

Chapter III

“Making Teachers Better”: A Brief History of Professional Development for Teachers

One of the requirements of a profession is that its members somehow continue to learn, to grow, to renew themselves, so that their interactions with ideas and with clients are reflective of the best knowledge and skill available to them (Griffin, 1979, p. 127).

In 2007, reports from the Office of the Secretary of Education’s Web site listed statistics about educational technology and schools. As of November 2006, the Internet Access in U.S. Public Schools and Classrooms: 1994-2005 report indicated “the ratio of students to instructional computers with Internet access in public schools was 3.8 to 1...” This was a decrease from 2003, when the ratio was 4.4 to 1 (Department of Education, 2006). There was also information about funding, including the \$2.25 billion in the federal E-rate program supporting discounts on telecommunications services, Internet access, and networking for schools and libraries. With each federal funding program for educational technology, professional development was an essential component, requiring up to 25 percent of funds to be used for professional development on using technology to improve student outcomes.

Professional development for teachers has been around for decades with mixed results. One major reason for professional development for teachers has been to effect change in practices in classrooms, either through policy changes or curriculum changes, among other forms of reform.

This chapter will look at the history of general professional development for teachers over the last 30 years. There is a rich literature on this topic, so this chapter is not exhaustive, but attempts to provide highlights into recent history. Given the fact that microcomputing is but 30-plus years old, and microcomputers have not been in most schools for that long, the relatively short history of professional development for teachers in using computers and infusing computers in classroom teaching activities will be discussed.

Professional Development for Teachers

Through the 1960s and 1970s, professional development was primarily delivered through inservice teacher training, which consisted of a series of “[d]isjointed workshops and courses focus[ed] on information dissemination rather than stressing the use of information or appropriate practice in the classroom” (Wood and Thompson, 1980). Wilson and Berne (1999) described these events as scattered and serendipitous, rather than planned and deliberate. These half-day or full-day events continued to be common in public education, in spite of efforts of staff developers to persuade school district officials to use other methods.

One method of providing professional growth for teachers has been through extended workshops, defined as a series of after school, two-hour, weekend-long, or several day-long workshops, sometimes for one or two weeks during the summer months. During these sessions the teachers “learned” new methods of teaching particular subjects, or a new philosophy of teaching a particular subject (e.g., early balanced literacy versus phonics based teaching). In both of these instances, inservice training or extended workshops, the process of helping the teachers learn new methods of teaching was typically taken out of context, even when the training was within their own school. Often these sessions presented new methods with theory to be learned (e.g., constructivist teaching and learning), a presentation of methods through videotape, film, or a slideshow, and perhaps some hands-on experiences as a whole group of teachers. But, the discussion was not about how this new method, theory, or policy was useful to the third grade teacher of mentally gifted children specifically in his classroom or the fifth grade teacher of special education children in her classroom. In other words, the training was generic and it was left up to the teachers to make use of the information or skills in his/her classrooms.

Since 1980 there have been any number of innovative practices brought to bear on teachers’ classrooms, from the inclusive classroom to the standards movement to

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