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Josh Flores: Thank you for subscribing and sharing our CEL Talks podcast. I am Josh Flores, your host for season one. Each episode was recorded live at the 2018 CEL Annual Conference in Houston, Texas, and features speakers, keynotes, and members of CEL, the Conference on English Leadership. We hope our conversations ignites and supports conversations with your colleagues at your schools or wherever you may be listening to this. It's a great PLC tool. If you want to introduce something different to your PLCs. I think it's a great support tool for that, to start conversations that maybe you are already having or want to have. And we hope that you find all sorts of unique ways to use these podcast episodes. It's chock full of information. I had a lot of fun just talking shop about our profession with professionals this year, and I look forward to continuing this podcast series.

Josh Flores: Speaking of sharing and continuing conversations, if you would like to know more about CEL, you can find us on the Twitter at @ncte\_cel. Or, you can search for the hashtag #CELchat, and you'll find our members using that hashtag and sharing and having conversations. You can also visit ncte.org, the NCTE main page, and find us under the groups tab. Here's where you can get all the information and get prepared for our 2019 Fall Conference. It's happening in November, 24th through the 26th in Baltimore, Maryland. And get this, our theme this year, Creating Opportunity: Leadership to Ignite Movements and Momentum. I'm excited. So, hope you enjoy that. And I hope you enjoy this inaugural podcast episode.

Josh Flores: Please don't forget to subscribe and share with a teacher friend that you love and give us some feedback. Keep the conversation going with us too. Engage with us on the Twitter. So, thanks again and enjoy this episode of CEL Talks.

## **CEL Talks podcast: Season 1, Episode 7**

### **Extreme Choice with Karen and David Reed Nordwall**

Josh Flores: That's it. Yes. Yes. It's the net. They win. Yeah, it's on. So, thanks for agreeing to be on the podcast.

Karen: Thank you. Happy to be here.

David: Thanks for having us. Are we close enough?



- Josh: Yeah, just lean in and I'll start talking. Do you mind introducing yourselves?
- Karen: Hello, I'm Karen Reed Nordwall, English department chair at Groves High School in Beverly Hills, Michigan, for Birmingham public schools.
- David: And I'm David Reed Nordwall. I'm associate principal, which is another term for assistant principal, at Bloomfield Hills high school in Michigan.
- [crosstalk]
- Josh: That's awesome. So, Birmingham . . . I'm in Birmingham. Do you know that?, Birmingham, Alabama.
- David: The real Birmingham. Ours is. Yeah, that's the way we think of it. Even in Birmingham.
- Josh: Oh yeah?
- David: We think of yours as the real Birmingham.
- Josh: Oh, I think of as real Birmingham, but I just got there too. I'm still getting to know my way around. You just finished presenting, right?
- David: We did.
- Josh: And how'd that go?
- Karen: It went well. We were talking about how to have students be in charge of their own learning. We talked to the, about how to design courses and how I started originally was out of the unit based on some of the stuff I learned at CEL and NCTE about how to do like student choice. And so then it evolved. I showed them the evolution from a one unit to a *whole course* of a class where it's extreme choice for students. They can write about any different thing that they want. They have to do a presentation, they have to do a project, they have to do a paper on it, but they have time. 50% of the time is in class with me and 50% is a hybrid blended time where they can go out in the community, do internships, work, create, all this great stuff, as long as they meet these certain criteria.
- Karen: And we were talking about how my students, especially my boys just thrive on it. They love it. They'll do anything. I have the highest grades I've ever had because my boys *will not* get below a B because if you get a B or below I won't let you blend anymore. And so they always are staying up, working really hard, making sure that they get everything in, and these are seniors. So it surprises people that seniors can be so active in their learning, but they love it.
- Josh: But they're really bought in, I mean they're invested in their learning this way and that choice.



