Strategies for Successfully Completing
Online Professional Development

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ABSTRACT

Recently, increasing demand for teacher professional development and significant advances in information and communication technologies has led to a proliferation of online professional development. In spite of online professional development's popularity and advantages, research indicates that there is a concern of considerably high dropout rates of online learners. Therefore, to reduce the dropout rates of the learners, this paper is designed to help teachers identify professional development opportunities that are tailored to their needs as well as successfully complete these learning experiences. To achieve the purpose of the study, the paper explores the considerations for evaluating the characteristics of online learners and online professional development. Using these evaluations, this paper provides practical strategies for helping elementary and secondary education teachers successfully complete online professional development without dropping out an online course.

1. Introduction

1.1. Need for Study

In recent years, increasing demand for teacher professional development and significant advances in information and communication technologies has led to a proliferation of online professional development (Lawless & Pellegrino, 2007; Russel et al., 2009). Online courses and workshops have become common in both preservice and inservice teacher education programs, using a variety of technologies to provide learning opportunities for teachers (Docherty & Sandhu, 2006; Russel et al., 2009). Because Internet access has become widespread in elementary and secondary schools as well as in teachers' homes, online professional development provides teachers with opportunities to engage in forms of training that may not be available within their local areas. Teachers can participate in professional development during times that are convenient, receive job-embedded support

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that address immediate classroom needs, customize programs to better suit their own individual learning styles, interact with material through a variety of visual or other multimedia formats, and gain valuable computer and online technology skills (Russel et al., 2009). In spite of their popularity and advantages, research indicates that there is a concern of considerably high dropout rates of online learners (Bocchi, Eastman, & Swift, 2004; Inan, Yukselturk, & Grant, 2009; Park & Choi, 2009). Several studies have reported that the top reason for dropping an online course is lack of time (Bocchi, Eastman, & Swift, 2004; Frankola, 2001). Some online learners blamed the online training for requiring more time than they expected, thereby they were unable to find time to finish the study due to their daily heavy workloads. Unfortunately, people have a misperception that online courses require less work than traditional courses (Bocchi, Eastman, & Swift, 2004). Additionally, other reasons for not completing online learning are problems with technology, lack of student support, and lack of motivation (Frankola, 2001). Therefore, to help elementary and secondary teachers reduce the chance of dropping out an online course, this paper will examine the characteristics of learners as well as of online professional development courses. Based on these evaluations, this paper will provide teachers some recommendations for successfully completing online professional programs.

1.2. Research Method

Candidate studies were identified by 1) searching electronic database (i. e., ERIC, PsycInfo, and Wilson Omni File) using relevant key words such as inservice, online professional development, online learning, online coursework, and e-learning, and 2) reviewing reference lists of articles obtained from the above-mentioned sources. The studies founded from these searches were reviewed to achieve the purposes of the study.

2. Content

2.1. Considerations for Evaluating Learners

Many elementary and secondary education teachers often enter online professional development, thinking "I need to complete the course but don't know why I have to take it" without any further consideration (Johnson, 2004). To prevent this mistake, research suggests that teachers' motivation for taking an online professional development course, learning styles, comfort with technology, and devotion for the course should be considered before these teachers take an online professional development program (Brown & Green, 2003; Ravitz & Hoadley, 2005).

2.1.1. Motivation
Past studies of factors contributing to learner attrition in distance education in educational and training settings suggest that lack of motivation is one of the major causes of failure to complete coursework (Frankola, 2001; Park & Choi, 2009; Rodriguez, Ooms, & Montañez, 2008). Their

level of motivation for enrolling and completing online training is often based on why they are enrolling in the training (Summerville & Johnson, 2006). For example, if teachers want to learn new skills and teaching techniques, they are more likely to stick with the training and finish it. If they are enrolling in an online course because their schedule conflicts with face-to-face training options, then they might not be motivated to fully participate in the online class. To prepare elementary and secondary education teachers for successful completion, the purpose for taking online professional development should be identified (Rodriguez, Ooms, & Montañez, 2008).

2.1.2. Learning Style

Although there are many forms of online professional development, largely, it is divided into two types, including non-instructor-led online training and instructor-led online training (George, 2007). While non-instructor-led online training requires learners to complete activities within a certain period of time without receiving ongoing feedback from an instructor, instructor-led training has someone who will guide them and their classmates through the critical learning requirements and facilitate their learning. According to Summerville and Johnson (2006), non-instructor-led online training could give benefits to a self-directed learner who is able to set his/her own schedule of learning and complete independent studies within the set amount of time. They also added that the self-paced atmosphere allows teachers the privacy of reviewing materials they did not feel they mastered.

