Chapter 15

Assessment Processes for Online Professional Development

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ABSTRACT

Professional development (PD) assessment is an ongoing, integral activity in order to improve results at individual, training, program, and institutional levels. Principles of assessment are outlined, and the general processes of assessment design, delivery, and analysis are explained. Technology greatly expands the possible data that can be collected for assessment purposes. Emphasis is placed on online environments, noting the issues that are unique to that environment.

INTRODUCTION

Assessment serves as a core activity in professional development (PD) at individual, training, program, and institutional levels. The intent is participant, instructor, and program improvement. First, educational goals and objectives need to be identified; who makes those decisions? Locating or developing a valid and reliable assessment instrument (or set of tools) requires answering a number of questions: what is assessed, who is assessed, who does the assessing, when and how frequently is the assessment done, how is it done, how are the data analyzed, who analyzes the data, how are the findings acted upon, who acts upon them, what accountability is present? These decisions may be made and perhaps acted upon by the PD enterprise.

In an online environment, participants and instructors can interact more often, and preserve their thinking processes more easily. Work can be posted and shared quickly and efficiently. Conversations about PD topics can continue without few space and time constraints. As a result, assessment can be more effective.

BACKGROUND ON ASSESSMENT

Principles of Assessment

Assessing professional development programs and their support mechanisms takes time and effort: from deciding what to assess through choosing an appropriate instrument, gathering the data, and analyzing the results. Any slip along the way can lessen its effect and benefits, so the process needs to be planned and implemented carefully.

To this end, the American Association of Higher Education (AAHE) Assessment Forum (2003) identified nine principles to guide assessment of participant learning. These principles apply well to assessing professional development in general and to online environments in particular.

1. Use educational values as your touchstone. Measure what you value. In online PD, values are determined all the stakeholders, particularly the PD provider, the participants, and the workplace.
2. Assessing adult learning as a complex set of skills, knowledge, and dispositions gained over time. As such, use a variety of assessment methods from different points of view and time. In online PD, assessment normally begins long before the training session occurs. Input is derived from the target audience, the workplace, and professional organizations. However, online PD needs to also assess the learners at the beginning of a training session in order to ascertain current needs and resources, which impacts the content and method of delivery. For example, media-rich resources might need to be omitted if participants cannot access a high-speed network; additionally, the PD provider might need to remediate participants who lack some prerequisite skills.
3. Have clear, specific educational goals. Assessment should lead to improvement, so all stakeholders should agree on precisely what needs to be examined – and why. Just as the needs assessment should involve all stakeholders, so too should assessment decisions. However, participants in online PD may well come from different backgrounds, and decide to engage in online PD for different reasons so that consensus on assessment goals might be difficult to achieve. Nevertheless, the educational goals should be clearly stipulated up front, and are often the basis for the audience to decide whether or not to participate in the online PD.
4. Consider both processes and products. How an adult learner solves a problem reflects both internal mental schemas as well as instructional approaches and content. In online environments, assessment needs to address technical expertise of both the instructor as well as the participants. In addition, achievement may be constrained by the technology itself, particularly on the side of the participant.
5. Assess on an ongoing basis. Baselines, benchmarks, and culminating experiences need to be assessed so timely interventions can be incorporated to optimize learning. There should be a spirit of continuous improvement. Online PD has the potential for immediate feedback and ongoing monitoring. The instructional design and the online platform greatly impact the capacity for ongoing and interactive assessment. Furthermore, the instructor's own practice impacts how assessment is implemented.
6. Foster broad involvement. Each stakeholder brings a unique perspective that can impact others' efforts. Active participation by the entire learning community also optimizes communication and systematic coordination. Online PD has the potential for continuous interaction and community building, depending on how it is structured and supported. Dynamically-built online PD that is based on a community of practice is most likely to

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