- Karen: They are, yep.
- Josh: Okay. So you did this as a senior class. I was wondering what the age range was cause I find that choice is really tricky. I think it's good for all students, but as was demonstrated by—was it LaVonna our keynote—at lunch?
- David: At lunch keynote, yeah.
- Josh: I think that she was talking about the importance of choice with her younger children. And I find that it works with my younger children, if I give them choice within these boundaries. But then like you're able to give so much more open choice with older kids.
- David: But the thing too, like as Karen's designed it and we're talking and this was a part, like when you say how did it go, there's so many things we want to talk about in a session. And one of the things I wanna talk about is, here we are at CEL and it's really important, we're all talking about choice, but we're also saying it's still not very common in the schools. So they don't know how to choose or they haven't been given the opportunity to choose. And so when we expect them to be super delighted, they're in an unknown place a lot, even at the high school level.
- David: So we need to look back and say, when *did* students start choosing and how experienced are they? And then meet them in that too because you're not often the savior. When you come in and give kids choice, they start saying things like, "You're not teaching" and "You're not telling me what to do". And they're floundering and they're really frustrated. So the choice part is something, even with these seniors, you need to help meet them in some place and make the choice, while individualized, safe. They need to be successful in it, and it's not easy.
- Karen: Yeah. And now the class has been running three years, so it has a reputation. So that really does help students think about it before they even come into my class. And so they are coming in with more ideas than they were like the first year. They've heard what other people have done and they've kind of come on ideas that they want to do.
- Josh: Well, don't you think that we've handicapped them in a way because teachers are having to fulfill all these objectives for teacher observations and in some districts they're forced to balance their instruction with these curriculum maps or pacing guides. And so they haven't had time to really think about the actual learning going on where you can provide those opportunities for choices. So now you get these seniors that—it is really sad and probably we have handicapped them like when they leave us, they're not gonna know how to make decisions.
- David: They're frozen Yeah, it's overwhelming.



- Karen: My students say, when I ask them on the first day, “What have you heard about this class?” And they're like, “I've heard that this is the first class that teaches you how to be an *adult*,” which I love.
- David: Which is all about choice. We handicap them and that's a difficult one too, but like Karen's doing right now, and in mine, in the session, we're working on putting this thing *in*, so we're trying to figure it out and Karen's in the process of working through it. But what happens when you give choice to kids? How do you grade that? How do you assess that? How do you identify that this kid's choice is at this level, whatever the level is, and this kid's choice is at *that* level. It's outside of our boundaries and it's very uncomfortable.
- David: So we don't just handicap them it, it's really more convenient for us where it fits with this process. You really start to blow the whole thing wide open and now you're in trouble. But what's cool about it is you start having mastery conversations as opposed to it's an A, I was hearing, “Now I'm there”, and it starts moving you in the directions but all of them can be extremely uncomfortable. And I think, that's the part of, like, it can be a great leverage, but you've gotta understand the complexity of choice. Their first reaction's not going to be happy with you. Some are ready for it, but you gotta be ready for a lotta kids and a lotta parents to be really frustrated and teachers to be completely stressed out.
- Josh: Well sure. It's new.
- David: And they don't say “tell me what to do”. If we say it's right for kids, kids will say, “Tell me what to do”. And when you're working with teachers they'll say, “Tell me what to do”. They'll say, “Tell me what to do”, they don't fully mean it, but they also do.
- Karen: Yeah, my students, one of the things I think I told you about last time, Josh, was the idea that I have them create their own rubrics, and that is one of the hardest things they do. And it has to follow the Common Core State Standards. So these are the ones for writing, these are the ones for reading, presentation, you know? And so they decide which ones are most relevant to them and a lot of them choose pretty much the same ones over and over. And we work together to grade them, and they say that's definitely one of the hardest things, is actually trying to do that. And I always say that I make the project like 10% of their grade because sometimes they fail miserably at it, and I don't want them not to graduate. So it's one section of it because it is something, I'm asking them to take a huge risk, and they could fail miserably. And so that is a way, it's my safety net for them.
- Karen: And I also ask them to do always a robust purpose. Some student, I would give the example, wanted to do hair braiding, and I was like, hair braiding? You want to learn to braid hair for a senior project? I don't think so. But when I asked her, “Well, why?” She said, “Well, growing up, my dad never knew how to braid hair. I never had this gorgeous



braids like all the other girls had because I had a single father and I've always wanted to learn how to hair braid." And I'm like, "Okay, that's great."

Karen: "So, now your robust purpose is, you go out in the community and you're teaching single fathers how to braid their daughters' hair." So that's what she did. She learned everything about hair braiding, research classes . And then she had to go out into the community and teach single fathers how to braid their hair. And they did.

