

# What Makes Online Courses Work?

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Online professional development for educators is an attractive concept that offers a number of benefits for educators. Online distributed learning breaks down the barriers of time and space that can often impede the planning of staff development activities. Asynchronous delivery of staff development online also affords the participant an any time, any place feature that easily accommodates teachers' busy schedules. Moreover, an online program with a high-quality, well-developed catalogue can actually allow teachers to tailor their professional development experience to meet their unique professional needs, unlike traditional one-size-fits-all training models.

Across the nation school systems are approaching online professional in varied and creative ways. In some instances, schools have purchased a delivery platform for online coursework (such as Blackboard or WebCT) and worked on developing original professional development courses that closely match the identified needs of their teachers. In other cases schools have enrolled their teachers in fully developed online programs (like Connected University and Riverdeep) that offer a complete catalogue of courses to meet the wide-ranging needs of a school system's professional development needs. In both cases, results have been mixed in the return school systems are getting on dollars invested.

Why is online professional development still finding its niche on the professional development landscape? Many factors need to be considered; among them teachers unfamiliar with online learning environments, uncomfortable with technology in general, or unable to access online courses from home. Also, administrators are learning the role they need to play to promote online courses, from getting the message out as course enrollment periods open to following up on teacher participation and completion as courses wind down. Everyone must take ownership in the process if it is to be a success.

One key component in delivery of online training is a face-to-face component that supports learners both on and offline. This can take many shapes. For example, in purchasing a district-wide subscription to Connected University a school system can utilize on site training to help make teachers familiar with the online learning environment and the processes involved in successfully participating in a course. This kind of up front intervention can help facilitate teacher interest in online course offerings and build confidence in teachers as online learners.

Another strategy that can help promote online success is the hybrid course. In this model participants meet weekly face-to-face while working online to complete readings and assignments in between class meetings. This allows for a sense of connection to the conventional classroom while enabling learners to build on their successes in the virtual classroom. Certainly this can be designed into locally developed courses, but more and more national online professional development programs are seeing the value of providing this hybrid model for subscribers. Connected University's Bring Your Own Guide program allows local professional development trainers to lead sections of CU courses for a local audience, including the option of offering face-to-face meetings as a feature of course delivery. This allows school systems to take advantage of high-quality off the shelf course content and their local trainer talent to best meet the needs of their staff.

If you already have an online professional development program in place, how can you revitalize your initiative to promote teacher participation and success?

- Promote course offerings through email campaigns, listservs, and local administrators.
- Emphasize the “any time, any where” nature of online learning as an advantage for busy teachers.
- Bill online course opportunities as an alternative to traditional professional development offerings for teachers.
- Afford teachers the opportunity to create individual professional development plans by selecting a series of training opportunities (including online learning) to fulfill the district's professional development requirement.
- Offer recertification points for completed courses based on the hours estimated necessary to successfully complete a course.
- Package an online cluster of courses that, once successfully completed, allows teachers to earn a specific certification, such as a district certificate in distance learning, technology integration, No Child Left Behind standards, or any local initiative that you wish to promote.
- Introduce a hybrid model that allows teachers to connect with one another face-to-face, in addition to working together online.
- Offer support to teachers to implement the projects they develop via online courses in their classroom.

The most effective ways to energize teachers as online learners is to provide meaningful ways to plug virtual learning into your existing professional development program. Teachers do not respond well to additional requirements in an already demanding profession. They are much more receptive when they perceive online training as a time-saving, efficient way to receive training in useful, high-interest subjects that they can immediately make use of in the classroom. By engaging teachers to proactively address their needs, online course delivery can be a vital piece in the professional development puzzle of the twenty-first century.

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