

What Makes Online Courses Work?

~ by *Walter McKenzie*

Online professional development for educators is an attractive concept that offers a number of benefits. Online distributed learning breaks down the barriers of time and space that can often impede the planning of staff development activities. Asynchronous delivery of staff development online also affords the participant an “any time, any where” feature that easily accommodates teachers’ busy schedules. Moreover, an online program with a high-quality, well-developed catalogue can actually allow teachers to tailor their professional development experience to meet their unique professional needs, unlike traditional one-size-fits-all training models. In a time of shrinking budgets and competition for funding, online professional development offers school districts a cost-effective solution by in-servicing large groups of educators without the overhead of substitute teachers and time spent away from the classroom.

What are my options?

Across the nation, school systems are approaching online professional development in varied and creative ways. In some instances, schools have purchased a delivery platform for online coursework (such as Blackboard or WebCT) and worked on developing original courses that closely match the identified needs of their teachers. In other cases, schools have enrolled

their teachers in fully developed online programs (like Connected University by Classroom Connect and TeacherUniverse by Riverdeep) that offer a complete catalogue of courses to meet the wide-ranging needs of a school system’s professional development needs. In some cases you can even focus your staff on a strand of fully-developed online programs, such as Technology Integration or Curriculum and Instruction through Connected University. Regardless of the program you choose, the key is to package online professional development as part of a comprehensive professional development program for your district.

Why is online professional development still finding its niche on the professional development landscape?

Factors to Consider

Why is online professional development still finding its niche on the professional development landscape? Many factors need to be considered; among them teachers unfamiliar with online learning environments, uncomfortable with technology in general, or unable to access online courses from home. Also, administrators are learning the role they need to play to promote online courses— from getting the message out as course enrollment periods open to providing ample time and support to facilitate teacher success. Following up on teacher participation and completion as courses wind down

is another way to enhance the online learning experience. Everyone must take ownership in the process if it is to be a success.

Consider the case of Principal Nancy Pfister of Chamberlain Elementary School in West Virginia. Through a state-wide initiative and as part of her professional development plan, she had the opportunity to partake in Connected University’s online courses. The courses helped her expand on her technology skills and introduced her to a supportive online community of educators. Her success with online learning has piqued her faculty’s interests and motivated them to learn more about online course offerings and resources. The seeds have been sown, and this is just one example of how an administrator in West Virginia has introduced her teachers to the extra dimension online professional development can bring to a professional development program.

Keys to Success

Leading by example is a great strategy that many districts have used to make their online professional development program successful. There are actually several ways of engaging educators to reap the benefits of online learning.

One of the keys to the delivery of online training is a face-to-face component that supports learners both online and off. This can take many shapes. For example, in purchasing a district-wide subscription to Connected University, a school system can utilize onsite training to help familiarize teachers with the online learning

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Online Courses

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environment and the skills involved in successfully participating in a course. This kind of up-front intervention can help facilitate interest in online course offerings and build confidence in teachers as online learners.

Another strategy that can help promote online success is the hybrid course. In this model, participants meet occasionally face-to-face while working online to complete readings and assignments in between class meetings. This allows for a sense of connection to the conventional classroom while enabling learners to build on their successes in the virtual world. Certainly, this can be designed into locally developed courses, but more and more national online professional development programs are seeing the value of providing this hybrid model for subscribers. Connected University's Bring Your Own Guide (BYOG) program allows local professional development trainers to lead sections of Connected University courses for their school districts, including the option of offering face-to-face meetings as a feature of course delivery. This allows school systems to take advantage of high-quality, off-the-shelf course content and local trainer talent to best meet the needs of their staff.

If you already have an online professional development program in place, how can you revitalize your initiative to promote teacher participation and success?

- ❖ Determine the courses that meet the needs of your target audience.
- ❖ Promote course offerings through email campaigns, listservs, and local administrators.
- ❖ Emphasize the “any time, any where” nature of online learning as an advantage for busy teachers.
- ❖ Bill online course opportunities as an alternative to traditional professional development offerings for teachers.
- ❖ At each building identify an online professional development “teacher advocate” who will champion the program and encourage others to participate.
- ❖ Identify minimum online requirements as part of your comprehensive professional development program.
- ❖ Afford teachers the opportunity to create individual professional development plans by selecting a series of training opportunities (including online learning) to fulfill their district's professional development requirement.
- ❖ Provide incentives for teachers, such as recertification points for completed courses based on the hours estimated necessary to successfully complete a course.
- ❖ Package an online cluster of courses that, once successfully completed, allows teachers to earn a specific certification, such as a district certificate in distance learning, technology integration, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) standards, or any local initiative that you wish to promote.
- ❖ Introduce a hybrid model that allows teachers to connect with one another face-to-face, in addition to working together online.
- ❖ Offer support in implementing classroom projects that teachers develop online.

The most effective ways to energize teachers as online learners is to plug virtual learning into your existing professional development program. Teachers do not respond well to additional requirements in an already demanding profession. In making the requirement to partake in online professional development, be sure you allot the time for staff to participate. They are much more receptive when they perceive online

training as a time-saving, efficient way to receive training in useful, high-interest subjects that they can immediately make use of in the classroom. By engaging teachers proactively to address their needs, online course delivery can be a vital piece in the twenty-first century professional development puzzle. ▲ ▼