

Chapter 2

Conceptualizing Characteristics of Professional Learning in an Online Environment

Aimee L. Morewood
West Virginia University, USA

Julie W. Ankrum
Indiana University of Pennsylvania, USA

Allison Swan Dagen
West Virginia University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter describes the intersection between documented research-based practices for effective professional learning and Garrison, Anderson, and Archer's conceptual framework for effective online learning and engagement, known as the community of inquiry (CoI). A social constructivist perspective is used to align the features of effective professional learning (e.g., duration, collaborative participation, active learning, coherence, and content focus) with the three CoI presences (e.g., teaching, social, and cognitive presences). Practical examples of online tools, for both synchronous and asynchronous online professional learning offerings, are discussed and implications for practice and research are presented.

INTRODUCTION

The physical “brick and mortar” classroom is starting to lose its monopoly as the place of learning (Nguyen, 2015, p.309).

As suggested in the quote above, face-to-face instruction delivered in a physical classroom is no longer the primary platform for ongoing continuing education. For decades, the education field has witnessed the growth of online instruction as the delivery platform has gained a foothold in education and continuous professional learning opportunities for teachers. Upon completion of formal teacher preparation courses

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and after securing employment in schools, teachers are required to participate in on going professional learning (PL) opportunities throughout their careers. Some of these opportunities are offered through their school district but teachers also seek out individualized professional learning opportunities. Some ways teachers engage in PL, include book studies, student data conversations in professional learning communities, and graduate coursework. Given the variety of formats in which teachers can participate in PL, research has focused on the characteristics to establish common themes nested within effective PL opportunities (Bean & Ippolito, Dillon et al., 2011; Bean & Morewood, 2011; Morewood, Ankrum, & Bean, 2010; Parsons, Ankrum, & Morewood 2016; Penuel, Fishman, Yamaguchi, & Gallagher, 2007; Taylor, Raphael, & Au, 2011; Taylor et al., 2005).

It has been twenty years since Abernathy (1999) touted online learning's presence by stating, "online learning is not the next big thing; it is the now thing" (p. 36). Online learning opportunities in education are more available than ever to support teachers' professional learning. Various online professional learning opportunities include for-profit institutional and organizational offerings, non-profit higher education institutional offerings (i.e., traditional coursework and non-credit granting work), state mandated and operated experiences (Zygouris-Coe, Yao, Tao, Hahs-Vaughn, & Baumbach, 2004), professional organizations (e.g., International Literacy Association) and district and school level offerings. Further, social media tools (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, podcasts, etc.) are also a way for teachers to continue their professional learning.

As schools struggle to design and implement high-quality, meaningful, cost-effective experiences, the traditional models of PL seem not only dated but in most cases ineffective. School level planners are wise to look to online options for delivery of strategic, content-focused learning opportunities. Further, as additional options outside of traditional school-based PL emerge, teachers who prefer personalized experiences are provided choices within a wide range of online experiences, both to fulfill mandatory school requirements and/or to fulfill more intrinsically inspired learning needs.

The focus of this chapter is an exploration of the intersection between widely acknowledged and implemented research-based practices of effective PL and a conceptual framework for effective online learning and engagement called the Community of Inquiry (CoI) (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). Our goal in writing this chapter is to present a model for PL providers to guide online PL as a promising practice for teacher growth and thus, student achievement as well. The model we present in this chapter updates our original conceptual frame (Morewood, Andkrum, & Swan Dagen, (2017) and discusses how active engagement is present across all three CoI presences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Effective PL

Substantive research on teacher learning and PL is available in the field. The focus of the body of research on PL is quite varied, including concepts such as workshop implementation, peer-coaching, and book study groups. Regardless of the type of PL, there is robust research in the field focusing on specific characteristics associated with effective PL. According to Desimone (2009) effective PL opportunities must:

- Have a strong content focus
- Integrate active learning opportunities

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