Chapter 24
Aligning Effective Professional Development and Online Learning: A Conceptual Stance

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this chapter is an exploration of the intersection between widely acknowledged and implemented research-based practices for effective PD and a conceptual framework for effective online learning and engagement called the Community of Inquiry (CoI) (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). A social constructivist perspective is used to align the characteristics of effective PD (e.g., duration, collaborative participation, active learning, coherence, and content focus) with the three CoI presences (e.g., teaching, social, and cognitive presences). Beyond the alignment of these two conceptual frameworks, practical examples of online tools are discussed for both synchronous and asynchronous online learning contexts within this chapter.

Online learning is not the next big thing; it is the now big thing. (Abernathy, 1999, p. 36)

INTRODUCTION

As indicated by the quote above, online learning is not a futurist approach for continued education, but instead an already widely used platform for teachers and other educators to continue to develop their
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skills. Upon completion of formal teacher preparation courses and after securing employment in schools, teachers are required to participate in ongoing professional development (PD) opportunities throughout their careers. There are many ways teachers can engage in professional learning, such as book studies, student data conversations in professional learning communities, and graduate coursework. Given the variety of formats in which teachers can participate in professional development, research on PD has focused on the characteristics to establish common themes nested within effective PD (Anders, Hoffman, & Duffy, 2000; Authors, 2010, 2011; Dillon et al., 2011; Penuel, Fishman, Yamaguchi, & Gallagher, 2007; Taylor, Raphael, & Au, 2011; Taylor et al., 2005; Walpole & McKenna, 2004).

It has been over 15 years since Abernathy (1999) touted online learning’s presence, in the quote opening this chapter; online learning opportunities in education are still more available than ever to support teachers’ professional learning. Various online professional development opportunities include for-profit institutional and organizational offerings, non-profit higher education institutional offerings (i.e., traditional coursework and non-credit granting work), state mandated and operated experiences (Zygouris-Coe, Yao, Tao, Hahs-Vaughn, & Baumbach, 2004), and district and school level offerings.

As schools struggle to design and implement high-quality, meaningful, cost-effective professional development experiences, the traditional models of professional development seem not only dated but in most cases ineffective. School level planners are wise to look to online options for delivery of strategic, content-focused professional development. Further, as additional options outside of traditional school-based professional learning emerge, teachers who want personalized experiences are able to choose from a wide range of experiences online, both to fulfill mandatory school requirements or to fulfill more intrinsically inspired learning needs.

The focus of this chapter is an exploration of the intersection between widely acknowledged and implemented research-based practices for effective PD and a conceptual framework for effective online learning and engagement called the Community of Inquiry (CoI) (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). Our goal in writing this chapter is to present a model to guide online professional learning as a promising practice for teacher growth and thus, student achievement as well.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Effective PD

Substantive research on teacher learning and PD is available in the field. The focus of the body of research on PD is quite varied, including topics such as workshop implementation, peer-coaching, and book study groups. Regardless of the type of PD, there is robust research in the field focusing on specific characteristics associated with effective PD. According to Desimone (2009) PD opportunities must have:

1. Strong content focus,
2. Active learning opportunities,
3. Provide coherence across the curriculum,
4. Occur over a duration of time, and
5. Allow for collective participation among participants.