Chapter 3
Informal Individual Learning via Virtual Professional Development:
A Proposal for Massive Open Online Professional Informal Individual Learning (MOOPIL)

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ABSTRACT

This chapter incudes a discussion of general professional development and online professional development and professional learning. In particular, the authors present information on virtual professional learning from a U.S. federally-funded Investing in Innovation (i3) grant, English Language and Literacy Acquisition – Validation (ELLA-V). The grant term used is ELLA-Virsity. The overarching concept for ELLA-Virsity is proposed, and that is massive open online informal individual learning (MOOPIL).

INTRODUCTION

Professional development (PD) is considered critical for continuing improvement in all professions. Sufficient published literature exists, particularly in the healthcare industry, which demonstrates that such PD, or continuing education, is believed to positively impact that industry. Guskey (2002), in particular, noted that for education, PD for teachers has been proposed as the single greatest factor for influencing student achievement, and that "professional development programs are systemic efforts to bring about change in the classroom practices of teachers, in their attitudes and beliefs, and in the learning outcomes of students" (p. 381). There is, indeed, a belief that there is a positive connection between PD and practice, but that is based in observation and expert opinions, and not on specific evaluative research studies (Scher & O'Reilly, 2009).

There have been some findings over the past 2.5 decades related to face-to-face PD. Rasmussen (2008) reported a synthesis of studies published between 2000 and 2008 related to components of effective PD, which includes (a) a focus on teaching specific content (Loucks-Horsley, Love, Stiles, Mundry, & Hewson, 2003), (b) the integration of specific teaching practices or pedagogy into the professional development (Foulger, 2005), (c) the engagement of participants in active learning (Boyle, Lamprianou, & Boyle, 2005), (d) collective participation of teachers from the same grades and/or subject (Snow-Renner & Lauer, 2005), and (e) delivery with an extended duration (Jeanpierre, Oberhauser, & Freeman, 2005). When the observed results of teacher PD have failed to bring about change in teacher practice, Guskey (2002) indicated it is due to the fact that teacher motivation for engaging in professional learning was not taken into account, and Loucks-Horseley, Love, Stiles, Mundry, and Hewson (2003) suggested that such a situation was due to the method in which the professional learning occurred. However, basically, the field is void of knowing how PD, in general, as well as online PD, directly impacts teacher behavior, and subsequently, student learning.

In a review of 400 articles related to online, face-to-face, and hybrid teacher PD prior to 2009 by Dede, Ketelhut, Whitehouse, Breit, and McCloskey (2009), 40 studies met their criteria for high-quality empirical research focused on interventions to improve teacher practice and/or student learning. However, of these studies, fewer than five were noted to include interventions designed to improve teacher pedagogical content knowledge, skills, and practices.

It was noted by Campbell (2012) that online learning may be the biggest educational change since the printing press as it gives learners the opportunity to study at a time and place that is convenient. Busy professionals can fit in online PD before or after work and around their other life commitments. Certainly, online PD provides teachers with such opportunities and particularly when such PD is not offered within their districts. However, Kear (2010) noted that being online does not allow for visual or auditory communication cues, and there can be long delays between messages, which can lead to it feeling impersonal and people disengaging from online learning. Others such as Inan, Yukselturk, and Grant (2009) and Park and Choi (2009) also expressed concern over fairly high dropout rates of online learners, and Bocchi, Eastman, and Swift (2004) indicated that dropping out is due to a lack of time and a misunderstanding that online learning requires less time commitment.

Many school district leaders are turning to online PD for their teachers as a cost-saving measure. However, many also realize that as Joyce and Showers (2002) indicated of general PD—that just gaining the knowledge does not make for application. They would not equate just knowing as professional learning. Many (e.g., Irby & Brown, 2000; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) would acknowledge that improved practice requires reflection on that practice. Irby and Brown (2000) recommended the Reflection Cycle in professional learning, which includes describing the practice, analyzing the practice, appraising the outcome of the practice, and then transforming practice. No matter what type of online PD in which an individual engages, whether it is a community of learners related to targeted job roles, whether it is a group of individuals who come together out of interest in a topic, or whether it is an individual who is interested in improving his/her own skills independently, we contend that reflection at an independent level and also in a discussion with at least one other individual is needed to retain the concepts promoted and thus to apply the new knowledge as transformed practice.

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