



Is Online Professional

Taking classes online can have many benefits not possible with face-to-face workshops and courses.

By Maureen Brown Yoder

Subject: Professional development

Audience: Teachers

Grade Level: All

Technology: Internet/Web

Standards: NETS • T V (www.iste.org/standards)

It's three o'clock. You are sitting in the school library with other teachers from your district. You have just finished a day with your students and are taking a professional development workshop with your colleagues. It is part of a series that has been well planned, is relevant to your curriculum, and involves no cost to you. You'll leave with new skills, ideas for integrating them into your classroom, and a deeper understanding of how technology can enhance learning.

The workshop has met some of your goals, but you are still curious about areas that may not be of interest to your colleagues. You may want to explore your subject area in more depth with very specific strategies and resources directed to the subject you teach. You may want to study a new

technology your district doesn't yet have or extend your experience to a subject area not taught in your district.

Advantages

Professional development comes in many forms, and there can be great benefits in the model described above, but taking courses or classes online can have many benefits not possible with face-to-face workshops and courses. These benefits, first listed and then described, are:

1. Extensive opportunities and resources
2. Specific goals
3. Convenience and flexibility
4. Involvement in a larger learning community
5. Emerging technologies



Development for You?

Extensive opportunities and resources.

The choices are so vast that you can choose a workshop or course that would never have a large enough audience in your district to justify it. Whether it is teaching Japanese, studying Ernest Hemingway's early works, working with a rare type of learning challenge—just about anything is available.

Many types of resources are available for all aspects of online professional development. See *Deciding if Online Learning Is for You*, *Online Course Opportunities*, and *Resources* on p. 57 for a sampling.

Specific goals. Your classroom is unique. You have challenges that need to be addressed in very specific ways. Imagine being in a class where all of the other

educators are facing the same problems and working together to solve them. Examples of targeted course titles are:

- Implementing a Laptop Program in Your School
- Designing Effective Science Lessons for Grades 7–12
- Integrating Technology into the Language Arts Curriculum
- WebMaker 101

Convenience and flexibility. However convenient it is to have professional development programs offered in your own school, online learning allows even more convenience. If the class is asynchronous, you never have to travel to a specific location at a specific time. Wherever you have access to a reliable Internet connection, you can connect to your instructor, communicate with

your classmates, and complete required assignments. Within the parameters of the class, you can make your own schedule. For any number of reasons, after school may not be the best time for you. Perhaps early morning is your best thinking time, or evenings, after a break, or weekends, when you feel more refreshed, will work for you. Perhaps you need a break from your day before you have to think again and would like to be home at your computer to tackle the challenge.

Involvement in a global community. To many teachers, the most exciting aspect of an online professional development experience could not be replicated in face-to-face classes. It is the opportunity to meet educators not only from other districts but also from other

parts of the country and around the world—similar to attending a conference—that makes online classes special. When online classes do not have residency requirements, it is possible for anyone with a reliable Internet connection to participate. The sharing of ideas and teaching strategies, combined with the connection with a teacher you would not otherwise have met, is one of the most rewarding features of distance learning.

Emerging technologies Emerging technologies are making online learning more interactive and visual. Delivery systems are becoming more sophisticated, with streaming video, voice and video interactions, and real-time text that instructors can use to enhance demonstrations and discussions.



Challenges

Challenges come with online professional development. In addition to not working with colleagues you know and are comfortable with, in a setting you are familiar with, there are structural and learning style differences you need to be aware of. To be successful in an online course requires more:

1. Self-discipline
2. More deliberate and thoughtful class discussions
3. Resourcefulness
4. Independence

Self-discipline. Your colleagues are not there as a visual reminder that assignments are due. You must discipline yourself to meet deadlines without anyone to remind you. Many online students set interim checkpoints for themselves. They have learned that waiting until the last minute can be disastrous. When you are dependent on your Internet connection, and the pressure is on to upload your assignment, you should allow extra time to cushion possible glitches.

Class discussions. In a face-to-face class discussion, there are informal comments and rapid responses when discussions get heated. Participation can be spontaneous. Reactions are immediate. Online learning is different. In a threaded discussion area, postings are written for others to see and respond to. Because the postings are going to remain in the discussion area, participation is usually more carefully thought out and constructed. Spelling checkers and proofreading are useful to ensure contributions look professional. On one hand, body language, appearance, and tone of voice do not affect your message; on the other hand, only your words help you convey your meaning. How articulate and well written your entry is can make a difference in your effect on the discussion. It would be very easy to symbolically sit slouched in your seat and not participate, just as you might in a face-to-face discussion. The expectations of the instructor and the requirements of the class may determine your motivation to contribute. In credit-bearing courses, part of your grade might depend on the number and quality of your postings to class discussions. Even if you are not earning a grade, if the subject matter is compelling enough, you will want to post your opinions and ideas. Also, the responses you will receive from your classmates and instructor will be natural rewards.