David: Oh my gosh, that would be so fun.

Josh: So, one of the things we talk about starting with the *yes* and then so *how*, and that's where you gotta help them when you say yes to them is like "And then what are you gonna do?" Cause if you're going to give people the chance to choose, *any* choice has to be right and this is really problematic. So you're going to have a kid to choose to do nothing. You have to say "I am going to honor your decision to do nothing right now, but I need to understand what is going on." Cause you also have to operate in a theory that, like LaVonna was saying, it's not about laziness, it's about overwhelm, to not be able to get started, and it's a motivation or an ability issue. And then you have to meet them at that place and then start moving them forward.

Josh: You start with the yes to whatever it is, and then you have to have a follow-up because another thing you're doing is you're trying to identify the teacher's role. It's an extremely different role. I'm not deliverer of information. What am I now? If the kids can learn anything—and so in this English classroom you could braid hair, you could start a nonprofit, you could learn how to play the guitar. Another one was, he's getting invested in the campaigning process. He works with a candidate, brings them in and he's canvassing . . . super cool. This is an English classroom. There's no room for me to deliver English content in the traditional way, but what's my purpose? And so at the same time, when you think, like, you start to get really excited, you get to the edge of a cliff of the unknown, on the teacher standpoint, and it's really hard to figure out what's on the other side of that. Is it a drop off? Is it just something I can't see? What's there?

David: I imagine that it's especially difficult and can be . . . it almost can freeze a person if they haven't seen it succeed before. Like that's a scary thought. And I think especially with students, if they haven't had that practice where they get some decision and their curriculum. And I was gonna actually ask you about the rubrics cause that's where my mind was going the first place. I think of where I would see students practicing choices in their writing, but then if the rubric is poor and weak, then their writing is even . . . it has no choice in it. It has to follow this formula.

Karen: Right, Yeah. So the rubrics are for projects. I have a rubric for the grading of the writing, but for the projects they design their own rubric and I have to approve it first. So . . . I'm always watching, then it can't just be, that I braided a hair, you know what I mean? So it has to fit at least *three* Common Core State Standards for writing or reading.



- Josh: I mean, I think that's also part of what could help and empower students a little bit, you're transparent with them. You *show* them: this is a policy document, these standards, and I want you to be aware of them. I bet that happens very rarely.
- David: It does but another thing we do is like you talk about—there has to be some identification of “This is a strong example of this thing.” And you try to find out what that is. So when you see excellent writing, you have a lot of choice within it, but there's some key components to excellent writing, and you have those conversations. You start talking about it, and then you talk about why you did some of the certain things and you have a rich conversation about it. You're naming a different problem, which is a formula. And even project-based learning starts following formulas and we just keep going to this place reminds me of a conversation we had about our daughter and I don't know if it was Penny, or I think it was Pernille, talking about her daughter picking a book that was too difficult.
- David: And it reminds me of our daughter who picked one of the Harry Potters that was too far out of her range. And as parents we were conflicted because it was a frustration. And so what we wanted to do was make her successful and we kept trying to encourage her to pick a different book and we got in this war and we could see that we are hurting her, but we also knew that she needed to be in this place of success. It's really confusing. So it's like in the best interest as teachers ,we over scaffold stuff.
- David: And rather than allowing them to really enjoy being like frustrated and lost, we give them too clear of examples, and next thing we know it became a formula and project-based became formula and writing became a formula and presentations became a formula and it just keeps happening again and again. And it's for the best of reasons. So it's like having somebody watching your back and being like, “Are you sure this is helping the child be successful because you're making it inauthentic.” Like it's the real world again and because you're mentioning that it's, like, preparing them to be an adult. It's really complex and really, it's more of like, nope, nope, nope, nope, yes. I was like, you know, it didn't work, didn't work, didn't work—now it worked. And it wasn't because it fit into a formula. It had some other element. And it's trying, it's actually, somebody like complexifying or making him comfortable in the complexity. It's like we over—you were saying this—we oversimplify stuff as a teacher. Actually kids are hardwired for complexity and they like difficulty, like puzzles. They don't like being completely lost, but they do like a puzzle. So it's like learning how to *puzzle* and be kind of successful in that.
- Josh: Yeah, I agree. I am always concerned that I'm oversimplifying things, and I think the worst thing you could do is put too many baby steps to the point where it's just spoon-feeding the kid, they don't have any time to do their own thinking. In whatever subject matter, really. But this is a pretty complex topic. So, how did you present it today? Can you walk me through like describe your presentation.
- David: First we bickered [laughter] a little bit. That's because our processes are extremely different.



