

High-Quality Professional Development Characteristics and Challenges Faced in Response to COVID-19

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Abstract

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, educational leaders quickly realized the need to provide online professional development opportunities for their instructors to ensure they possessed the skills necessary to effectively provide online instruction. Due to the sudden shift of the educational landscape, many districts and universities found themselves scrambling to provide training without time to consider high-quality elements of the professional development or plan for the possible challenges that could exist. In this article, the authors discuss the high-quality professional development elements of content focus, active learning, collaboration, and duration. Example applications of each element are included as they could apply in an online environment. Challenges while providing professional development, skills, structure, and pedagogy, are addressed. Information gained in this article can support both school districts and universities and is relevant over a year later as educational leaders continue to navigate through the barriers of COVID-19.

Keywords: COVID-19, educational leaders, online professional development, online teaching, higher education institutions, professional development, challenges, P12 school districts

1. Introduction

The landscape of education drastically changed in 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in the United States. Overnight, teachers and instructors at all levels were forced to transition from traditional face-to-face or hybrid/blended instruction to a totally online learning environment (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). It became immediately evident that faculty were experiencing challenges as they prepared and attempted to provide quality online instruction for their students as their pedagogy had to be adjusted (Pearcy, 2014). Instructors who had been trained in the traditional delivery method of face-to-face instruction were forced to transition their courses to an online environment and many did not possess the training or skills to do this effectively.

An example of this sudden shift in the educational landscape during COVID-19 was Peking University's launching of 2,613 undergraduate and 1,824 graduate online courses in a matter of days with most of their faculty lacking online teaching experience (Bao, 2020). This quick pivot required academic leaders to provide essential training, support, and resources for online learning while addressing the challenges faced. University and P12

district leaders quickly organized professional development opportunities to familiarize faculty with remote teaching and learning tools (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). This article examines elements of high-quality professional development, how these elements can be modeled in an online environment, and challenges to consider when providing online professional development.

2. Professional Development

According to the United States Department of Education, billions of federal funds are spent yearly on professional development for teachers and administrators with little evidence of these funds providing an increase in teacher effectiveness (United States Department of Education, n.d.). Effective professional development directly links to teacher efficacy (Cohen & Hill, 2000), which yields the greatest impact on student achievement (Hattie, 2015). Professional development is especially critical for the adaptability to shifting school environments (Lawless & Pellegrino, 2007), such as the sudden shift to online learning during COVID-19.

Providing professional development does not automatically produce teacher efficacy or the ability for an educational institution to adapt to a shift in the educational landscape. All professional development is not created the same (Cohen & Hill, 2000; Darling-Hammond et al., (2017); Kennedy, 2016), and effective professional development is a complex process with many factors that could influence its success (Lawless & Pellegrino, 2007). What constitutes high-quality professional development and how could this look in an online professional development environment? This reflection reviews research to identify four key elements of high-quality professional development and provides an application of each element in an online environment. Content focus, active learning, collaboration, and duration will be addressed.

2.1 Content Focus

Content Focus is a key element to high-quality professional development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone, 2009; Schildkamp et al., 2020). Professional development that is content focused intentionally focuses on curriculum development and pedagogy. Teachers' learning is supported within teaching strategies aligned with their own content areas (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

2.1.1 Application of Content Focus

An example of this in online professional development could be the use of a Jigsaw activity utilizing technologies such as Zoom or Google Slides. A Jigsaw activity utilizes groups that become "experts" on particular topics. The groups then shift their role by sharing the information with a new group to complete a task together. The Jigsaw activity could connect to any content by simply changing the team document topics. There are a variety of iterations of this activity type. To integrate it in a synchronous Zoom environment, the professional development facilitator could share the team files via Google Drive or Zoom chat. The students would then be dispersed into Zoom breakout rooms to discuss the content becoming "experts" on the topic. This would be followed up with a whole-class discussion led by each group. Another option for integrating the Jigsaw teaching strategy into an asynchronous online professional development would be through the use of Google Slides. Each team would have their own slide on which to share their "expert" knowledge of their assigned content. All the slide content would be needed for each group to complete the presented problem.

2.2 Active Learning

Active Learning is another research-based best practice for effective professional development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone, 2009; Schildkamp et al., 2020). Active learning provides opportunities for engagement in interactive activities and strategies that are of the same design for incorporation into their own classrooms. The content used during the professional development is authentic and deeply embedded with classroom practices (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). In other words, the facilitator needs to ensure teachers are actively engaged in meaningful practice, planning, and discussion (Main & Pendergast, 2015).

2.2.1 Application of Active Learning

There are numerous avenues for active learning in an online environment. The previously mentioned Jigsaw activity is an example of active learning while easily integrating classroom-aligned content. Another option to integrate active learning in online professional development is Think-Pair-Share using technology such as Group Me or Google Jamboard. Think-Pair-Share is a three-step active learning activity in which the facilitator prompts participants to think about a question or problem, pair with another student to discuss the problem, and then share

with the whole group. For a synchronous or asynchronous professional development, the facilitator could provide an article and propose a problem to solve or question to answer per pair of participants. Each pair of participants would individually read the article and consider the proposed problem or question. Next, each pair would use a chat tool such as Group Me to discuss the content and decide what to share with the whole group. Google Jamboard would be used for each pair to share information with the whole group by posting sticky notes, text, and images on their designated board. Each of the boards on the Jamboard would be accessible by the entire group.

