teachers throughout the process and are central to their success.

GUIDE & COACH



Navigators guide teachers through the processes.

They translate micro-credential prompts & rubrics into actionable steps, provide timely, non-evaluative feedback, encouragement, & problem solving support



SUPPORT AUTONOMY

Navigators listen, ask reflective questions, & provide opportunities for voice & choice. They help teachers move forward at a pace & in a way that works for the individual.



SCAFFOLD & CONNECT

Navigators tailor support to each teacher's circumstances by providing individualized scaffolding as well as creating templates for drafting responses, curating "tips & tricks," making videos, sharing examples, & connecting teachers for peer-to-peer collaboration.



MAINTAIN MOMENTUM



Consistent accessibility via email & regular in-person check-ins build momentum, increase accountability, & establish trust.

1

NEEDS ASSESSMENT

2

SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING PLAN (SDLP)

3

MICRO-CREDENTIAL (MC) SELECTION






4

IMPLEMENTATION

5

COLLABORATIVE REFLECTION

CORE COMPONENTS

-  **Needs Assessment – based on NCEES SOLs**
-  **Self-Directed Learning Plan (SDLP)**
-  **Individualized Coaching & Structured Support**
-  **Micro-credentials**
-  **Collaborative Reflection**

Needs Assessment

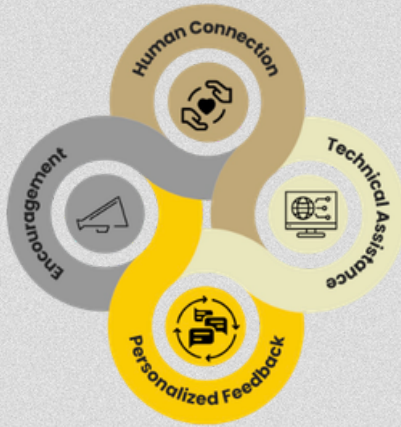
The needs assessment aligned closely with the North Carolina Educator Effectiveness System (NCEES) standards of learning (SOLs). This alignment provided teachers with meaningful data about their strengths and areas for growth and ensured seamless coherence with school-level Professional Development Plans (PDPs). Ideally, teachers would be able to use their completed micro-credentials to meet both the needs of our program and the requirements of their individual PDPs.

SDLP

Teachers used information gained from the needs assessment to develop a Self-Directed Learning Plan (SDLP), which served as a personalized roadmap through the ETL program for the school year. The SDLP anchored professional learning in teachers' immediate contexts and supported their intentional selection of micro-credentials to align with individual goals and with broader school improvement efforts.

Individualized Coaching & Structured Support

The Navigator Model



At the center of the ETL framework was individualized coaching support through dedicated Navigators.

Why Coaching Matters

Teachers were significantly more likely to complete micro-credentials and implement new practices when they had:

- Accessible support
- Non-evaluative feedback
- Flexible pacing
- Relationship-centered coaching

Central to the success of this model was individualized support provided through a dedicated “Navigator” (facilitator and coach), whose role was to guide participants through the ETL Project processes. ETL Navigators were well-versed in the Digital Promise micro-credential library and helped translate micro-credential prompts and rubrics into actionable steps for teachers. Navigators provided timely, non-evaluative feedback on written drafts, offered encouragement, and helped teachers problem-solve. Importantly, they supported teachers without diminishing their autonomy by listening, asking reflective questions, and helping teachers move forward at a pace that worked for them. ETL Navigators served as thought-partners and tailored their support to each teacher’s circumstances. This personalization increased the likelihood of successful completion (Knight, 2018).

Navigators also employed a range of scaffolding strategies to reduce cognitive load. These included creating reusable drafting templates, curating “tips and tricks” resources, developing short how-to videos, and offering examples of successful submissions. When possible, Navigators connected teachers who were working on similar micro-credentials to promote peer collaboration across classrooms, schools, and districts. Consistent accessibility of Navigators via email and through brief monthly check-ins helped maintain momentum, accountability, and trust. Interactions were intentionally focused on maximizing success and providing objective feedback, even when revisions or resubmissions were required.

