How eLearning & Related Trends Are Impacting Teacher Professional Development

The Problem: Old Training for New Challenges

In 2013, Teacher Professional development is more important than ever as schools work to improve academic performance while also hitting the moving targets of standards and technology. Serving the needs of both students and teachers in this constantly evolving climate can be a challenge to do consistently, making how K-20 educators are trained even more important.

Further stressing the system are aggressive budget cuts, forcing district and building-level administrators to prioritize staff development needs, and often leave gaps in teacher training. The rise of the teacher leader has been one response, whereby individuals are sent out to expensive professional development sessions across the country, and then present ideas, tools, and takeaways to the staff in quick meetings or **district trainings** while also supporting other teachers informally as well. This helps maximize return on investment, but still **doesn't address the need for iterative and persistent improvement of teacher capacity in critical areas of curriculum, assessment, instruction, and technology.**

Teacher Professional development has historically been handled by two approaches: local building-level professional development that is district-directed, and national conferences that are vendor and organization-directed. The former is the most common, reaching the majority (if not all) of the staff but lacking the depth, substance, and duration of teacher-directed, curiosity-based training.

The latter allows teachers to explore self-directed topics in-depth but at great cost, only for a small handful of teachers, and even then often at odds with district and building-level professional development priorities. This presents a problem, one that technology has stepped up to fill.

A Solution: The Rise of eLearning

According to a study conducted by the California Learning Resource Network, 78% of educator respondents in a study either offered blended learning (i.e., a "blend" of both electronic and in-person learning), or planned to within the following school year. This trend is currently dominated by high schools, with up to 74% of high schools offering some form of eLearning,

compared to only 4% of elementary schools, but the trend remains: technology is being used to supplement in-person training to support personalization, diversity, and depth of instruction.

There is a significant variety of eLearning environments with a range of social and customizable dynamics. Social learning--which benefits from connectivism and enables constructivism, peer-to-peer learning, and self-direction--is an evolution of the pure eLearning environment. In addition to eLearning and blended learning, mobile learning has also surfaced to provide educators and students with mobile access to content and critical peer networks. When social layers are added to blended and mobile learning environments, there is increased potential for educator interaction with experts, course materials, and organic peer networks for long-term informal development benefits

The Difference Between Information, Learning, and Knowledge

Though information and data can be gleaned from skimming sources, listening to speakers and holding conversations, learning is more complex than these relatively simple observation and consumption patterns. **Learning is an iterative process that results from an active participation in a self-guided and externally supported process.** It happens at different rates based on complex factors and principles that can be challenging to identify. It can help though to think of the relationship of learning and knowledge in its most simple terms: Learning precedes knowledge, strategic activity precedes learning.

Knowledge is not acquired from activity alone. There is a need for structured presentation of knowledge, opportunity to operationalize that knowledge, and construct deeper meaning through social interaction and construction. Although teachers are often asked to apply ideas within their classrooms under the broad term "differentiation," we do not model differentiated teacher training and professional development. The challenge here parallels the same challenge in classrooms--one of quantity (of the sheer number of teacher training needs) and quality (of a suitable personalized learning framework).

One response that seeks to address both issues of quantity and quality is the Flipped or Blended Professional Development model.

The Flipped or Blended Professional Development Model

The Flipped Professional Development parallels the much-acclaimed Flipped Classroom model, where the traditional schedule of being introduced to new content at school and studying further at home is "flipped," and students instead approach content at home, and come to school to work collaboratively with students and teachers already having reviewed critical material. The key idea at work here is to use the support systems of a school to meet the needs of learners while they sort out difficult questions during the second stage of the learning process, and save the initial content introduction--often in the form of lectures, videos, and presentations--for students to do alone at home where there might be little support.

The Flipped Professional Development model is a similar reversal of the traditional teacher improvement process. In traditional teacher professional development, a teacher will receive training together with other teachers, and then be expected to integrate this training on their own in the classroom, or in small professional learning communities. There is little personalized learning, front-loading, or pre-assessment of their individual learning needs.

The "flipped" version of this process sees teachers accessing key development resources--digital, multimedia, and otherwise--in an organic and self-directed way on their own, at any point being able to access peers, new resources, and content experts to respond to questions, clarify thinking, and equip with new tools. This allows for just enough, just in time, just for me learning of ideas based on a teacher's curiosity, and led by the author expert's leadership and support.

The easiest way to define flipped or blended professional development, then, is **a sequence of professional development where individual inquiry and collaborative activity combine online and face to face experiences that lead to deeper knowledge about curriculum and pedagogy.** Put more simply, the teachers explore content on their own using the online interaction with experts in the field, then work together to correct misconceptions, rethink positions, and continue creating knowledge in a highly-constructivist approach that leads to changes in practice. This offers a sustainable and affordable method for continuous improvement.

Conclusions

1. Educator professional development needs are increasing in quantity and diversity.

2. Traditional district-led professional development is limited in its scope and authenticity, and subsequently long-term staff impact.

3. Technology has evolved to help address these needs through the rise of eLearning, blended learning, and the Flipped Professional Development Approach.

4. The potential long-term impacts of social learning include expanded teacher networks, improved depth of understanding, and long-term retention of critical needs in educator professional development.

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