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**Breaking Away From Tradition**

E-Education Expands Opportunities For Raising Achievement

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**Teacher Training Goes in Virtual Directions****Educators see an explosion in online-only offerings**By **Stephen Sawchuk**

Between the ringing bells and the standardized class periods, teachers have among the most structured of all careers. Their time for professional growth is equally prescribed, often being set by contracts, district policies, and even state law.

So imagine a teacher who finishes grading some papers, puts the children to bed, and at 9:30 p.m. logs on to an online module to learn new practices for differentiating instruction for his or her English-language-learner students.

That scene is swiftly becoming a reality, as more and more teachers tune out the distractions, turn on their PCs, and log on to Web-based training programs at times that suit their own schedules.

Although no solid data are available on how many teachers receive staff training either partly or exclusively online, the professional-development marketplace has undergone an explosion in offerings. School districts now face a bewildering array of options for offering online professional development, so much so that the term by its very ambiguity can mask the potential and the challenges lurking in online formats.

"'Online' is such an umbrella term that it isn't really very helpful," says Christopher J. Dede, a professor of learning technologies at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, who has published several books on the topic of online teacher training. "It's like saying chalk-based teaching."

Whether online professional development is offered through vendors or created in-house, researchers and practitioners agree that successful models use technology to build on—and enhance—what has been learned about effective

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face-to-face staff development.

"The biggest takeaway we've learned is that online learning can be a very professional experience, a very empowering experience," adds Melinda G. George, the senior director for the Public Broadcasting Service's **TeacherLine**, one of the best-known purveyors of online teacher training. "It lets teachers get what they need, when they need it, in a way that is accessible to them."

And for states that have an online-delivery infrastructure, such as a virtual school network, the online training also has the potential to lower costs over the long run while providing more uniform professional-development experiences for teachers.

Although developing a solid online course for the first time can be costly, districts and states can reuse that framework, focusing future attention on how to improve the quality of online instruction, says William R. Thomas, the director of educational technology for the Atlanta-based **Southern Regional Education Board**, a state consortium.

"So much of what goes on today in traditional education is based on ZIP code," says Thomas, who has worked with SREB states to improve their online professional-development offerings. "Imagine if, all of a sudden, every teacher had access to a good online course."

Early efforts to move teacher training online consisted of little more than a series of slides or self-guided screens through which teachers would click—essentially the online equivalent of the much-maligned one-day workshops or lectures that still make up much of professional development in the United States.

"In the beginning it was you, the computer, and the content, and often it was very good content and very good material, but there wasn't an instructor, a facilitator of a group of professionals," says Jamey T. Fitzpatrick, the president and chief executive officer of the Michigan Virtual University. That non-degree-granting nonprofit body hosts **Michigan LearnPort**, an online professional-development platform through which the state's teachers can earn continuing education credits online.

The "facilitated" format, which is gaining in popularity, rose as one solution to give teachers more opportunities to reflect on their practices with an expert, as well as with their peers. In that format, teachers access certain materials, such as readings on a new instructional practice, on their course's Web site. They are expected to read and digest the materials, complete related assignments, and take part in threaded discussions within a certain time frame, typically a week.

### Tips

1. Work with state partners to build online professional-development offerings off existing platforms, such as a state virtual school.
2. Begin with a clear idea of which teachers you want to target for online professional development, and which format—facilitated course, webinar, or online network—will best suit their needs.
3. Provide training for online course facilitators so that they know how to support teachers' learning, guide an online discussion, and follow up with those teachers who aren't engaging in discussions.
4. When investigating courses offered by third-party sources, create a quality-control review process to determine whether such courses meet your needs.

The format gives teachers time to go back to their classrooms and schools, attempt a new strategy, and then reconnect with facilitators and peers to discuss what succeeded—and what didn't.

The practice also better aligns with the research on professional development, which suggests that continued, sustained engagement in content with peers makes for changes in teacher behavior, and, it is hoped, more student learning.

A facilitated format, experts say, adds three major benefits that can improve teacher engagement in ongoing training. First, it can maintain or even increase the level of interaction of an in-person class, because an online instructor or facilitator isn't limited by time constraints and can have multiple dialogues with each participant. Second, it allows for a measure of flexibility in timing, so a teacher can participate at a time and place that let him or her more fully engage in the content. And finally, the online medium offers a way for those teachers who tend to hold back during in-person professional development to express themselves.

"It's pretty hard to stand up face to face in front of a group of your peers and admit you're not as great of a teacher as you could be," Dede says. "Most people find being online disinhibiting a little bit. That kind of dialogue is important. Professional development can't really start with the idea that you're perfect."

The benefits of well-constructed, facilitated online learning are such that Michigan's LearnPort developers are gradually shifting the system's delivery methods away from self-guided courses toward facilitated ones. About 20 percent of the platform's offerings are now facilitated. The PBS TeacherLine uses exclusively facilitated courses.

Facilitated courses have also given way to "blended" or "hybrid" professional development that couple a primarily online-based setting with some face-to-face activities. That's the model of online teacher training that's used primarily in Washoe County, Nev., a district of 63,000 students near Reno. To create its own system aligned with district goals, Washoe enlisted an outside vendor with expertise in online learning, resulting in its own platform, [ANGEL online](#).

Joseph F. Elcano, the district's director of educational technology, for instance, leads one course on ANGEL that teaches educators how to integrate iPods into music classes. In person, the participants learn new uses for their devices; online, they troubleshoot, offer feedback to one another, and share tips and strategies.