- Karen: Yes. I like to plan everything months in advance and David is more, he's got a little bit of ADD, so he likes to kind of think on the fly. But what's great about him is he'll synthesize what everybody is saying. He brings in what everybody's learning, like Pernille and what Penny said, and so many of the people today, he had quotes from what we had been watching the last couple of days. So that's great. I'm more of a . . . I want to plan a little bit more. But anyways, well what we did is we talked about like my process was I was a teacher who wanted to *do* some of these things that I was learning at CEL and NCTE. Giving that choice and ownership over to kids, whereas in David's school it's more, the administration has decided that they want to do it. That was their vision. And so now he's organizing it, you know, with a team of teachers. So it's just a different thing.
- Karen: Whereas for me it was like from a teacher begging for this and his was just a school redesign. So we kinda presented two different ways to think about it, and we tried to show examples and then would go around and kind of hear what people were talking about, their struggles that they're having in their own schools. Someone talked about, "I can't differentiate," and I was talking about how I do that with Edmodo, really allows me to differentiate and self-pace. So I have some kids that are fast, they're ready to go on and I can just move them right to the next level in Edmodo. And then I've got others who are dealing with so much and they're taking a long time and I can pace them so that other kids aren't getting behind.
- Karen: So it just allows me through that learning system to be able to do that. So we showed that, I talked to other people about that. And now I've got this project, but I don't really know what to do with it. And that was one of the things I'm always working on, I want it to go beyond my classroom and that's still a struggle I'm always working on. So just kind of hearing what people were talking about, letting them talk about their struggles. And then David designed a menu . . . you want to talk about your menu?
- David: Let me take a step back. It's very difficult because we come to . . . like in CEL we're talking, and we're talking about things that we know aren't working and yet they're still being perpetuated. So like one of the ones we had today, I don't know if it was Chris . . . it was our morning keynote, and they're talking about we have a system that perpetuate inequities. But what's fascinating is a system can *disrupt* inequity. And so when it comes to PD, we know that most PD is a waste of money. And I'm just, I'm obsessed with it. Like in my job as an administrator, that's what I've been doing for the last eight years, is basically wasting money. Cause my job has always been instructional components—
- Karen: I don't know about that—
- David: Well, but if you think about you know that the PD is—it's like, when you look at all the research and the amount of change that's happened from it is this . . . I just have this quandary about how is PD most effective?



- David: So one of the things we always try to do is we really want to try to model something that we believe is going to work or at least the next step. We want to try to not perpetuate the thing. So we're also talking about how we generate.
- David: So Karen's excellent at modeling and she'll model this thing, help spark ideas and get you going or we find you need something to get you moving. And I'll be obsessed with generating. It doesn't matter how you deliver it but if it causes something to be implemented, it's successful. And so that's always been one of my measures and you asked us to start this off, how did it go? Not really sure yet, but the goal is that it generates your own original work and then in starting to generate it, you have something that's inevitable to implement and then you're going to be able to do that.
- David: Where went off, though, is some of our buzzwords are *choice*. So we're sitting over at one of the local kitchens, Walker Street Kitchen, has, they have a design-your-own omelet, and we happen to have in Birmingham a design-your-own salad. And I make fun of Karen cause she likes it.
- Karen: It's amazing. Social Kitchen.
- David: She came home this day and she's like, "Most amazing salad you've ever had." I'm like, "That doesn't make sense. Salad?"
- Josh: Shout-out to Social Kitchen.
- David: Right? Salad? How can you say the most amazing salad? That doesn't make sense. And so she takes me over and it's a card. You choose your own options, you go through it, and choice is just central to this thing and none of the options are wrong. And I've never made a salad the same way since, but it's such a different vision of what a restaurant would be, yet with the same kind of concept. They have a kitchen, they have food, and just the element of choice makes it different.
- David: So we, in the second half of the presentation, had a make your own course menu and it had, I don't know, over a hundred selections, just check boxes. I want something that's PBL, I want something that's inquiry, I want something that's an AP level. I want something that's pure elective. I want something that's a mandated course. None of the options are wrong. They're just all possible design elements to a course that you would want to make, and you would go through it, and then you get a printout that shows you what you chose. And in that you kind of get an idea of what it is you're thinking about. And that tends to be one of the tougher things when you're in the first part of it is, what is it I'm really trying to imagine? And when you talk with someone about it, having it be clear, I guess, to be able to kinda clearly articulate this idea so then you can start working on it.
- Josh: So you're piecing all of these elements together with the teachers in your workshop?





