BOOK REVIEW

Virtual Mentoring for Teachers:
Online Professional Development Practices

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Virtual Mentoring for Teachers:
Online Professional Development Practices
Jared Keengwe and Lydia Kyei-Blankson
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Online education is a growing trend in the United States and around the world. The latest report by Allen and Seaman[1] representing the Babson Survey Research Group (2013) indicated that about 70% of the leaders of higher education institutions in the U.S. consider online learning critical to their long-term strategy. About 6.7 million students are now estimated to be taking at least one online course. These growing trends, changing student demographics, and new technologies require educators to have enhanced pedagogical, technological, and communication skills. Their success depends upon effective initial training and continual professional development (PD). I found *Virtual Mentoring for Teachers: Online Professional Development* by Jared Keengwe and Lydia Kyei-Blankson (Eds., 2013) of particular inter-

est as it covered many critical components of distance learning: instructional design, online learning and teaching, and faculty training and professional development.

Each of the 16 chapters centers around themes of professional development for online instructors and the integration of new web-based technologies. The authors of each chapter include innovative practices for in-service or pre-service teachers utilizing many formats and modes of delivery: from informal learning communities and structured courses to virtual worlds. Examples are diverse and cover both K-12 and higher education in the US, Canada, and New Zealand. Case studies are applicable for institutions that have a unit formally charged to lead PD activities and also those that operate on a smaller budget and with limited staff. Helpful graphics, tables, and appendices are included to complement practical advice, case studies, and research findings.

The first chapter is a useful overview of instructional design principles and andragogy (adult learning), experiential and transformative learning as they apply to online instruction. The authors rightfully claim that when skilled

instructors utilize solid instructional design, student learning experiences will be optimal. In sharing their experience in organizing a 9-week long course for online faculty, the authors provide a topical outline and potential activities.

Many of us have worked as teaching assistants (TA) in the early stages of our professional careers or we have employed TAs to facilitate online courses. But how well are TAs prepared to teach online and meet demands for quality synchronous and asynchronous instruction? Authors of Chapter 2 propose a comprehensive approach that enables TAs, as either independent or as co-instructors, to assume social, managerial, communicative, technical and pedagogical roles in an online environment.

Those of us who have organized professional development activities for faculty are aware of the logistical complexity and range of training requirements. Recognizing this critical need for continuous, soundly designed professional development, the authors of Chapter 3 concisely describe a highly adaptable and flexible multi-modal program based on ADDIE and Community of Learners models. This PD program includes synchronous face-to-face, webinars, multimedia resources for online general training, one-on-one training, on-demand training, and social events. Focusing on both pedagogy and technology, the program offers a variety of topics, strategies, methods, and tips on how to engage and motivate faculty.

While social networks are a relatively new phenomenon, they have made a considerable impact on education. The authors of Chapter 4 describe utilizing the Networked Learning Framework (NLF), combining both 10-15 hours of online guided activities and common social media tools that enable teachers to learn collaboratively, network professionally, and proactively use online tools to participate in their professional development. The case study includes a detailed description of core activities, design principles, a topical outline, and facilitator skills.

Chapter 5 explains how the educational skills of pre-service teachers can be enriched when they are linked to practicing teachers in remote areas virtually via an internal network that allows them to collaborate and share observations and practices in their teaching circles and "cybercells". This idea can be translated into any setting, not necessarily rural or remote. After school districts can easily modify and rethink certain technological, pedagogical, organizational, and conceptual processes.

In reviewing Chapter 6, I became genuinely excited about a comprehensive approach to professional development for online facilitators. It describes a facilitator's critical characteristics and ways to enable andragogical, contextual, online learning and teaching, technological skills and competencies. The effectiveness of this PD approach was demonstrated when trained online facilitators were able to support successfully over 43,000 K-12 teachers.

Virtual worlds and their usage in education are discussed in Chapters 7 and 8. The authors describe their experiences using Second Life (SL) as part of professional and mentoring activities and how to encourage SL in teaching practices. Those of us who might need convincing about the viability of this approach will find a concise and honest assessment of SL advantages and limitations. The authors suggest potential objectives, instructional plans, activities for participants, assessment, and evaluation of workshop effectiveness. This chapter was of a particular interest to me as I recently facilitated SL usage for one of our courses in career counseling. A relatively new phenomenon (SL was launched in 2003), virtual world integration into teaching and learning requires raising awareness of its unique benefits, careful planning, and a substantial commitment to professional development.

Continuous and aligned evaluation of online professional development is an important key to improving its effectiveness. Chapter 9 presents assessment processes, their purpose, various assessment instruments, criteria and factors affecting their selection, and the benefits of technology-enhanced assessment. The author discusses situations where it might be more beneficial to use existing instruments or to develop of one's own. It is argued that thorough

evaluation needs to be embedded throughout the entire PD process: from conception and learner needs analysis to content design and delivery, followed by data analysis and acting upon it.