ON-GOING INDIVIDUALIZED COACHING SUPPORT



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MAINTAIN MOMENTUM



Consistent accessibility via email & regular in-person check-ins build momentum, increase accountability, & establish trust.



Benefits

- Flexible
- Personalized
- Competency-based
- Research-backed



Micro-Credentials (MCs)

MCs are digital certifications for specific skills that allow learners to prove competency through evidence rather than course completion. They are skill-specific, research-backed and competency-based (Digital Promise 2025). MCs support TDPL by enabling teachers to work at their own pace and on their own schedules, an essential feature given the competing demands of teaching.

Collaborative Reflection

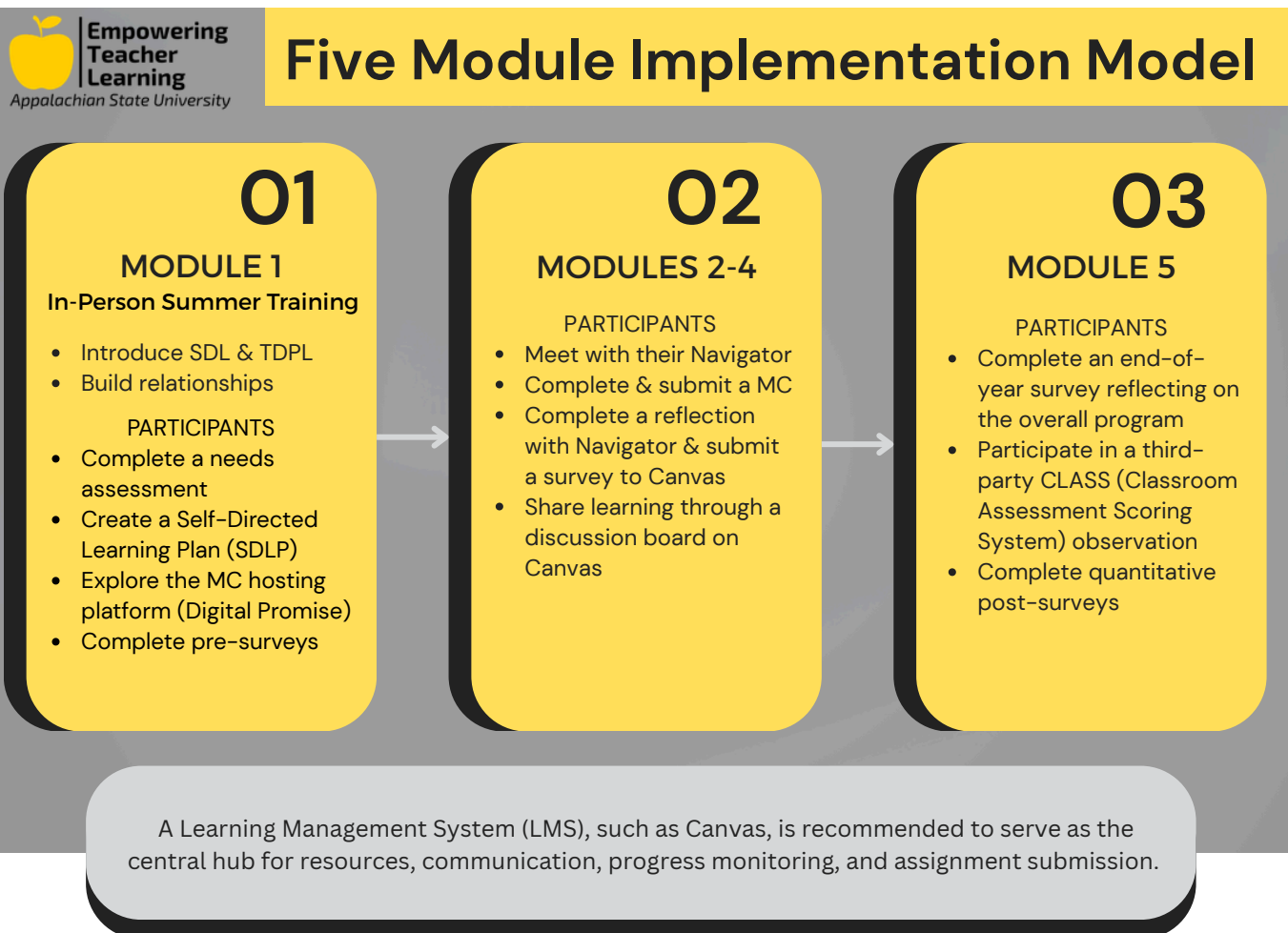
Malcolm Knowles identified self-evaluation as a critical component of self-directed learning and professional growth (Knowles, 1975). For teachers, reflection is the process of examining instructional decisions, evaluating their impact on student learning, and identifying opportunities for improvement. Within the ETL Framework, teachers engaged in self-reflection following each micro-credential and participated in collaborative reflection with their Navigator to analyze implementation, gain additional perspective, and inform future practice. (Zeichner & Liston, 2014).