- David: We're trying to and, at least, they went through it. They all had this form. It was a Google form they went through. They click these things, they got the results right there. They're kind of looking through them and they can use it either as it is, or we're going to share it so you can see what else somebody else built. You know? It's kinda like if you walked away, you would see if it were like a build-your-own salad, you also get to see what everybody's salad was. And people were talking, they were talking.
- Karen: Yeah. I think what was really helpful for people is that we forced them to narrow it down to like four cornerstone things. What are the most important things? Give me four. And that was hard to do. And it's eye-opening when I look at—when we did it together, trying to figure out what are our four? And that's what you can kind of always have in your vision, up on your desk, these are the four things. And I can look at it, and it . . . is my course hitting these four? These are the four that I've said I believe in. Am I doing this, and how am I doing it daily, weekly to make sure that my students end up leaving my school ready for the world?
- Josh: And even those four things could be different.
- Karen: Right. Yeah. Each person—
- David: They were dramatically different, and even between the two of us, Karen's is a single class, English. The thing I'm looking at, I know, is multiple class in a block and multidisciplinary, team taught. So, that's massive in its difference. Like, hers has to be implemented in one classroom, maybe different teachers. But that. Mine would have to be implemented with three or four teachers in different subject matters and that makes all the difference in the world. And you need to know that. When you're coming into it, you kind of need to know what the scope is you're talking about. You're not *limited* to it, but it's helping you kind of figure out where you're headed.
- Karen: Yep and like I want extreme choice. I want differentiation, I want self-pacing. And I want extreme—[talking over each other]
- David: She just came up with that. I love that. “Extreme choice. “Choice in the classroom, *extreme classroom---*
- Karen: Yeah, like, [in commercial dramatic voice] *EXTREEEEEME* choice. . .
- David: Rockin’ English with extreeeeeeme . . .
- Karen: And I also want it to be blended. So 50% with me, 50% out in the community.
- David: Yep. And I know mine is probably not blended and I was just thinking, it was interesting. I would like to see everybody's. What's been fascinating about this conference is how we've said content matters, but like in this, I know for my cornerstones that we're talking about . . . cornerstone wasn't content specific like in a traditional sense.



- Karen: Correct, yeah.
- David: And . . .so . . . Karen's *was*, to English standards, but like, *choice, project-based learning*, and *blended* were kinda some cornerstone elements to it. *Real-world problem solving, choice* were cornerstone elements to what we've been talking about.
- David: Fascinating how it helps shape it—when you're looking at making a course, you have to bring these other . . .like it sounds like, and across everybody, choice and student ownership is a central element to a program design and that's a new conversation from 15 years ago anyway. There was like, What are your standards? What's your backward design? Where's your curriculum map? And I understand that's still happening ,and actually this conference we're hearing a lot of people do that. But what we've seen, and saw in our session was, when you make student ownership and choice a *cornerstone* of your development of your program, it changes everything. And that's a very high-leverage tool to bring into your lesson design is . . . where in this lesson did I focus on student choice and student ownership? and that's every bit as important as “I read this paragraph.” That's something you bring in and put side-by-side with that.
- David: And then try to legitimize that because, you know, even when we talked about, not necessarily cl— like if you backward design, if you run off copies for all your course all the way till January and you haven't met your kids yet . . . are you making some assumptions here? How could you possibly know?
- Josh: I saw that tweeted out; I thought that was brilliant.
- David: Thank you. Thank you. I got that from Karen, I'm gonna say, so. . . [crosstalk 00:24:31]
- Karen: Niiiiice!
- David: That rocks.
- Josh: That was a good one, yeah. Well, couple things here cause I was taking notes while you were talking. First, a shout-out to Edmodo. Cause you mentioned them and they're a sponsor.
- David: Incredible, incredible to have.
- Josh: Really cool. Really cool. I want to hear about what you weren't able to cover. Cause you also talked about, you briefly mentioned that, but I was just curious cause you mentioned how great PD is. Not really. But have you ever read anything by Peter Cole?
- David: No. Tell me more.
- Josh: Okay, so Peter Cole, I can share it with you or you can actually look it up. But he has a fantastic basis that I use whenever I start a workshop series with the district. And he has



