Chapter XIX

Guiding Our Way:
Needs and Motivations of Teachers in Online Learning Modeling Responsive Course Design

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Abstract

Increased accountability for student outcomes among teachers led to an examination of the needs and motivations of 324 K-12 educators who participated in 6-week on-line professional development (PD) modules of study. This research was conducted through focus groups and an online survey. The most telling findings indicate four themes regarding teacher online PD: learner expectations, learner support and access, incentives and content. This project illuminates issues that arise in formal education online learning environments as we continue to discover how to best serve educators' learning needs. This two-step study uses surveys and focus groups to empirically identify critical factors in instructional design and implementation. It benefits from large samples and the application of knowledge derived from Group A experiences to Group B. Follow-up research of 944 participants at year four of the project provides additional insight into technology use and motivation.

Introduction

Accountability means teachers must implement standards-based instruction and raise student achievement. The Anytime Anywhere Learning PD School (AALPDS) partnership developed a distance learning PD model to address this problem as it was emerging on the United States (U.S.) national educational horizon in the year 2000. Today, in 2006, it is clear how this need extends to the classroom, as teachers and schools, faculty and educational institutions face increased and incessant demands to integrate technology into teaching and learning, raise student test scores, and meet or exceed academic and content-area standards. This robust distance learning development, training and research project spans the years 2000-2005 and explores how online PD can offer a valuable vehicle for convenient, 24 hours-a-day/7-days-a-week access to a PD community and content that can address these challenges. Timing for the field of education to learn how online learning and hybrid learning can help advance these needs is at a critical stage.

AALPDS is an extensive online course delivery system of multiple 6-week courses. Each course passes through stages of development, implementation, evaluation and revision in a cycle of continual improvement. This distance learning project was funded by a U.S. Department of Education Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) Learning Anytime Anywhere Partnership (LAAP) grant.

The project set out to (1) design a system of PD that applies current national standards of PD, (2) adapt PD courses to local standards of learning, and (3) increase the capacity of local educators to implement and evaluate their own school-based PD programs. The strategy was to use emerging distance learning technologies to scale up the PD efforts required by standards-based accountability demands. By using Web-enabled technologies, the AALPDS project sought to relieve participating school districts from the burden of creating the PD courses, managing the technology—the networks and systems—needed to deliver the instruction. The earliest phase was directed at organizational alignment and restructuring, and was followed by a more extended period of course development and online implementation. The project created AALPDS, which served educators in 32 states even as the project evolved.

This project is distinctive because of its focus on the needs of teachers as adult learners, the development of local and distant learning communities, and unique content in the areas of standards-based teaching, online learning, adult learning and high-performance classrooms. The online courses consist of instructor-guided, interactive, asynchronous formats that present in-depth material, promote the application of technology-based learning in teachers' classrooms and facilitate teachers' critical reflection and collaboration in online threaded discussions and group projects. The project sought to assist experienced as well as new teachers in the implementation

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