IMPLEMENTATION

GOAL

Transform professional learning from a time-based, compliance-driven model to a teacher-directed, competency-based system that values demonstrated practice, impact, and educator agency. To achieve this, the ETL Team developed a five module implementation model.



*A Stipend was awarded for successful completion of each of the modules.



CHALLENGES

COVID-19 Pandemic

The ETL Project was born during one of the most disruptive periods in modern education.

Senate Bill 49

Legislative changes required major adjustments to:

- Student survey procedures
- Classroom video collection
- Observation processes

“Flexibility allowed teachers to continue professional learning regardless of outside influences.”

Hurricane Helene

Every participating district was impacted by the historic storm in Western North Carolina.

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

RECOMMENDATIONS

01

TEACHER AGENCY MATTERS

Professional learning becomes more meaningful when teachers direct their own growth.

02

COACHING IS ESSENTIAL

Individualized support dramatically increases implementation and completion.

03

FLEXIBILITY INCREASES PARTICIPATION

Teachers need professional learning structures that adapt to real-life demands.

04

COMPETENCY MATTERS MORE THAN SEAT TIME

Demonstrated application provides stronger evidence of growth than attendance hours.

05

ADMINISTRATOR BUY-IN IS CRITICAL

School leadership support significantly impacts participation and sustainability.