Within instructor-led learning, it is important to decide which online professional development teachers prefer, synchronous or asynchronous interactions (George, 2007). Since synchronous or "real time" learning demands teachers to log on at certain times during the day or week and engage online with their classmates and an instructor, this type of learning can be very beneficial if teachers want immediate feedback to their questions and to learn the information along with others (Crichton & Childs, 2004). Asynchronous interactions are those where they log on during the week or training period at their convenience to learn the information and participate in discussion forums. If their online training includes class discussions, then these will occur in a threaded discussion forum, where they will log on and answer questions and share with their classmates at anytime (Hur & Brush, 2009). Asynchronous trainings are good for those who cannot regularly attend a specific time or day of the week. Studies indicated that discussion forums allow teachers to use online collaborative tools to exchange ideas with peers and an instructor and to stay more up-to-date knowledge and information regarding a topic (Frey, 2009).

2.1.3. Comfort with Technology

Stokes (2003) found a significant relationship between the two variables: students who felt more at easy using the Internet were more likely to be satisfied with their online learning experiences than students who did not feel comfortable using the Internet. Also, Xenos and colleagues (2002) indicated that dropout rates were high for students who do not use computers or email due to low computer proficiency skills. Therefore, it is important to know how well teachers deal with computer technology to go through online professional development course. If they are new to online instruction and not comfortable with computer technology, then they need to consider choosing

an online professional development course which provides technical supports or has a user-friendly interface (Rodriguez, Ooms, & Montañez, 2008).

2.1.4. Devotion

It is critical to evaluate how much time elementary and secondary education teachers can set aside for online professional development before deciding to pursue it. Several studies have reported that the top reason for dropping an online course is lack of time (Bocchi, Eastman, & Swift, 2004; Frankola, 2001). Some online learners blamed the online training for requiring more time than they expected, thereby they were unable to find time to finish the study due to their daily workloads. Unfortunately, people have a misperception that online courses require less work than traditional courses (Bocchi, Eastman, & Swift, 2004). This misperception often leads them to fail to finish it. Online professional development will save time in commuting but it will not guarantee less time to complete the online training than learning (Frankola, 2001; Park & Choi, 2009).

2.2. Considerations for Evaluating Online Professional Development

There are plenty of online professional development courses and workshops in education field. Although many questions remain regarding the design and delivery of effective online professional development (Ravitz & Hoadley, 2005), research indicates that content presentation, reliability, difficulty level, technical support, certification, and cost should be considered in order for elementary and secondary education teachers to wisely select the quality of online professional development programs (Crichton & Childs, 2004; Lawless & Pellegrino, 2007; Smith & Meyen, 2003).

2.2.1. Content Presentation

The specific online tools selected for content presentations have a significant influence on the level of learners' acquisition of the content; therefore, the content of the training should guide how information is conveyed (Frey, 2009). If the topic is complex or is presenting training on a new skill or intervention technique, then teachers require seeing a variety of multimedia elements to support the learning. Online training that is text-driven and only offers the learner text-based information is fine for an introductory topic. However, with the advances in technology in general, because more and more online training is able to offer multimedia elements, the content of the training topic needs to matches the methods used to convey the information (Collins et al., 2002).

2.2.2. Reliability

Online professional development programs may be most effective when a content expert wrote the course or acts as a facilitator (Collins et al., 2002; Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005). Content experts can help diagnose and correct teacher misconceptions, recommend useful and reliable resources, validate new insights, and provide context for new learning. Furthermore, the presence of a knowledgeable online instructor can help participants synthesize course material and progress beyond the initial stages of idea discovery and exploration (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005). In order to find out if the online training was developed by reliable and knowledgeable entities, it is important for

elementary and secondary education teachers to check the qualifications of the training by looking for the organization or authors of the training (Collins et al., 2002).

2.2.3. Difficulty Level

Elementary and secondary education teachers' level of existing or prior content knowledge varies, as does the instructional intent of online professional development courses and programs (Donavant, 2009). Although professional development is basically designed to try to facilitate the movement of teachers from novices to higher levels of professional expertise, some courses are created for initial or entry-level novice teachers and other for teachers with teaching experiences and seeking advanced instruction designed to develop competence (George, 2007). Therefore, elementary and secondary education teachers need to consider the area where they want to enhance their knowledge and skills and ask themselves how much they know about this area.

2.2.4. Technical Support

To have online training successfully, one of the most important points to analyze is whether the online professional development provides technical support/assistance. The effectiveness of technical support affects the quality of the online experience for learners and can make or break online courses and programs (Collins et al., 2002). According to the research (Crichton & Childs, 2004), online learners need a mechanism for requesting assistance when they encounter problems. Gaumer-Erickson and Noonan (2010) suggested that if elementary and secondary education teachers are new to computer technology or have never taken an online training before, they will most likely need some technical support. Also, they added that the teachers should check whether the online professional development provides instructions and even short "help" videos of how to access and participate in the training.