Resourcefulness. Resourcefulness, particularly in terms of getting technical

help, is essential. In a computer lab, if your computer crashes, you can often raise your hand to get help or pair up with someone else. When you are at home with your own computer and encounter trouble, it is useful to be able to solve the problem yourself or have your own resources available. Some online programs provide a telephone help desk.

Independence. Being an independent learner will contribute to your success as an online student. When you have a question about an assignment or are having trouble completing an assignment, you must actively request help. Often this is accomplished by going to a conference board or sending an e-mail. The good news is that you can do this any time, day or night. Most of the time, though, you will be working alone or collaborating with a group of students online. If you are not prone to feeling isolated and lonely, then online learning can be a good choice for you. Of course, with emerging technologies and faster connections, we may soon be able to easily view our classmates and instructors, possibly as holograms.

Financial Issues, District Support

Another challenge with online learning might be the different structure of such learning as compared with traditional face-to-face workshops. In addition to the different setting and personal requirements, there may be financial and support issues if your school has no precedent for this type of professional development.

Face-to-face professional development may involve the payment of tuition, travel costs, and the purchase of materials. Online learning may not involve travel, but the cost of hardware, software, and other relevant materials can be considerable. Make sure that before you enroll, you have assessed all potential costs.

Who will pay for your professional development? How much will your

school district contribute? You may be setting a precedent and have to explain and justify your goals and how you plan to achieve them. You may also have to show how you applied what you learned.

It is often helpful to participate in online professional development with other professionals from your school or district. Not only will you then have some local support, but also your district will benefit more fully from the skills and knowledge you and your colleagues have attained. Teachers who have conducted workshops to present what they have learned to administrators, parents, and other teachers often create a better understanding of the benefits of online professional development and allow for stronger support in the future.

Using a Computer at Work

If you are using a computer and Internet connection at work, make sure you negotiate a clear agreement with your employer about time and use, as well as consumable resources such as paper and ink cartridges.

Although your learning may benefit your school system, you will want to make sure that your school's contribution is fair and that your use of school equipment (including software such as e-mail) does not interfere in any way with scheduled classes or your primary work responsibilities. To reduce the risk of any misunderstandings, the agreement should be in writing. A freely reproducible example of an Equipment Usage Agreement is on p. 58.

At home, if there are multiple users of the computer and Internet connection, it may help to have a similar, but probably less formal, agreement.

Being an Online Student

Patty Devries, a graduate of the Lesley University online degree program, reflected on her experiences working with other teachers from around the

Online continued on page 57.



Online continued from page 9.

Deciding if Online Learning Is for You

Many self-paced surveys are available to determine whether you are a good candidate for online professional development. Web-based and print resources help potential students decide if they have the software and hardware, skills, time, and learning style to be successful online learners.

Internet-Based Decision-Making Resources

AT&T Learning Network: www.att.com/learningnetwork/virtualacademy/success.html. Online Professional Development— Suggestions for Success! by Lynne Schrum, is a series of articles for educators who want to make "the most out of online educational opportunities." It includes guidelines for choosing online professional development classes, a list of online workshops and degree programs, and a learning style self-quiz.

The Illinois Online Network: <http://illinois.online.uillinois.edu/IONresources/onlineoverview/StudentProfile.html>. What Makes a Successful Online Student? provides a list of guidelines to help you make decisions. Find links to several self-paced surveys and Tips for Online Success.

Minnesota Virtual University: www.mnvu.org/Frame?pg=1515. Seven Questions to Ask about Your Online Course will provide you with the questions to ask when exploring your options. It includes topics such as handling instructor and peer interactions.

Print-Based Decision-Making Questionnaires

Turlington, S. R. (2000). *Is distance learning right for you? The unofficial guide to distance learning*. Indianapolis, IN: Hungry Minds Inc.

Criscito, P. (1999). *Barron's guide to distance learning: Degrees, certificates, courses* (2nd ed.). Hauppauge, NY: Barron's Educational Series Inc.

Online Course Opportunities

The following examples provide teachers with online resources for their classrooms as well as connections to other teachers with similar interests (some also offer online workshops and courses):

TeacherLine: <http://teacherline.pbs.org/teacherline/welcome.cfm>. This professional development Web site is designed as a source for "content, community, and collaboration." A series of modules help educators integrate technology into their learning and teaching. PBS Education and ISTE are working to develop a certification program for PK-12 teachers, based on the National Educational Technology Standards (NETS).

The Teachers Network— The TeachNet Project: www.teachnet.org. The TeachNet Project helps teachers and educational communities create local or regional school improvement projects. Through small grants, the network assists teachers in developing their innovative ideas and connects them with interested colleagues.

TAPPED IN—Teacher Professional Development Institute: www.tappedin.org. TAPPED IN is an "online community for teachers, professional development providers, and researchers. Visitors can participate in real-time discussions and classes. Teachers log in to share experiences, find and contribute educational resources, hold meetings, conduct collaborative inquiries, and meet new colleagues. Membership is free to educators."

Classroom Connect's Connected University: <http://cu.classroom.com>. The Connected University provides an "online professional development community, providing educators with courses, learning resources, just-in-time support, and a convenient way to interact with your peers nationwide."

