

## Chapter 20

# Moving Beyond Trial and Error: Exploring Case Studies of Professional Development Models in K–12 Blended Learning

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Through 15 years of research on social presence examining the level of connectedness among students and instructors, the authors uncovered a recurring theme: the need for districts to provide better support professional development (PD) in K-12 settings. In this chapter, they address some of the challenges in implementing PD, describe and explain the social presence model (SPM), provide evidence from multiple case studies, and summarize the key findings. The research uncovered that while online and blended teachers often recognized the need for continued support and its role in helping them be more effective educators, they often moved forward without adequate PD. Because the passion and perseverance of these teachers predict long-term success for students, districts need to have a plan in place to help them get the PD needed to maximize their experience and impact student learning most effectively. In closing, the authors offer micro-communities as one robust, socially present, easy-to-implement, and budget-conscious solution that at least partially addresses this growing concern.*

## INTRODUCTION

This chapter leverages 15 years of case study research on *social presence*—the level of connectedness among students and instructors in online and blended learning environments. Our research centers on the social presence model (SPM) as a theoretical framework, examining student-teacher connectedness. In this chapter, we focus our findings on the topic of professional development (PD) within two very different K12 cases studies of blended learning models.

Our research uncovered that K12 teachers recognize the need for continued support in helping them be effective online educators, but are unable to articulate their specific needs for PD in online and blended learning environments. This finding means that districts must plan ahead and provide a multitude of options for addressing teachers' continuous PD needs for blended and online learning. We provide help and suggestions for academic leaders considering PD programs or modifications.

In this chapter, we begin with a brief background on the rise of online and blended learning in K12 settings and the resultant need for PD, describe and explain the social presence model (SPM), provide evidence from multiple case studies, summarize the key findings, and offer micro-communities as a powerful partial solution to this growing concern.

## Evolution of K12 Professional Development for Online Learning

In recent years, there has been a shift in the K12 online learning landscape from the primary providers of online education being either state public virtual schools or online schools run by major companies, such as K12 Inc. The sheer rise in demand for K12 online and blended learning opportunities and increased enrollments have led public schools and districts to develop their own programs (Gemin & Pape, 2017), which in turn has caused a major demand for teachers to fill the void as online and blended learning instructors. Although many high-quality teachers are interested in these new opportunities, some teachers are diving in without adequate training and PD to help their students be successful in these learning environments. Their pre-service teacher training, in most cases, did not incorporate training and preparation to teach in an online learning environment (Jackson, 2018). Preservice programs are still predominantly designed for face-to-face (F2F) teaching and learning, although that is slowly changing as well (Kennedy & Archambault, 2011, 2012, 2013). Additionally, training and PD for current online teachers varies greatly depending on the individual teacher, school, district, or organization.

This need for K12 teacher training and PD has been pointed out by several renowned researchers (Kennedy & Archambault, 2011, 2012; Jackson, 2018). Specifically, Jackson (2018) stresses the need to explore and personalize education in regard to PD, calling for “additional teacher education and PD on the types of characteristics apparent in K12 online students, as well as the skills necessary for meeting the needs of these students” (p. 126). Multiple sources cite the importance of targeted training for K12 teachers to provide professional programs that ease the transition to teaching in these sometimes new blended and online learning situations (Abrami, Bernard, Bures, Borokhovski, & Tamim, 2011; Basham, Smith, Greer, & Marino, 2017; Garrett Dikkers & Whiteside, 2017; Garrett Dikkers, Whiteside, & Lewis, 2012, 2013, 2017; Oliver, Kellogg, Townsend, & Brady, 2010; Rice, 2009; Whiteside & Garrett Dikkers, 2015; Whiteside, Garrett Dikkers, & Lewis, 2014, 2016, 2017).

Not only do some teachers lack adequate training, PD, and experience in online and blended learning environments, but there is also a direct connection between teacher preparation and student performance. In an in-depth analysis of state policies, case studies, Schools and Staffing Surveys, and the National

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