2.3 Collaboration

High-quality professional development includes opportunities for collaboration (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone, 2009; Sparks, 2002). Collaboration allows participants to share and build upon ideas and even create communities to continue learning outside the professional development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Teacher implementation of professional development content is more likely when collaboration is used extensively (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

2.3.1 Application of Collaboration

The previously mentioned Jigsaw and Think-Pair-Share activities are collaborative activities. Another example of a professional development collaborative activity is a team scavenger hunt. Online professional development participants can participate in this type of activity in a synchronous or asynchronous format through a technology tool such as Goosechase. Goosechase allows facilitators and/or teachers to build team missions to be completed through GPS check-in, photos, videos, or text. Each mission is worth different point values and teams compete against each other to complete the missions and/or be the top earner.

2.4 Duration

A longer duration of professional development adds to the effectiveness of professional development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone, 2009; Sparks, 2002). The professional development should expand beyond a single sit-and-get session (Lawless & Pellegrino, 2007). The duration of professional development needs to include adequate time to allow instructional change (Main & Pendergast, 2015) and include time to learn, practice, implement, and reflect (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). A longer duration is more likely to include the types of learning opportunities necessary for teachers to integrate new technology into practice (Brown, 2004). Though research has not established an exact number of professional development hours needed, the professional development does need to include support and follow-up over an extended amount of time such as a semester (Desimone, 2009).

2.4.1 Application of Duration

One way to extend the duration of professional development beyond a single session is through regular check-ins which include providing additional resources and support as needed. This connects back to the collaborative element needed in professional development in which you build a community atmosphere. The Group Me tool previously mentioned could be utilized to establish such a community feel for participants.

3. Challenges

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the decisions made to suspend traditional face-to-face instruction, the need for professional development became evident (Bao, 2020; Fernandez & Shaw, 2020), but this was not without challenges. Across the United States, colleges and universities scrambled to find ways to assist their faculty and staff as they transitioned their courses from brick-and-mortar to total online platforms. Challenges to providing and implementing high-quality professional development include skills, structure, and pedagogy.

3.1 Skills

As courses moved online many instructors discovered they did not possess the skills needed to teach effectively online (Arora & Srinivasan, 2020; Bao, 2020; Lockee, 2020). Veteran, experienced teachers could suddenly be characterized as novices in this new-to-them learning environment (Bao, 2020; Lockee, 2020). The effectiveness of online instruction is dependent upon teachers' perspective, understanding, and ability, and many teachers do not feel they possess the skills necessary to teach effectively in this non-traditional environment (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Percy, 2014). When providing and planning for professional development, consideration must be given to providing instructors the most up-to-date technology tools and resources, so they are equipped with the skills they need to be successful.

3.2 Structure

The structure of professional development opportunities emerged as another barrier for online professional development. Educational leaders need to consider participation requirements, duration, and support when planning the structure of professional development for their organization. Most professional development opportunities are voluntary (Bobrowsky et al., 2001), and the level of commitment and motivation differs between voluntary and non-voluntary participants. Those who willingly participate in training often do so because they enjoy the content or challenge associated with the training (Loughran & Gunstone, 1997). One key criticism of traditional professional development activities is being too short and lacking follow-up once the new skill or concept is implemented (Penuel et al., 2007). In most cases, during the rapid shift online, opportunities for follow-up or adequate technical support were not provided (Bao, 2020; Pandya et al., 2021). Based on the research of Pandya et al. (2021), the most significant limitation was the lack of technical support.

3.3 Pedagogy

A key barrier in providing online professional development is online pedagogy (Lawless & Pellegrino, 2007; Percy, 2014; Weidmann & Offterman, 2010). Pedagogy for online learning is very different from that of face-to-face or even hybrid learning. This emerging, new pedagogy may encompass different roles, different outcomes, different expectations, and different assessments (Weidmann & Offterman, 2010). According to Percy (2014), when online courses began to be incorporated into higher education, many instructors had to alter their beliefs about learning as well as their approach to teaching. The use of technology is non-negotiable in online courses but the integration of technology in online teaching and learning may be limited by the instructor's pedagogy (Lawless & Pellegrino, 2007; Percy, 2014).

4. Conclusion

The arrival of the pandemic in the United States was a detrimental event touching many aspects of Americans lives which included a major shift in the educational landscape. Without prior notice, universities and school districts across the country transitioned to online teaching which caused educational leaders to seek avenues for providing online professional development opportunities for teachers. With the sudden shift to online instruction, the need to prepare faculty competencies and teaching strategies for this new environment became evident (Pandya et al., 2021). Key elements to providing high quality professional development are content focus, active learning, collaboration, and duration. Over a year later, higher education institutions are still experiencing ongoing challenges related to COVID-19 (Pandya et al., 2021). Universities should be willing and able to address the changes that occur in the quickly changing world of technology (Percy, 2014) and prepare for the possibility of future crises. Challenges to be considered during this planning are skills, structure, and pedagogy.

Future research in this area should examine the inclusion of high-quality characteristics and how administrators addressed the challenges found in providing online professional development. Additional research could also include how educational leaders are modifying their professional development in lieu of their experiences during the recent pandemic.

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