... an article called “Professional Development: A Great Way to Avoid Change.” And that's interesting.

David: What a title!

Josh: Yeah, it's great, he breaks down these 10 contentions about professional development to really rethink how are we engaging in professional development and growth. And how are we really more engaging in professional learning because professional development doesn't develop anybody, and where does learning actually happen? And you know, spoiler alert, a lot of it is in lesson study and what you do in a group, but it's very to your point in what you're presenting. What I find very conflicting in his report is that real change for schools happens because of a team, not for one single person, but also real change happens when the *individual* decides what they want to change about their instruction and in their practices. So you have to have—

David: So the there's a tension between the two . . .yeah. . .

Josh: It's this weird balance like you have to have both team working together towards change, but you also have to have the individual deciding I'm going to change this and it might be completely different from the group.

David: And if you can harness that, I mean that was, when you say what was the overall, like Karen's story in hers that I love to watch as she presents it is, “Here's where I started. I took this one unit, I didn't know what I was doing, but I knew I need to do something different. And I tried something focused on the revitalization of Detroit.” It's got a lot of interest in our area, the kids went, and then when she finished, she was dissatisfied and it grew, it became a unit, it became a course. Then it became a couple of teachers across five sections of the course, and now it's six different teachers in a bunch of different classrooms and a ton of kids. But it was based on what you just described of a single person saying something's not right. But there was an element of harnessing it, harnessing that movement to get it to stick and grow into other classrooms.

David: And I think part of being a leader, if the leaders aren't the one implementing the change, that's why I, I envy the fact that I know it's a lot of work, but you have a classroom, so she's a leader, she does evaluations, but she also *teaches*. To be able to do that is like a hidden secret that a lot of leaders lack, is to be the person who as I go out and kind of go on the single path, it still comes back and affects other classrooms. How do we harness that? So . . .

Karen: Yeah, and I think what was crucial was after . . . I started off with the Detroit movement, but since then kids have taken many different ways. They don't really focus so much, they don't have to focus on Detroit. But what happened was administration liked what they saw. They liked this community outreach. And I've gotten their support and when we did a curriculum redesigned, the other department chair over at the other school was interested in that, had a vision for it. So I did have enough, like three or four plus an



administrator, who was interested in *allowing* the design. So I was very lucky to have my principals and people above me who were able to . . . who saw that vision and wanted to support it.

Josh: So my second question, is there anything that you just ran out of time and didn't get to that you want to elaborate on?

David: all the rest of it?

Karen: Well, I'm looking at some of my slides. I wanted to talk about some of the worries that students had a lot of worries. Teachers had a lot of worries. The kids were nervous about this style of classroom, so a lot of students who would typically take this class jumped into AP lit because they knew what to expect with the AP lit. So there was a lot of fear the first time around and that's normal. So if you ever do design something don't get too nervous that everybody jumps out. They will come around once a year has gone by and they've watched other people and other people have talked about it.

Josh: Yeah, that would be worrisome. Yeah.

Karen: So that was one thing. The project was really scary for people. They were afraid they were gonna fail. Administration was afraid, what if these seniors fail? They're doing a project, and you know. So we have had students that their project has not worked out and so, but they haven't failed the class. We make it like a smaller percentage, like 10% of the grade is based on that so that you're allowed to take a risk. So that was one thing I really want to spend time about that, issues with plagiarism, a little bit more about grading. I wanted to talk about but, um, differentiating and self-pacing through like an LMS system has been the thing, I think, that changed my practice. I mean it takes a lot of time, like every d—so I tell Dave every Saturday morning, while he's sleeping and the girls are sleeping, I'm up and—

Dave: —I don't sleep. I'm working in the yard, I'm cleaning—

Karen: I'm on Edmodo, you know, getting it all prepared so that it looks effortless to the students and to other teachers.

