Update — Anytime/Anywhere
Finding Our Way: Better Understanding the Motivations of Teachers in Online Learning

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ABSTRACT

Research among K-12 educators participating in six-week online professional development modules of study provides insight into their needs and motivations. Three hundred and twenty-four educators participated in this original research through focus groups and an online survey. The most telling findings indicate four themes regarding teacher online professional development: learner expectations, learner support and access, incentives, and content. Overall, this project illuminates issues that we face in formal education online learning environments as we continue to discover how to best serve educators’ learning needs. This two-step study uses surveys and focus groups to empirically identify critical factors in instructional design and implementation. It benefits from large samples and application of knowledge derived from Group A experiences to Group B.

Keywords: collaborative learning; distance learning; motivation; professional development; recommendations

INTRODUCTION

In the midst of the post-information age, we are constantly challenged to do more in less time. This need extends directly to the classroom, as teachers and schools, and faculty and educational institutions face increased and incessant demands to integrate technology into teaching and learning, to raise student test scores, and to meet or exceed academic and content-area standards. This research explores how online professional development can offer a valuable vehicle for convenient, 24-7 access to a professional development community and content that can address these challenges.

The Anytime Anywhere Learning Professional Development School (AALPDS) is an extensive online course delivery system of multiple six-week courses. Each course passes through stages...
of development, implementation, evaluation, and revision in a cycle of continual improvement. This distance learning project was funded by a United States Department of Education FIPSE Learning Anytime Anywhere Partnership (LAAP) grant. This project is distinctive in including a focus on the needs of teachers as adult learners, the development of local and distant learning communities, and unique content in the areas of standards-based teaching, online learning, adult learning, and high performance classrooms. The online courses consist of instructor-guided, interactive, asynchronous formats that present in-depth material, cultivate application, and facilitate critical reflection and collaboration in online-threaded discussions and group projects.

Since the project’s inception in 2000 and going live with its first class in March 2001, we have experienced many changes in partnerships and much formative reorientation of our direction and implementation. While the primary goals of the professional development school have remained the same, the path of implementation has shifted, based on formative evaluation data and collaboration of the entire project team. It is from this perspective that this paper offers a discussion of two especially important research questions: What characterizes the strength of this distinctive online learning format? and What needs does teacher education and professional development face within online learning environments? This project illuminates many issues that we face in online learning environments and as colleges and universities of teacher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In considering the needs of educators in online professional development, two areas of the literature in particular inform our discussion: professional development from an adult learning perspective and distance education.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

In considering the needs of educators in their ongoing professional development, one salient perspective is to recognize them as adult learners (Cranton, 1996; King, 2002a; Lawler & King, 2000). The growing literature in this area brings to the forefront characteristics of adult learners, which are especially meaningful in cultivating a climate of respect, building on prior experience, learning for application, encouraging active participation, using collaborative learning, and empowering participants (Lawler & King, 2000). These broad principles are then interpreted for and applied to the professional development context more specifically.

The climate in which educators work is a critical element in forming perspectives of teaching and learning. When educators work within an environment in which their high value is communicated and in which they are addressed as professionals, they can develop responsibility for and invest time in their professional development. Intrinsic motivation powerfully complements extrinsic rewards and can be communicated through the organization, individual relationships, and the manner in which professional development is planned and delivered.

Similarly, building on prior experience enables educators to scaffold their learning and advance in thought and practice while validating their expertise (Lawler & King, 2000). This approach emphasizes transfer of learning and immediate application.

Such learning is well received when educators interact with the content and with
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