

BUILDING WITHOUT WALLS: MODERN PRACTICES FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Put simply, professional development affords teachers ongoing learning opportunities relevant to their field. Educators require continuous, evolving efforts to maintain subject area mastery and improve learning practices. Whether supporting a new teacher induction program or regularly offering veteran faculty a platform to learn from one another, any approach to professional development requires versatility. Modern programs may be conducted using a variety of methods, from in-person formats to online platforms.

Professional Development in Education

Quality instruction is one of the most important factors influencing student performance. By extension, professional development is vital to educators and administrators seeking innovative and pedagogically sound teaching methods. Effective professional development strategies have been directly linked to school success and teacher fulfillment (Research Center: Professional Development, 2011).

Often, these strategies are tied directly to school-based improvement plans, teacher-focused professional development plans, or a combination of both. With heavy classroom schedules and demands on teachers at an all-time high, educators may find it difficult to conventionally participate in the quality professional development opportunities they deserve.

The “Why?” of Web-Based: Flexibility, Scalability, Individuality

Accessing online or blended instruction resources is an immediate solution to practical dilemmas of time and logistics. Online learning programs allow districts to offer a diverse course slate, helping to build and maintain teachers’ awareness of new requirements and best practices. Personal and professional goals can be developed through continuing opportunities that may have been previously limited to short term, face-to-face workshops (Liu, Carr, and Strobel, 2009). Under a web-enabled approach to professional development, teachers can learn, essentially, without boundaries.

The flexibility of online delivery methods enables teachers to align target growth areas with student performance without waiting for a live opportunity during the year. Teachers can learn while they plan. On-demand access to new strategies and implementations can help enhance the quality of instruction.

As society grows more mobile, so must its concept of learning.

Online professional development benefits teachers in allowing them to take courses anytime, anywhere. Additionally, online formats are capable of offering diverse libraries containing both self-directed and teacher-facilitated courses. Using webcasting technologies such as Desire2Learn's Capture, lectures can be recorded and published for on-demand viewing. Teachers can watch presentations repeatedly and consult them again later, as needed.

Online professional development implementations incorporating both formal and informal activities encourage results by providing educators with an interconnected opportunity to share and discuss their experiences. Any school program requires teacher buy-in to achieve success; administrators must be aware of the benefits of engaging faculty to provide feedback if they are considering developing blended or virtual learning systems in their schools.

Classroom Impact

The impact of evolving technology extends directly into the classroom learning experience. Modern students may have more developed technical skills than their teachers. In order for educators to move forward with technology in their classrooms, they must be enabled to adapt to the changing landscape and establish the necessary comfort level.

Participating in online professional development inherently improves a teacher's skillset. Faculty can familiarize themselves with new programs and technologies prior to implementation. When teachers become students in a blended or strictly online professional development course, they gain valuable insights about what does or doesn't work from a student-centered perspective. From these insights, they're able to construct more informed models for practical classroom use.

Achieving excellence on the practical side of online education requires a different understanding of how to support students and develop instructional resources (Davis & Rose, 2011). Online teachers require a strong knowledge of content, learning strategies, and the technology being used to foster the same communication and interaction that would otherwise traditionally be part of a conventional brick-and-mortar environment. Professional development is essential in helping teachers adapt to these new instructional delivery methods.

Reflective Practices

In an age of accountability, professional development should fit annual goals for instructional growth. Most school boards evaluate teachers on a system that includes professional development plans. Whether traditional or online, professional development efforts supporting these plans will see gains for both teachers and students throughout the process. Utilizing online tools to accomplish these goals is not only effective, but provides an opportunity for continuous collaboration and improvement.

The means to digitally collect and store learning resources is a necessary part of this approach: an action enabled by, for example, Desire2Learn's ePortfolio. This tool allows teachers to collaborate, share, and reflect on ideas, presentations, projects, and course work. For evaluation purposes, having a system in place that enables sharing with administrators and documentation of practices supports a more meaningful experience for teachers. Just as teacher training programs include collaboration and reflective practice, so should the professional development of established faculty.

Conclusion

Modern learning theories consider Communities of Practice fundamental, and that they help “build the ‘knowledge base’ of the field” (Taylor, 2008). Interaction with peers has been shown to result in deeper processing and better learning by providing developmental scaffolding and an opportunity for groups to generate explanations (Chi, de Leeuw, & Chiu). These communities support strong professional development programs.

Likewise, good professional development practices encourage these communities by providing a forum in which they can take place. Sharing knowledge helps teachers learn how to implement best practices successfully. Technology enables powerful mechanisms of delivery, and should be infused into communities of practice and professional development to improve proficiency, knowledge, and skills. (Consortium for School Networking Initiative).

Meaningful experiences promote the advancement of classroom instruction.

Through quality professional development and communities of practice, schools can develop an enhanced culture of collaboration and learning. When instructors are able to participate in an asynchronous manner that better fits their individual schedules and lifestyles, they are more inclined to make impactful contributions to the content, to their peers, and to the process of learning itself.

About Desire2Learn

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