06

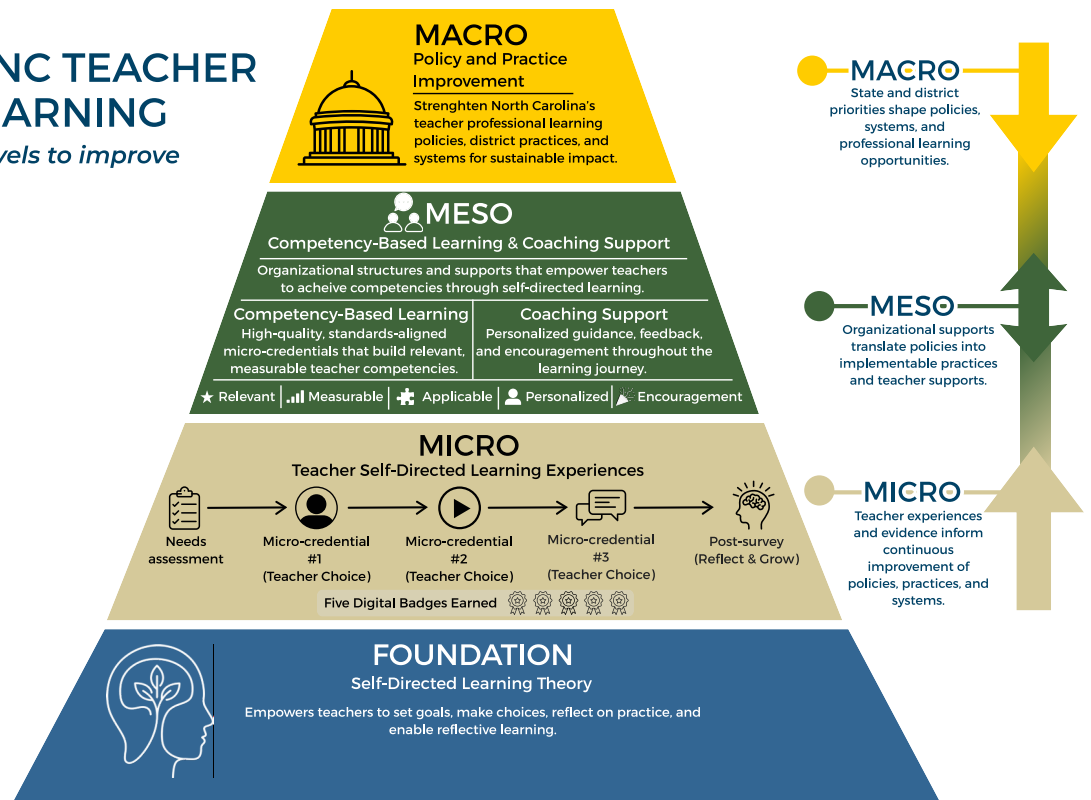
REFLECTION DEEPENS LEARNING

Structured self-reflection strengthens instructional transfer and metacognition.

FUTURE IMPACT

STRENGTHENING NC TEACHER PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Dynamic interaction across levels to improve policy, practice and outcomes.



This project adopts self-directed learning theory as its model for teacher-directed professional learning. We posit that our Framework for TDPL will impact educational systems improvement across micro, meso, and macro levels. This infographic demonstrates how the five core components of the ETL Framework support the professional learning process: needs assessment, self-directed learning plans, coaching support for micro-credentials, competency-based micro-credentials, and self-reflection. The model reflects the understanding that sustainable improvement depends on ongoing interaction among individual experiences, organizational supports, and broader policy systems.

FUTURE IMPACT

At the micro level, teachers engage in individualized professional learning experiences through needs assessments, competency-based micro-credentials, coaching support, and reflective practice. At the meso level, organizational structures and supports—including coaching, implementation guidance, and competency-based learning pathways—help translate professional learning into instructional practice. At the macro level, state, district, and institutional priorities shape policies, systems, and professional learning opportunities that support sustainable improvement.

A central feature of the framework is the continuous interaction across all three levels. State and district priorities help guide professional learning design and support structures, while teacher experiences, implementation evidence, and reflective feedback inform future professional learning practices and systems improvement efforts across rural North Carolina.

By integrating self-directed learning, competency-based micro-credentials, and coaching support within a micro-meso-macro framework, this approach provides a scalable model for strengthening digital professional learning while supporting both teacher growth and long-term systems improvement.

CONCLUSION

The Empowering Teacher Learning (ETL) Project demonstrated that Teacher-Directed Professional Learning (TDPL) can provide a sustainable, scalable alternative to traditional professional development models. By centering teacher agency, competency-based micro-credentials, individualized coaching, and reflective practice, ETL created a framework that was flexible, classroom-embedded, and responsive to educator needs. Grounded in self-directed learning theory, our framework recognizes teachers as active professionals who learn most effectively when they can identify goals, make meaningful learning choices, reflect on practice, and apply learning directly to instruction. Rather than relying primarily on isolated workshops or compliance-oriented professional development, the framework emphasizes ongoing, personalized, and practice-based digital professional learning.

Key Takeaways

- Professional learning is more impactful when teachers direct their own growth.
- Competency-based micro-credentials promote authentic classroom application.
- Individualized coaching and reflection strengthen implementation and engagement.
- Flexible learning structures increase accessibility and sustainability, particularly in rural contexts.
- Teacher-centered professional learning can support instructional improvement, teacher retention, and student outcomes.

The ETL Solution

The ETL framework provides a practical model for organizations seeking to:

- Shift from compliance-based PD to competency-based growth
- Increase teacher engagement and ownership
- Implement scalable coaching and micro-credential systems
- Align professional learning with classroom practice and school improvement goals

Call to Action

Educational organizations, districts, state agencies, and institutions of higher education are encouraged to adapt and implement the TDPL Framework as a practical model for creating flexible, competency-based professional learning systems that support both educator growth and student success.

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