

Arrested Development

Online training is the norm in other professions.

Why not in K–12 education?

BY MICHAEL J. PETRILLI

Everyone knows that the Internet is changing the way the world works, plays, and connects. Yet its most powerful applications only seem obvious after some entrepreneur has brought them to life. Of course the web is a great way to distribute books, but it took Amazon to make this clear. Of course the Internet is a smart way to distribute movies, but it took Netflix to make it happen.

So it is with adult learning. Most professionals would rather develop their skills online, on their own schedule, at their own pace, than sit in day-long, mind-numbing “workshops” that bring a lot of boredom and frustration but little intellectual stimulation. So it’s not surprising that as long ago as 2006 (eons in Internet time) the American Society for Training and Development reported that across all sectors almost 40 percent of professional development (PD) was delivered via technology (See figure 1). (Surely the numbers are even higher now.)

One would think that our elementary and secondary education system would embrace online learning for teachers and administrators, too. Traditional professional development for educators isn’t exactly winning rave reviews; in 2006, for example, the MetLife Survey of the American Teacher found that only half of teachers thought that “providing more opportunities for professional development would help a lot in keeping good people in teaching.”

It’s not hard to understand why: as with other professionals—or even K–12 students—individual teachers don’t want or need homogenized training. They need “differentiated instruction,” targeted to where they are in their careers and focused on the subjects they teach, their own strengths and skills gaps. None of this is easy to deliver in traditional settings.

And school schedules make face-to-face training logistically challenging. Some districts have created special “professional development” days for their teachers (likely not

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popular with working parents); others try to cram PD into the heads of exhausted instructors as soon as the closing bell rings.

As in so many other areas, our education system appears to be lagging behind in exploiting the Internet. Last year the National Research Council (NRC) published *Enhancing Professional Development for Teachers: Potential Uses of Information Technology*. It reported on a recent survey by Leah O’Donnell of consulting firm Eduventures, which found that six in seven teachers had participated in “conventional” professional development experiences, but a “markedly lower” proportion had access to online training.

This is particularly perplexing, given that teachers could be receiving targeted training in the comfort of their own homes, on their own schedule, and without the hassle or frustration of face-to-face PD. And the offerings of online teacher training are growing—and growing better. For example, PBS’s TeacherLine offers more than 100 interactive courses for pre-K–12 teachers, who can earn PD credits or (for a nominal fee) even college credit for completing them. Or consider CaseNEX, an online professional development company that spun off from the University of Virginia’s Curry School of Education. Via online video, teachers can engage with real-life “case studies” of classroom challenges and participate in an interactive online community of professionals. And yes, they can earn credits for doing so.

So why aren’t K–12 educators embracing online professional development in greater numbers? The NRC report suggests several possible reasons, including a lack of knowledge about such opportunities among teachers and administrators; a bias among principals for more traditional methods; and institutional resistance from district professional development staff who might see their own jobs disappear if teachers bypass their programs and engage in training created from afar.

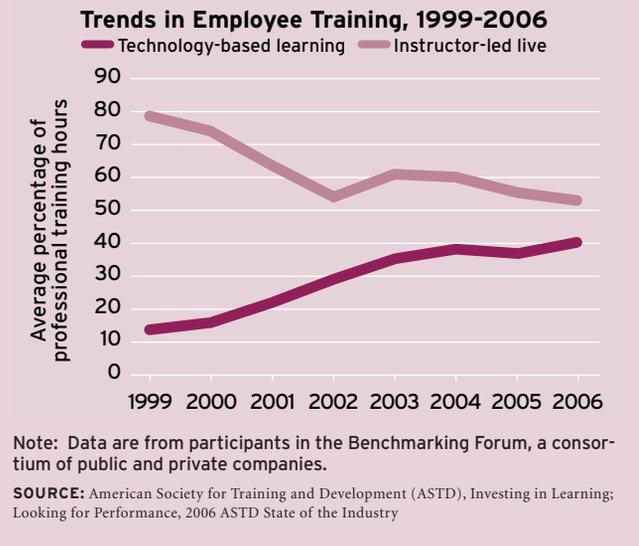
This institutional resistance appears to be the most likely explanation, but it's not limited to central office staff. As with so many things in life, the problem comes down to money. Traditional professional development providers (including colleges of education) have a lot of dollars at stake in the face-to-face model. They are likely to be outcompeted by national providers in the purveyance of customized teacher training.

And teachers themselves have come to expect to be compensated for the time they spend in professional development activities. A recent study by *Education Next* executive editor Frederick M. Hess for the Thomas B. Fordham Institute found that the collective bargaining agreements of more than half of the nation's 50 largest school districts mandate that teachers be paid stipends for participating in PD outside of the regular school day. If these teachers participated in online professional development instead, at home, at night or on the weekends, would they have to be paid for their time? It's not clear.

Perhaps accountability is an issue, too. Under the traditional model, teachers get credit just for showing up. In an online setting, they would probably have to demonstrate mastery of a subject via an assessment. And almost nothing stirs up a faculty lounge more than the dreaded words "teacher testing."

Going Online (Figure 1)

Private and public sector organizations outside of education have seen a steady shift away from live instructor-led training toward technology-based training.



Still, judging from the Internet's success in revolutionizing other fields, eventually the resistance to online professional development will crumble. How long that will take will be a decent indicator of just how calcified our education system has become. ■

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