



FACILITATED ONLINE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF EDUCATORS IN THE CHANGING WORLD OF TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

It is commonly accepted across the world today that education is one of the most important aspects of human life in the rapidly developing world of technology and information. The paper asserts that teaching and education relies greatly upon the quality of teachers entering primary and higher level education systems and then discusses how continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers is becoming obligatory in educational institutions. The most effective way of spreading and updating professional development for teachers can be done with the use of virtual learning environments. They provide ease of delivery, flexibility for usage of resources, technology to support collaborative work and emergence of learning/teaching communities that can further help each other in their common tasks. Technology use is a basic feature of online professional development, since it provides the technology of delivery as well as effective means of learning. Therefore, professional development has to consider the use of information and communication technologies as its main priorities when transforming teacher education into an effective process. Education also has to take into consideration the change in the forms of learning, turning away from more formalised school settings into various forms of informal modes of learning, thus the design of learning objects have to satisfy a more flexible use of materials within different contexts.

Key Words: Twitter, Wikis, Podcasts, Skype, Moodle, Ning, Google Docs

I. INTRODUCTION

The environments in which teachers work, and the demands placed upon them by society are increasingly complex. Teachers strive to equip learners with a wide range of skills that they will require to take their place in a world that is in constant evolution; this hastens the need for the development of more competence-centered approaches to teaching, together with greater emphasis on learning outcomes. Pupils are increasingly expected to become more autonomous learners and to take responsibility for their own learning. The learners in any class may come from an increasingly wide range of backgrounds and may have a very broad range of abilities. In this context, even initial teacher education of the highest quality cannot provide teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary for a lifetime of teaching. Teachers are called upon not only to acquire new knowledge and skills but also to develop them continuously. The education and professional development of every teacher



needs to be seen as a lifelong task, and be structured and resourced accordingly. To equip the teaching body with the skills and competences needed for its new roles, it is necessary to have both quality initial teacher education and a coherent process of continuous professional development to keep teachers up to date with the skills required in a knowledge based society.

II. ONLINE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IDEAS

Online professional development does not necessarily mean taking a class or workshop online. It can also be the use of online tools to enhance an educator's skills or knowledge. Credit for this type of professional development may be obtained through alternative means, such as creating a portfolio or applying for alternative CEUs. One way teachers can use the web is for research. This may be to find information about a behavioral issue they wish to address in the classroom, a new way to teach a topic, or even to find local resources for class projects.

Teachers can also use online resources to reach out to and share their findings. Blogs, wikis, and Google groups are simple to create and can be maintained as an online journal. These tools are easy to maintain, and have the added feature that colleagues and peers can contribute through comments on a blog or editing and appending information on a wiki or Google group. Whether taking an online course or workshop, researching educational needs, or collaborating online through a wiki or blog, educators have a variety of options for furthering their education and developing their professional interests. The direct benefit is the ease of access and attendance while enjoying the summer months. Other benefits include an increased understanding of the use of technology for educational purposes and a larger group of educators with whom to collaborate.

III. ONLINE CONTINUING EDUCATION FOR EDUCATORS IS RAPIDLY EXPANDING

Teachers are able to participate in professional development learning activities through the enrollment in online facilitated courses and use of Web 2.0 tools. Early online continuing education efforts for teachers consisted of watching a series of slides or self-guided screens which teachers would click through. This was essentially the online equivalent of one-day workshops or lectures that still comprise much of professional development for teachers. These efforts lack sustainability because there is no follow-up or collaborative effort. However, today's continuing education efforts have evolved to include facilitated online learning such as Michigan's Learn Port. The design of this site is to provide web-based interactive professional development for teachers. Another source of online professional development is PBS Teacher's Line of facilitated courses. Both of these continuing education programs have moved beyond watching a series of slides or self-guide screens.

The facilitated format provides teachers with opportunities to reflect on their practices with an expert, as well as with their peers. Teachers access course materials, such as readings on a new instructional practice. They are expected to read and digest the materials, complete related assignments, and take part in threaded discussions within a certain time frame. The format gives teachers time to go back to their classrooms and attempt a new strategy. Then they reconnect with facilitators and peers in online discussions of successes and failures. This



practice is aligned with professional development efforts for continued, sustained engagement in content, and with peers. The anticipated results are changes in teaching practices and increased student learning.

IV. FACILITATED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The facilitated format provides three benefits for improving teacher engagement in this form of continuing education. Facilitated training:

- Maintains or increases the level of interaction when compared to classroom situations, because online instructors or facilitators are not limited by time constraints and offer greater availability to participants.
- Provides the advantage of flexibility in timing, so a teacher can participate at a time and place that lets him or her more fully engage in the course.
- Offers a way for teachers who tend to hold back during classroom professional development sessions to express themselves.