Apple Learning Interchange: <http://ali.apple.com/nshelp/welcome.shtml>. Apple Learning Professional Development Online Courses provide an array of self-paced courses, "consisting of an interactive tutorial, a hands-on course project, and a forum for discussion with fellow students and with the course mentor."

OnlineLearning: www.OnlineLearning.net. This site offers an extensive list of online offerings for K-12 teachers. There are 20 "Education Neighborhoods," including Teaching English as a Foreign Language and College Counseling Certificate Program.

Search Engines: Typing "online professional development for teachers" in any search engine can access many additional resources.

Resources

You will need to decide if your primary goal is to gather knowledge, collect Professional Developments Points (PDPs), work toward a certificate, earn additional college credits, or pursue an entire degree online. Use the following degree program list, as well as the online, print, and informal resources, to find online professional development that fits your lifestyle, budget, and professional goals.

Degree Programs

The following fully accredited universities offer master's degree programs with no residency requirement:

George Washington University:
www.gwu.edu

Lesley University: www.lesley.edu

Michigan State University:
<http://ed-web3.educ.msu.edu/onlineedu>

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign:
<http://ctcr.ed.uiuc.edu/index.html>

University of Maryland University College:
www.umuc.edu

Online Resources

Peterson's and Barron's, traditionally publishers of guides to face-to-face learning at the undergraduate and graduate levels, provide searchable Web pages at:

www.petersons.com

www.barrons.com

Additional online guides to distance learning opportunities can be found by typing "guide to distance learning" into any search engine.

Print Materials

- Bear, J., & Bear, M. (2000). *Bear's guide to earning degrees by distance learning* (14th ed.). Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press.
- Criscito, P. (1999). *Barron's guide to distance learning: Degrees, certificates, courses* (2nd ed.). Hauppauge, NY: Barron's Education Series Inc.
- Peterson's. (2000). *Peterson's guide to distance learning programs* (5th ed.). Princeton, NJ: Author.

If you go to any of the online booksellers and type in "guide to distance learning," you will find additional resources.

Informal Resources

Suggestions from colleagues and friends who have had firsthand experience with online learning can be the best resource for finding out what being an online student is like. When you are doing research on a distance learning program, make sure that in addition to reading Web page information, you also call and speak to someone, asking questions that are rarely answered on a Web page, such as how many students there typically are in a class. Ask if you can speak to a current student or a student who has already taken a class.

Equipment Usage Agreement

Dear _____ :
(administrator's name)

From _____ through _____ I will be taking part in a series of online professional develop-
(starting date) (ending date)
ment workshops. The workshops will provide me with new technological skills and ideas for incorporating tech-
nology into classroom activities. I am also looking forward to collaborating with teachers in other districts in an
online forum.

I would like to use a school-owned computer and its Internet connection to complete the assignments and com-
municate with colleagues participating in the workshops.

I will use the computer before and after school hours, which will not interfere with any classroom activities.

Your signature below will confirm your approval.

Thank you very much for your support.

Sincerely,

(teacher's signature)

(name printed)

Date submitted: _____

I approve of _____'s use of a _____ computer and Internet
(teacher's name) (school name)

connection from _____ to _____ for the purposes of a professional development
(starting date) (ending date)

course and understand that his/her use will not interfere with students' use of the computer lab or interrupt class-
room activities.

Signature:

(administrator's signature)

Date approved: _____



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world. She was initially surprised that distance “learning would not only afford me the gift of time” but also enrich her learning experience “beyond any that I could imagine happening within the four walls of a classroom. Your first thoughts may be that I was isolated within my living room, but in fact, my class consisted of a multicultural group of people from a wide geographic area. We were very much an online community sharing not only our knowledge and experiences with technology, but also our daily lives.”

Other students have said the following:

My students in Indiana are currently conducting a collaborative writing project with students in Japan, which would not have occurred if I did not make the contact in my most recent online class. The teacher in Kobe and I were partners in an online assignment, which led to many discussions about the use of technology in the language arts, and ultimately to connecting our students online.

By taking an online professional development course, I was able to learn from educators who provided a fresh perspective and lots of practical ideas for my fifth-grade classroom.

Conclusion

The opportunities for online professional development are increasing, making them more varied and exten-

sive, but resulting in a more difficult decision-making process. Use the resources listed on p. 57 to first decide if you are a good candidate for online learning. Then, assess your professional goals to see if you want a short-term solution to learn a specific skill or if you want to earn a certificate or degree. You can use Internet or print resources to explore options and talk to people about their experiences and suggestions.

The benefits of online learning outweigh the challenges. Becoming part of an online community of educators with similar goals and challenges can immeasurably enrich your professional life. Having that community include teachers from all over the globe can lead to collaborations not otherwise possible.

Professional development opportunities abound and appear to be increasing in variety and depth. Although face-to-face professional development may still meet your needs and be easily accessible in your district, online options will continue to provide a valuable alternative. Explore the options available to you, and take advantage of becoming a member of a worldwide learning community.



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 What delivery methods have you found to be most useful?
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