2.2.5. Certifications

Online professional development can count toward continuing educational requirements in the same way as any other professional development training (George, 2007). However, some districts continuing education requirements include "seat time" or hours in training. This means that elementary and secondary education teachers will want to fully understand the documentation needed to receive continuing education credit from the online training (Donavant, 2009). Therefore, it is important to find out if certification will be provided and if the information about the online course completion meets the requirements of district they belong to.

2.2.6. Cost

Costs of training can make a difference in terms of what they choose (Lawless & Pellegrino, 2007). Free trainings typically are very short sessions and are often used as a marketing promotion to sign up for more intensive training. This type of free training can help elementary and secondary education teachers decide whether they want more intensive training on a particular topic. Other forms of free online professional development may have been developed by national education organizations to provide information to the field at large. This maybe very beneficial to them,

but they must be sure to check if the free training comes with some form of certificate of completion in order to ensure that the training will count toward professional development and continuing education credits, if that is an important reason to take the training (Brown & Green, 2003). Trainings associated with a registration fee are often ones with an instructor associated with the training, which may be an important consideration (Collins et al., 2002).

3. Conclusion and Strategies for Successfully Completing Online Professional Development

Online professional development provides elementary and secondary education teachers with an effective, efficient way to reach their professional and personal goals as well as pursue lifelong learning opportunities (George, 2007). Unfortunately, several studies indicate that once a teacher has chosen and enrolled in an online professional development option, there are a few key strategies for staying on track through completion (Bocchi, Eastman, & Swift, 2004; Inan, Yukselturk, & Grant, 2009). Therefore, to help teachers reduce the chance of dropping out an online course, this study examined the characteristics of online learners and of online professional development. The considerations of evaluating online learners include teachers' motivation for taking an online professional development course, learning styles, comfort with technology, and devotion for the course. In addition, the considerations for evaluating online professional development consist of content presentation, reliability, difficulty level, technical support, certification, and cost. Based on these considerations, this paper provides some recommendations for successfully completing online professional development to help them identify professional development opportunities that are tailored to their needs and successfully complete these learning experiences.

3.1. Set up a place and time for working on the online professional development

As with all learning, it's important to identify a place conducive for study. This location should be quiet and free from distractions. It's also important to have a computer with internet access and room to spread out materials teachers are going to use. Some online professional development requires access multiple times during the week, so it's important to schedule the training into life (Donavant, 2009).

3.2. Make Sure the Computer Has All of the Software and Equipment Needed to Participate

Prior to or during the first few days of the online professional development, it's important to analyze the computer software the teachers plan to use. Online learners report the greatest frustrations are associated with incompatible equipment, unstable connections, and bandwidth limitations (Collins et al., 2002). So, the teachers should try to access all of the resources for the training to identify software and equipments that need to be updated (Rodriguez, Ooms, & Montañez, 2008).

3.3. Make sure to understand the requirements for completing the training

Like face-to-face professional development, an online professional development course or program should include a syllabus with a detailed timeline which elementary and secondary school teachers can benefit from (Collins et al., 2002). Teachers should review the syllabus prior to the start of the training and then estimate the time that will be required to complete assignments and note any assignments that will require advanced research or preparation (Docherty & Sandhu, 2006).

3.4. Don't wait until the last minute to complete work; it's better to spread it out over time

Often there is a set time frame for completing assignments or online discussions. It is helpful for teachers to organize their time so that they can review all of the necessary material early in the time frame (Rodriguez, Ooms, & Montañez, 2008). With asynchronous discussions, it's often overwhelming to view all of the unread comments toward the end of the discussion. So, teachers can be beneficial from planning to spend 15-30 minutes each day keeping up with the discussion and adding their insights. This will help ensure that they're more engaged in the learning, and it will allow time for them to reflect on the topics prior to completion of the assignments (George, 2007).

3.5. Back up work frequently

Computer glitches will happen, often at the most inopportune times. It is helpful for teachers to plan for these glitches by backing up their work (Crichton & Childs, 2004). For example, for online discussions, teachers may write their comments into a word processing document prior to posting on the training website. This ensures that their comment is saved if it does not post correctly, and it also helps them check the spelling and grammar of their comments. When computer glitches arise, teachers may want to contact their instructor identifying the problem and asking for alternatives if the glitch can't be resolved in a timely manner (Russel et al., 2009). For example, an alternative may be to email assignment to the instructor if the online uploading system in the training website is not functioning properly.

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