Karen: But the first time around is a lot of work. The second time is revising everything and making it right. Now I'm starting to go, "I feel like I kinda got it," but I mean it is this long process, I think. So it takes a long time, but it's worth it when you see them producing these kinds of things. So I would encourage people to expect it to be hard, you know? And I thought the parents would be against it because sometimes I'm having kids out in the community or. you know, I just wondered how *they* would react to it, but the parents feel like it's, again, that class that helps them how to be a college student and a lot of my students said, "I feel comfortable now going to college. I know that I can do it. I surprised myself that I was able to manage my time and be able to do all of this." So it really helped a lot of students feel a little more confident as they go off.



- Karen: And I was expecting a lot of pushback and I really haven't gotten it. Some of the teachers were wondering, "Oh well is this really an English class? We want to know for sure that the kids are learning." So I might have, like, pushed my kids a little *too* hard. I was looking at like what they were doing in AP and I was kind of expecting like a lot of work just like the AP teachers were, but I wanted to make sure so badly that it was rigorous enough. I didn't want kids going to the other teachers and saying things like, "Oh well I completed it in one hour" or something. I was really nervous for the first years just to make sure that the messaging out to parents and other students and the teachers within the school was a positive message, and they believe it now. Now I've got six teachers who are asking to be a part of it, so they're seeing the benefit to it.
- Josh: Again, it's scary until you can see it.
- Karen: Yeah.
- Josh: And you're showing them. So that's . . . powerful.
- David: Yeah, and when you say what else we could have done, I think, too, the way we designed it was to give them some models and then help people move forward. So, like, this menu idea was simply designed—to break it down, it's the same thing as writer's block. Write a paper. That's . . . to us, when we've been doing it for a while, we know where to start. But when you're looking at again, this wide-open choice thing, and to recognize the same thing is happening to our teachers. Now that we're coming in and there's all this rhetoric around "give choice, give options, give opportunity to students," we're missing the fact that they don't know where to start with that. And it is really overwhelming. If you've just blown open topics, standards, assessment—if you've blown all that wide open, you gotta recognize that there has to be some safe starting point. So we just made this version of an omelet to get a starting point. Once you have a starting point, though, now that you're inside it—and I think that was kind of one of the tricks to this—is now I'm inside and I'm starting to play with this, I'm starting to have more questions.
- David: And they're having great questions too, like they're saying, "Well what's the next step?" People are saying, "Well, what type of inquiry am I talking about?" And it becomes really rich because inquiry doesn't—you could have a very controlled inquiry. Like, let's say we're going to use the scientific method, and you're probably, as a teacher, going to have very strict standards on what you're doing and maybe you're going into water sampling. It's still inquiry and it can still be very intense, but that's different than an inquirer. It's like what is your passion and what do you want to do in life, which is going to go out to these broad boundaries.
- David: Now you're thinking *inquiry*, you have to start answering questions about what does inquiry mean? Is it problem-based learning, is it project based learning? So when you say, like, what next steps would be, it was like we wanted to see what people were generating, and then they were kind of talking with us about what they would be.



They're making great suggestions. It would really be an ongoing thing. I mean, I think what we were talking about is we would try to group people and help them identify the next step and start building the thing. It's fun to prototype and what would you make, and start dreaming what this thing was, and then start seeing if you can get there.

Karen: Yeah. Something that you can do next week or in your next class next semester. We find that if you don't put it into place quickly, it might just go into something that you talked about at CEL or NCTE and just never hit your classroom. So it's something to try to start thinking about next steps right away, what part of that could you take? Even if you can't jump into a full class with blended, what is one thing you could start with? Because I did start with just a unit.