Chapter 10 not only provides an overview and definitions of online PD for teachers, but summarizes cases where these activities might benefit both synchronous and asynchronous delivery. The authors also note professional development opportunities for faculty and staff both in-house or outsourced; for tuition-based or free from top tier universities mentioned in 2011 issue of *U.S. News and World Report*, complemented by a list of eight professional organizations providing PD. I found invaluable a comparison of characteristics of "three w's" (webconference/meeting, webinar, and webcast) and demonstration of how the TPACK (technology knowledge, pedagogy knowledge, and content knowledge) model can be applied to PD.

Due to the complex and multi-faceted roles faculty must play in online teaching, professional development programs are not easy to devise and implement. These programs must encompass a broad array of competencies that are not always well defined while coping with information overload, ever-changing technologies, and the logistics of engaging faculty who might not even be in the same time zone. Chapter 11 presents case studies from different institutions, best practices, and different models of online PD from formal courses to virtual learning communities. Particularly valuable for me were the examples of how multiple institutions collaborate to provide professional development for faculty and instructional designers.

Based on their personal experience in designing and teaching three online courses, the authors of Chapter 12, argue that meaningful professional development activities and faculty motivation must incorporate pedagogical and technological skills, working in teams, and modification of teaching practices based learning theories as they apply to the digital age while at the same time promoting connectivism and constructivism. Faculty must participate in collaborative discussions with colleagues, mentoring, self-reflection, and act upon feedback from students and peers.

Though many chapters in this book cite motivation as critical to the success of online education, Chapter 13 in particular focuses on instructional design models and motivation theories as they apply to e-learning. Online courses can be motivating if they are learner-centered, flexible, relevant, interactive, and allow learner control over pace, time, and content. Facilitators must be skilled in providing positive learning experiences and be able to communicate with and engage e-learners at all stages of course delivery.

The author of Chapter 14 rightfully argues that adult learning theories and strategies should not be included as simply one of the topics in a professional development outline, but be embedded into PD itself. Faculty who are learning how to teach online are also adults, and thus should be engaged in meaningful, contextual, relevant, reflective, and flexible professional development to enhance their technological, pedagogical, and social roles in the online environment. The author suggests multiple ways in organizing these activities, forming faculty learning cycle, and causing changes in teaching, but learning by doing in online lab, collaborating with peers, and modifying one's teaching believes and practices were found to be the most beneficial.

While reviewing Chapter 15, I caught myself running a mental checklist for the online classes I teach. Am I doing enough modeling of best practices, strategies, and technologies? Am I employing graphic organizers to their full potential? Do I provide enough opportunities for students to manipulate content (my courses do not have any mathematics or science manipulatives), and create simulations? Do I maintain the right balance of synchronous and asynchronous activities in my fully online classes? How can I improve my use of social media and networking to engage my learners? If you are interested in improving and diversifying your teaching strategies, you will definitely find this practical chapter very helpful.

I was intrigued by the notion of creating and maintaining one's personal brand as one of the learning outcomes of an online course. Authors of Chapter 16 claim that online courses provide an excellent environment for teaching students online communication skills and the concepts of personal branding. As a result, students will have to acquire many other useful skills in technology, social media, networking, marketing, critical thinking, metacognition, creativity, and even… damage control, if needed. Though the authors describe a course in sport administration, I found the program applicable for any aspiring professional.

This book will benefit not only those responsible for professional development at their institutions, but individual faculty and teaching assistants who want to improve their online teaching skills and provide better learning experiences for their students. Learning to teach online or in a blended environment is a life-long process and we all need to be ready for this journey with new technologies, innovative instructional strategies, and creative approaches. More than ever, professional development in a variety of forms and delivery methods will be vital for the success of online and technology-enhanced learning, teaching, assessment, and research.

ENDNOTES

[1]   Allen, I.E, & Seaman, J. (2013).*Changing Course: Ten Years of Tracking Online Education in the US.* Retrieved from http://www. onlinelearningsurvey.com/reports/changing-course.pdf

Dina Vyortkina has been involved in design, development, delivery, and improvement of online courses and distance learning programs since 1997 in US. She worked as an E-learning Manager at the University of East London, UK, in 2006-2008. Her expertise involves, but is not limited to instructional design, performance improvement and human resource development, pre- and in-service teacher preparation in the area of blended and online learning and teaching, faculty professional development, technology integration in higher education, and information and communication technologies for educational administrators and school leadership preparation programs. Currently she is employed as the Director of the Office of Information and Instructional Technologies in the Florida State University College of Education. As a faculty member at the School of Teacher Education, she is teaching online classes in Blended and Online Learning and Teaching program (BOLT; http://coe.fsu.edu/BOLT). Dr. Vyortkina is a reviewer and program committee member for SITE--Society for Information Technology and Teacher Education International Conference, Ed-Media -- World Conference on Educational Multimedia, Hypermedia and Telecommunications, and Global Learn Asia Pacific-- Global Conference for Learning and Technology.