Chapter 97

An Investigation of a Computer Training Company's Migration to a New Distance Learning Platform and the Implementation of an Online Professional Development Program

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to determine if the Training Partner Program was successful in preparing trainers to use a new distance learning platform. Results indicate the program was a success in improving self-efficacy, engagement, and collaboration among trainers. Additionally, characteristics of online trainers are identified. Online learning in higher education, business training, and elementary/secondary schools is increasing exponentially and developing effective professional development programs to prepare instructors is of paramount importance. The current study provides valuable insight for any training managers or educators developing activities and exercises to train their faculty on distance learning software and systems.

INTRODUCTION

Online training is becoming as common as traditional instructor-led, lecture-based deliveries. Whether instruction utilizes an asynchronous distance learning platform or a fully-featured synchronous system with video and audio capabilities, new technologies, competencies, and attitudes are required to effectively manage teaching numerous types of students who may be hundreds

of miles away from the traditional classroom. The value of professional development, either synchronous, asynchronous or in a brick and mortar format, cannot be underestimated and is the glue that keeps schools, corporations, and non-profits bound to quality delivery of products and services. Moreover, the purpose of professional development should be to promote and enhance learning (Webster-Wright, 2009). At the heart of professional development lies what Hargreaves and Fulan (2012) coined "professional capital" that must be developed in order for organizations to reach their optimal effectiveness. Professional Development opportunities "have the potential to engage teachers in the development of a collective culture allowing them to learn from and with each other" (Patton, Parker, & Pratt, 2013, p. 441) and this collaboration can cultivate a camaraderie that supports learning in a journey to seek new knowledge and skillsets. Successful professional development involves challenging learners to make meaning from the content, in a new format, and must be ongoing, learner-centered, and physically and mentally active (O'Sullivan, 2007; Parker, Patton, & Tannehill, 2012). Professional capital has the potential to embolden professionals to engage in new and innovative methods.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Online Professional Development

Online professional development is a relatively new phenomenon in the literature, and this new, innovative type of online professional development has dramatically increased as technologies have advanced (Brown & Green, 2003). Professional development, in an online format, has to take on a new persona that integrates the essentials of professional development but also effectively incorporates online components. Online learning or distance education is similar to brick and mortar education in that it includes the triad of instructor, learners and content. Online instructors need effective, evidence-based professional development in order to successfully meet the diverse population in which they serve. Professional development trainers, one would argue, are no different than teachers in that they are facilitators of learning and partners in inquiry. With that said, online training must be accountable for engaging learners, building rapport, and fostering ongoing development and support in an electronic format that differs significantly from what we envisioned professional development to be ten years ago.

More recently, the role of online instructor/trainer has moved from transactional to transformative in that they must consider their role differently than in the past. Within this vein, online professional development should include active engagement, ongoing discussion and construction of new learning. Laurillard (1994) argued the importance of discussion and reflection during online learning, and Hiltz and Turoff (1978) identified that facilitators must be cognizant of the need for an online environment that is supportive, engaging, and stimulating in order for participants to construct knowledge. Construction of knowledge is often operationalized through reflection. Moreover, Tagg (1994) defined a facilitator of professional development as "one that motivates, provides support, and stimulates" (p. 40), and involves participants in multiple opportunities to engage with other students and/or professionals. This sentiment holds true today in the online training atmosphere.

Collaboration/Peer-Assisted Learning

Understanding how collaboration impacts learning and how collaborative groups construct knowledge requires examination of learning outcomes. The simple fact that learners are given an environment in which to collaborate does not guarantee learners will construct new knowledge or will experience

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