"Like everything, there's a progression, from using the iPod instead of a CD player, which is the obvious 'aha,' to how can we move beyond this," Elcano says. "Now [the teachers] are recording rehearsals, so if the trumpets are too loud, they can record it and play it back."

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Many educators still hold the view that professional development conducted largely online is less rigorous than that offered face-to-face, however.

"We've busted a few myths over the years, but we still battle a little," says George of PBS. "People think it's going to be easy, like surfing the Web. They sign up and say, 'I'm here, where's my credit?'"

And even the flashiest of online systems cannot compensate for poor-quality training, Dede of Harvard warns.

"You can have a fabulous professional-development infrastructure and terrible professional development if people don't understand the content and the pedagogy," he points out. "[The technology platform] is the least important aspect and probably the easiest to outsource."

In the absence of better data, the National Education Association and other groups are stepping up efforts to establish a floor for the quality of online professional-development offerings. The 3.2 million-member union is poised to roll out the NEA Academy, essentially an online repository that will link educators to online courses that have passed a rigorous peer-review process. Where a dearth of high-quality offerings exists, the NEA will create a course in-house.

A quality-review board, staffed by selected members and state officials, scores the online offerings using a rubric adapted from online-professional-development standards, says Tom Blanford, the associate director of the NEA Academy. It evaluates offerings based on their evidence base, their links to specific state and national standards for academic content, and whether they draw on content-specific pedagogy. (The union is keeping the names of the review board's panelists under wraps to prevent them from being lobbied by commercial vendors, who alongside nonprofit bodies, submit their courses for review.)

Once they accept an online module, NEA officials iron out licensing issues and other details with providers before making it available to teachers on the [NEA Academy's Web site](#).

Online formats also offer novel ways to increase teachers' accountability for their participation in training, proponents add. Participation in online discussions and related work can be easily tracked, notes Leslie D. Doukas, the leader of the Washoe County ANGEL initiative. "It's very documentable about what you did and didn't do," Doukas says. "You can't just sit in the back of the class and get your credit."

Some of the newest and most promising forms of online professional development aren't connected to formal courses or even to continuing education or graduate credit at all. Drawing on features of social networking, districts are setting up online networks to allow teachers, coaches, and mentors to connect with peers serving in similar subject areas or positions, discuss common topics, and reflect on practices.

Although the online-network approach to professional development can especially help teachers who are in the most isolated of school settings, it has raised concerns by experts who argue that, to truly improve schools, the teachers working together in one building with a set group of students should devise professional learning strategies that cross-cut grades and subjects.

"One of the things we've been nervous about with online learning is that it could set us back decades where districts purchase access to a series of online courses for teachers, and teachers go home at night and sit alone in front of their computers, answering questions all in isolation," says Joellen Killion, the deputy executive director of the National Staff Development Council, a Dallas-based membership organization that works to improve teacher training in schools.

"That is the kind of online learning that I think is dangerous," she says, "and does not reflect

any of the things we support about collaborative learning connected to classrooms.”

It is also the reason why the leaders of the NEA Academy plan to build in features for advanced course offerings to encourage teams of educators to use the courses as the basis for professional learning communities in their schools. For instance, Blanford says, certain courses will be accompanied by downloadable forms and exercises that need to be completed by more than one person at a school—a mentor teacher and a novice. Such features, Blanford says, will encourage teams of educators to use courses as the basis for professional learning communities in their schools.

The San Francisco-based **Teachscape**, one of the largest for-profit online-platform vendors, includes a custom publishing tool in its new Teachscape XL platform that’s designed to aid school-based learning communities. Using this tool, teachers can upload student work samples, assessment data, a professional article of interest, and—for the most confident of teachers—a recording of their own teaching. Such artifacts serve as the basis for additional discussion, says Maryann R. Marrapodi, Teachscape’s chief learning officer.

“When a professional learning community is set up within a school, there is often a limited amount of time,” she says. “Through the online platform, they can continue their discussions anytime they want. It is an enhancement and extension, rather than an obstacle.”

Indeed, commercial developers are increasingly offering a mix of features, realizing that certain professional-development formats work in some contexts but not others. A teacher who wants to brush up on algebra content can do so in a self-guided course, but one who is learning how to teach the subject for the first time needs more-intense interaction and support, Fitzpatrick of the Michigan Virtual University explains.

The expansion of new technology, nevertheless, forces providers to stay on their toes and continually determine ways to refine their offerings.

“One of the difficulties is that it’s a rapidly moving target,” says Blanford, who adds that the NEA Academy will remove programs over time as enhanced ones become available. “The best programs on [English-language learners] from 18 months ago are superseded by the one that’s coming out tomorrow.”

Experts are also working to improve the links between teachers’ online professional development and the types of teaching they do in their own classrooms. Washoe County’s ANGEL project, for instance, doubles as a platform on which K-12 teachers trained in how to use the system can design their own online courses for students.



“Our students don’t learn the way we learned; they use a variety of interactive tools, and in order to do that we need to expose teachers to using those tools,” says Jan Morrison, the state and federal programs project director for the Washoe County district. “The whole online venue is where we do that.”

And like the best of teachers, Morrison eagerly anticipates the next leap forward. As a member

of the New Media Consortium, a community of leading universities and researchers investigating the use of emerging technologies for learning, she is experimenting with possible training applications for Second Life, a computer-based simulated world. The platform allows subscribers to interact with one another using “avatars”—digital objects or characters that represent them on a computer screen.

In theory, says Morrison, such technology could allow teachers to try out new practices in a classroom populated by “virtual” students, before they interact with live pupils.

“This is a great opportunity for me to figure out the new technologies,” she says. “You’re not going to believe what’s going to be happening out there.”

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