Online professional development is especially helpful for teachers who are in the most isolated of school settings around the country as a means of earning continuing education units.

V. DISTRICT TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TOOLS

Advances in continuing education to support facilitated learning for teachers include some of the newest and most promising forms of online professional development. These draw upon the features of social networking. School districts are setting up online networks to allow teachers, facilitators, and mentors to connect with peers serving in similar subject areas or positions. This network provides opportunities to discuss common topics and reflect on teaching practices.

VI. PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT WITH WEB 2.0 TOOLS

Other tools which allow teachers to participate in online professional development include Web 2.0 tools such as:

Twitter – Twitter is a website, owned and operated by Twitter Inc., which offers a social networking and micro blogging service, enabling its users to send and read other users' messages called *tweets*. Tweets are text-based posts of up to 140 characters displayed on the user's profile page. It helps in developing collaborative networks between teachers in different schools to test professional development strategies and techniques.

Wikis –It allows teachers to participate in continuing education staff development opportunities offered by certified trainers within or outside the school district, along with classroom applications for Wikis. Wikis are websites which can be edited by anyone the owner allows. In this case, teachers allow their students to edit class Wikis. Wikis are more versatile than a class blog, because blogs are typically one way communication and Wikis are updated by teachers and students. Wikis are a free teaching and learning technology tool for teachers to use in education settings.



Wikis have become very popular in education since 2006. There are currently over 100,000 registered education Wikis. Education Wikis come with an upgraded membership, worth \$50 annually, for teachers. The upgraded membership also eliminates advertisements and allows the ability to restrict public viewing.

To support the demand for Wikis in education, Wiki spaces (the developer) is now offering 250,000 education Wikis with the upgraded membership to teachers. Registration is free and all services are free. Services include the ability to upload documents, pictures, videos, and more by teachers and students.

Podcasts – A podcast is a series of digital media files (either audio or video) that are released episodically and often downloaded through web syndication. The word usurped webcast in common vernacular, due to rising popularity of the iPod and the innovation of web feeds. The mode of delivery differentiates podcasting from other means of accessing media files over the Internet, such as direct download, or streamed webcasting. A list of all the audio or video files currently associated with a given series is maintained centrally on the distributor's server as a web feed, and the listener or viewer employs special client application software known as a *pod catcher* that can access this web feed, check it for updates, and download any new files in the series. This process can be automated so that new files are downloaded automatically. Files are stored locally on the user's computer or other device ready for offline use, giving simple and convenient access to episodic content. Podcast provides video and audio continuing education materials to teachers participating in staff development activities and courses.

Skype – Skype is a software application that allows users to make voice calls over the Internet. Calls to other users within the Skype service are free, while calls to both traditional landline telephones and mobile phones can be made for a fee using a debit-based user account system. Skype has also become popular for its additional features which include instant messaging, file transfer, and video conferencing. It provides teachers with opportunities to talk to other teachers and facilitators to share and reflect on staff development activities using the Internet.

Moodle – Moodle (abbreviation for *Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment*) is a free and open-source e-learning software platform, also known as a Course Management System, Learning Management System, or Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). Moodle was originally developed by Martin Dougiamas to help educators create online courses with a focus on interaction and collaborative construction of content, and is in continual evolution. It provides a virtual learning environment that allows facilitators and certified trainers to develop and conduct staff development for teachers.

Flat Classroom – collaborative projects using Web 2.0 tools to foster communication, collaboration, and creation between teachers around the world.

Ning – Ning is an online platform for people to create their own social networks, launched in October 2005. Ning a teaching and learning collaboration transforming teacher professional development.

Google Docs - collaboration with other teachers in the continuing education projects and assignments. Google Docs are web-based word processor, spreadsheet, presentation, and form applications provided free by Google. These applications allow teachers and students to create and/or edit documents online, while collaborating with



others. Google Docs provides all the necessary document creating and handling services typically provided in education desktop productivity software packages.

Continuing education has taken on a whole new setting for teachers. Staff development is rapidly moving into the online world of participation in facilitated courses and collaborative networks. Teachers are using Web 2.0 tools to participate in continuing education when it is convenient for them, without the constraints of the rigid school day schedule.

All teachers need to refresh themselves and improve their skills by attending or participating in professional development opportunities designed to invigorate learning. Professional development represents a vital on-going activity that all teachers should address in order to remain current in their academic disciplines and up to date on educational trends that might affect their teaching methodologies, curriculum, and student-centered considerations such as dealing with learning disabilities. Professional development opportunities can be a one-day seminar or a semester night course at the local university. What is important is that all teachers refresh their credentials whether or not state certification and licensure requirements mandate such actions.

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