# Chapter X
# Blended Learning and Professional Development in the K–12 Sector

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## ABSTRACT

*This chapter examines the use of blended learning in an online community which supported teacher professional development in the province of Ontario, Canada for ten years. The online network which was called The Education Network of Ontario/ Le Réseau éducatif de l'Ontario (ENO/REO) used a blend of tools and some face-to-face opportunities to support teacher professional development across the province. Teachers were encouraged to use the ENO/REO environment to join in discussions, create and maintain online projects and share research and curriculum resources. The chapter will focus on a study which examined the effect of long term participation in such a community in order to provide insight into the use of blended learning in online communities for professional development.*

## INTRODUCTION

The need for professional development has never been more acute for teachers in the Kindergarten to grade twelve (K-12) sectors than it is today. Students are growing up in an age where there is a schism between what are referred to as digital natives (our students) and digital immigrants (our teachers) and where traditional concepts of teaching and learning are being challenged (Prensky, 2001; Richardson, 2006; Pink, 2006). The gap between the two groups will continue to grow unless new and innovative means are found to support teacher learning. Presently, there are many technological innovations in place that have the potential to support teacher learning at a distance but there are difficulties in leveraging those technologies when teachers are already busy trying to stay abreast of change in today's classrooms.

This chapter is framed around a study of twelve teachers who were members of an online community of practice which used a blended learning approach for professional learning for over a decade. The twelve teachers involved joined an online community called The Education Network of Ontario/ Le Réseau éducatif de l'Ontario (ENO/REO) and spent many years participating in online activities through the community's website. Eight of the teachers were involved in the community between 1993 and 2003, while four of them were involved for less than four years between 1999 and 2003. In the initial years of the formation of the community several of the participants met face-to-face before committing to taking part online. All of the teachers in the study connected with each other using technological tools while shaping, forming and becoming immersed in an online community over time. While the study researched a small sample of the members of the community, their experiences provide a snapshot of the way in which a group of K-12 teachers used blended learning to further their professional learning.

The chapter begins with a discussion of the concept of blended learning within online communities of practice while the next section contextualizes the research and describes the methodology, theoretical framework, findings and conclusions of the study in question. Finally, the culminating section makes some recommendations regarding the use of blended learning in online communities for professional development.

## BACKGROUND

There is general agreement that the term community of practice refers to groups who empower each other through their ongoing interactions regarding shared passions (or concerns) in order to potentially improve the workplace (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002; Wenger & Snyder, 2001) and that teachers need to work together within communities of practice in order to improve student achievement (Schlager & Fusco, 2004; Speck & Knipe, 2001). However, creating opportunities for teachers to develop ongoing face-to-face communities of practice is difficult given the busy schedules of K-12 teachers so it is not surprising that emergent technological tools are being examined to provide blended learning situations where face-to-face and online opportunities for professional development are combined.

The definition of what constitutes blended learning is challenging (Stacey & Gerbic, 2007) with terms such as "hybrid, blended or sandwich learning" used interchangeably (Ausburn, 2004, p.328). In addition to the confusion over the terminology, blended approaches to learning and teaching have met with mixed reviews from both instructors and adult learners with concerns about workload and student engagement on the one hand (Welker & Berardino, 2005) and enthusiasm for the potential of blended learning on the other "the blend itself makes effective engagement in a range of situations possible" (Aspden & Helm, 2004, p.251). The term blended learning will be used in this chapter in two ways. Firstly, it will refer to a mix of face-to-face and technology enhanced engagement where participants meet face-to-face at some point and secondly, it will be used in relation to the combination of synchronous and asynchronous tools to communicate over time (Bonk, Olson, Wisher, & Orvis, 2002; Khine & Lourdusamy, 2003; Motteram, 2006; Vaughan & Garrison, 2006) and referred to in the paper as blended online learning.

## Online Communities of Practice and Blended Learning

The use of the term community of practice as it relates to an online network is challenged by some as overused and ill-defined where loose networks of online participants with very weak connections are referred to as online 'communities' (Preece & Maloney-Krichmar, 2003;de Souza and Preece,

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