From MOOCs to MOOPILs: Pushing the Boundaries of Virtual Professional Development and Learning for Teachers

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ABSTRACT

This article includes a discussion of the growing use of virtual professional development and learning for educators. Next the authors describe virtual professional development and learning within the context of a U.S. federally-funded Investing in Innovation (i3) grant, English Language and Literacy Acquisition-Validation (ELLA-V), and the need for a new understanding of such on an informal and individual basis. The proposed concept is a Massive Open Online Professional Informal Individual Learning (MOOPIL). Lastly, the authors provide an example of a MOOPIL from the ELLA-V grant which is called ELLA-Virsity—a collection of short professional development webinars for teachers and school leaders who work with English language learners.

KEYWORDS
Distance Education, Massive Open Online Course (MOOC), Massive Open Online Professional Informal Individual Learning (MOOPIL), Professional Development, Professional Learning

INTRODUCTION

Advances in technology as well as increased access to the internet in homes and schools is changing the way teachers continue their professional learning after their initial education. Today teachers enjoy a significantly broader range of professional development options on the web, available to them at any hour. Whether they enroll in an online university course in their subject area, participate in interactive district webinars, or seek advice from other educators over social media, they are furthering their instructional knowledge and skills through virtual professional development and professional learning.

This article begins with our discussion of virtual teacher professional development (VPD), its standards and components, and a synthesis of findings from research on VPD. Lastly, we introduce the concept of Massive Open Online Professional Informal Individual Learning (MOOPIL) and provide an example of ELLA-Virsity, which is a component of a U.S. federal grant, English Language and Literacy Acquisition—Validation (ELLA-V). Our objective in this paper is to extend the concept of teacher professional development and learning with activities on a virtual platform such as MOOPIL.
Teacher Professional Development

PD is considered critical for continuing improvement in all professions. Sufficient published literature exists, particularly in the healthcare industry, which demonstrates that such PD, or continuing education, is believed to impact that industry positively. Guskey (2002) noted that for education, PD for teachers has been proposed as the single greatest factor for influencing student achievement, and that “professional development programs are systemic efforts to bring about change in the classroom practices of teachers, in their attitudes and beliefs, and in the learning outcomes of students” (p. 381). There is a belief that there is a positive connection between PD and practice, but that is based in observation and expert opinions, and not on specific evaluative research studies (Scher & O’Reilly, 2009).

There have been some findings over the past 2.5 decades related to face-to-face PD. Rasmussen (2008) reported a synthesis of studies published between 2000 and 2008 related to components of effective PD which includes (a) a focus on teaching specific content (Loucks-Horsley, Love, Stiles, Mundry, & Hewson, 2003), (b) the integration of specific teaching practices or pedagogy into the professional development (Foulger, 2005), (c) the engagement of participants in active learning (Boyle, Lamprianou, & Boyle, 2005), (d) collective participation of teachers from the same grades and/or subject (Snow-Renner & Lauer, 2005), and (e) delivery with an extended duration (Jeanpierre, Oberhauser, & Freeman, 2005). Similarly, Jaquith, Mindich, Wei, and Darling-Hammond (2010) reported that effective professional development is:

- Focused on specific curriculum and pedagogies needed to teach that content effectively
- Designed to engage teachers in active, collegial learning that allows them to try out ideas in the classroom and make sense of what they are learning in meaningful ways
- Presented in an intensive, sustained, and continuous manner over time…
- Linked to analysis of teaching and student learning, including use of assessment data
- Supported by coaching, modeling, observation, and feedback
- Connected to teachers’ collaborative work in school-based professional learning communities and learning teams
- Integrated with other school level policies or reforms, so that there is a coherent approach to curriculum, instruction, assessments, and professional development (p. 2).

When teacher motivation for engaging in professional learning was not taken into account, the observed results of teacher PD fail to bring about change in teacher practice (Guskey, 2002). Such a situation was due to the method in which the professional learning occurred (Loucks-Horsley, Love, Stiles, Mundry, & Hewson, 2003). However, basically, the field is void of knowing how PD, in general, as well as VPD, directly impacts teacher behavior, and subsequently, student learning.

Dede, Ketelhut, Whitehouse, Breit, and McCloskey (2009) conducted a review of 400 articles related to virtual, face-to-face, and hybrid teacher PD prior to 2009 and found only 40 studies that met the criteria for high-quality empirical research focused on interventions to improve teacher practice and/or student learning. However, of these studies, fewer than five studies included interventions designed to improve teacher pedagogical and content knowledge, skills, and practices.

Campbell (2012) indicated that online learning may be the biggest educational change since the printing press as it gives learners the opportunity to study at a time and place that is convenient. Busy professionals can fit in VPD before or after work and around their other life commitments. VPD provides teachers with such opportunities and particularly when such PD is not offered within their districts. Kear (2010) commented that being online does not allow for visual or auditory communication.
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