

Encouraging Participation in Voluntary, Online Staff Development

Graeme Salter

University of Western Sydney, Australia

INTRODUCTION

In order to determine what factors might lead to increased participation and effectiveness in voluntary online staff development, a case study was conducted. The results revealed a problem known as “churn.” That is, the majority of users went to the site only once or twice and then only for a short amount of time. The major barrier cited by staff was lack of time. This article examines approaches to overcome involved for both users and developers of online learning activities.

BACKGROUND

Traditional staff development activities in higher education are an essential element in any systematic professional development program. However, there are problems associated with these types of activities. For example, the often-used practice of an “education developer” sitting down one-to-one is only suitable for small numbers of staff and depends on the availability of a skilled specialist (Grant, 1996). This methodology also suffers from the amount of time and resources needed in educational environments with limited, and often, diminishing resources (Slay, 1999).

Activities that can deal with larger numbers, such as workshops, but require “synchronous” attendance for a period of time also have limitations. For example, they tend to attract the same participants (Zuber-Skerritt, 1992). When an event is voluntary, attendance usually reflects a willingness to improve one’s own practice. Because of this, many that attend are already good teachers and not necessarily the most in need of such development. This does not mean that those who fail to attend are not good teachers. There are many barriers to attendance—the most commonly cited is usually that of time pressure.

Activities that are scheduled require that the staff member is available at that particular time and for that

amount of time. Staff are often reluctant to give up large amounts of time, particularly if they have concerns over the relevance of an activity. It is difficult to design a one-off activity that is relevant to all, given the wide diversity of needs and levels of competence that participants bring. Many staff have experienced giving up a day only to find that few of their needs were met. Negative experiences like this make it more difficult to attract participants in the future.

When staff do make the effort, it is often to a single event rather than being a part of a coordinated staff development plan. While short-term training sessions have value in imparting certain skills, they are frequently used beyond their effective domains and in some institutions become the dominant method of staff development (Grant, 1996). The ability of such short-term training to promote lasting change is often questioned (Fowler & Dickie, 1997; Hall & Hord, 1987; Loucks-Horsley, Hewson, Love, & Stiles, 1998). Rather than “inoculating” teachers with one-shot injections of information, many suggest that effective professional development should be a systematic and continuing process (Apple, 2000; Butler, 1992; Goral, 2001; Grant, 1996).

There are numerous potential benefits in providing staff development online. These include reduced travel, the ability to provide just-in-time and just-enough learning, the potential for increased collaboration and reflection, a degree of privacy that can overcome fear of being seen as foolish, modeling of online teaching, a lower need for facilities and supplies, and the potential to reach large numbers of staff. Nevertheless, it remains to be seen whether these benefits will eventuate in practice. There are many untested assumptions in the suggested benefits listed. For example, do staff really prefer just-in-time learning from their office? For someone who spends a large part of their day at a computer keyboard, “classroom training might sound much more appealing than another three hours spent clicking from one bland slide

to the next” (LGuide, 1999, paragraph 1). The convenience of online learning may be easily negated by technical problems, which can generate “extremely strong feelings of frustration and anger” (North, Strain, & Abott, 2000, paragraph 1).

In addition, the potential benefits listed are neither automatic or exclusive. Many of these are shared with various forms of traditional staff development. For example, action learning is highly collaborative. On the other hand, online teaching has the “potential to be just as inflexible and inappropriate as any other form of poor instruction” (Bennett, Priest, & Macpherson, 1999). There is no guarantee that tools that have the potential to enhance learning, such as computer-conferencing, will be used effectively. As the field of online teaching is relatively new, what constitutes “effective” use needs further research. It is recognized that best practice will only develop over time (Morris, Mitchell, & Bell, 1999).

Because we do not know which aspects of current educational innovation will be heretical and which will be proved right in the light of research, we need to continue testing a wide variety of methods and technologies in different contexts. (Freeman & Capper, 1999, paragraph 2)

To test the assumptions about the benefits of online staff development, a case study using a voluntary online staff development module “Introduction to Online Teaching” was conducted.

THE PROBLEM OF CHURN

Over a period of several months, 63 staff visited the site and nearly 1,500 pages were viewed. This sug-

gests a measure of success. However, a closer examination of the log files revealed deficiencies with the site. The site was developed with the expectation that staff would use it as a resource and return often. However, as Figure 1 shows, the vast majority of users went to the site only once or twice.

While this activity, referred to as “churn,” is rarely referred to in educational literature, it is quite well known in other disciplines such as e-commerce and marketing.

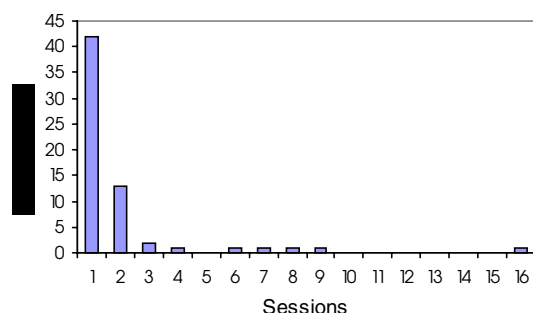
Once you’ve lost a customer, you’ve lost him for good. The costs of flipping to another Web site are so low it doesn’t make any sense for people to go back to a site that failed them the first time. In the Web world, this phenomenon is called churn. People check out your site once or twice and never return. (Kuniavsky, 1998, paragraph 1)

The amount of time spent at the site showed a similar pattern (see Figure 2). The majority of sessions lasted for five minutes or less. This is also reflected in e-business research. Neilsen suggests that the attention span of an e-commerce transactor has gone down from twelve seconds to about five seconds (Neilsen, 2000).

Part of the attraction of providing staff development online as a voluntary rather than a formal or accredited program is that staff can use it as they see fit. Of course, this means that they may not use it as expected or as was intended. In traditional workshops, staff tend not to walk out when unsatisfied, if only through politeness. On the Web a hasty exit is only a mouse click away. As one participant said:

- **Interview comment:** “Anything past about two clicks for me, the third click often doesn’t get me there.”

Figure 1. Count of sessions by users



THE TIME BARRIER

The Web is a new medium. Not only do we need to ask, “If I build it, will they come?” We also need to ask, “If they come, will they stay? Will they return? Will they interact while they are there?” Certain aspects of promotion and design of the site were found to contribute to the problem of churn. However, the major factor cited as a barrier to participation was

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