David: You did. I think I still would have, and that's a great question, I think I probably would have tried to prepare him for the very next step to be difficult. I think if we did that and to expect people to go in, it just reminds me of every time we talk about someone it's like, yeah, I did this project and it was just awful. The kids' projects sucked, they didn't know what to do, and it's a really difficult place for a teacher. It goes back to what we were talking about. When you really scaffold things and you're really lay it out and you have this really cool formula and the kid writes this really great essay. When you take all that away, their first original work ever is really comparatively not good.

David: But that's cause it's the first time it was ever *originally* their work, and so you're seeing the kid completely design something from scratch. So it's gonna be really pretty messy. And helping teachers realize that's beautiful. That is exactly what it's supposed to be. That is a really amazing thing they just created, although it looks like just a lump of junk. Because when you compare it to something that you've overscaffolded and overstructured and oversimplified, it seems like all this content is really brilliant, but you're just helping the kids fill in blanks as opposed to create really complex from scratch, and *that* is going to be a mess. Helping them feel comfortable with that. Like when Karen came . . . one of the great quotes I love from the presentation, when she said the first time she gave this idea to the teachers to come and see what the kids wanted to do, some of the teachers felt that that, "It sounds like you're disorganized and maybe not planning ahead," and it's like, it could have that feel to it.

Karen: Those teachers weren't at my school, by the way.

David: Some other place, not from where we live and all my PD was great where I live and I didn't waste any money there, just in case.

Karen: [crosstalk 00:36:10] because it was . . . when we proposed it, she was saying, "Oh my gosh. You should have your handouts for January already done." And I'm like, "But I haven't had my students yet." And she's like, "Yeah, well you're disorganized if you don't have everything planned out all the way through."



David: That's a strong pressure out there. And then to look at the kid work and not feel like you failed. That's the first thing that happens to most teachers when they try this, or they go back and they bring this idea back and they come back into the building and it gets squashed. You know, it's like, be just be ready for that. It's okay, but your heart's leading you in the right place. Cause like we started the session off with what everybody's saying. You're here because you feel like something's not right. You got to just trust that, you've got to trust your sense that something's not right. And we keep saying it is about choice, but choice itself is not this wonderful fix. It is really complex. It is the answer. But it's something that you have to learn how to teach. You have to learn how to help kids operate in choice.

Josh: Then they don't get enough of it, obviously.

David: And that too, they haven't had it. And where's the research, too, that shows that kids, by the time they reach high school, not just the amount of choices they make but the amount of times they've been told not to do something in their creative opportunities. Where it goes from before they get to school: tremendous opportunities. And by the time they get to school, they don't make choices, they don't think for themselves, and they basically hear what they can't do. And so creativity and choice has been removed from their lives.

Josh: So if, based on what we've seen with all the stats here of how we were still seeing basically a very narrow set of examples of life, we're seeing a very narrow set of experiences in school choice would mean that every single kid in your classroom has a very different experience. That that's a huge concept if you really dive into it.

David: It is and I appreciate you broadening what choice is in the classroom because I was just expecting, oh, like, books? Because that's, I think, what everybody presents on. Like they need to be able to choose what to read. But you're really taking that to this next level, which is why I like this conference, too. You get these workshops like this which are pretty advanced, I think.

Karen: EXTREME CHOICE.

Josh: Extreeeeeme choice!

David: Rah! Rah! You got that rock music going . . . Well I think you got to open up what literacy means then too. If you say choice, literacy has to be more than just a word. And I like how for me, a lover of graphic novels, like an image is a literacy. Communication is what we're talking about. So even if you said it to, like, the class that Karen's describing, they're presenting, they're communicating when you're presenting and communicating you have to look at all the different ways you do it. And that's all literacy.

Josh: That's true. One of the ignites keynotes from earlier today. He talked about this is a literacy now. Social media use and the behavior some of our nation's leaders are



exhibiting on there, their choices they're making with that is they're modeling bullying. And the impact that has on our kids is, well, that's a whole other topic and he's gonna be on the podcast later too.

Josh: But thank you for being on. We went over and I think we could keep talking, but I don't want to elongate it too much.

Karen: Well thank you, Josh.

David: I appreciate you for having us. Thanks for doing this.

Karen: Oh yeah, this is fun. It's great to capture. All right, so thanks for listening. Until next time, take care of yourself, take care of your students and take care of each other.