

Tools FOR SCHOOLS

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS AND LEADERS

Technology closes the distance

*Remote professional learning experiences create
new challenges for staff development leaders*

BY TRACY CROW

Kimberly Tyson remembers an “aha” moment in her early development as a facilitator of videoconferences. She was working with a well-known speaker in a videoconferencing environment when she noticed that the speaker paused after each question, just as she would if the participants were actually in front of her.

Tyson, a reading specialist and educational consultant in Indiana, does this all of the time in face-to-face settings. “I realized that [in a videoconference] I spend more time talking than if I were in the same room,” she said. After that experience, she consciously began to move her

videoconferencing facilitation style closer to her face-to-face facilitation style.

So is good facilitation the same no matter what technology stands between you and a learner? The principles of planning for an effective event remain the same. In any medium, facilitators and the groups they work with need to establish:

- What are the goals of a learning event?
- What is the setting?
- Who will be there?
- What resources do participants have available?
- What are participants’ level of knowl-

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How many distance learning methods are there? See the list on p. 2.



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edge and readiness?

- What processes will serve the goals and the learners?
- How can I check learner engagement and understanding?
 - What follow-up or ongoing support will sustain the work we do together?

Videoconferencing is one of many technology-enhanced methods for staff development. Other methods include:

- **Computer tutorials**
- **Online courses or degree programs**
- **Telephone conference calls**
- **E-mail lists**
- **Web-based discussions — asynchronous or synchronous**
- **Web-based conferences**
- **Voice over Internet protocol**
- **Web logs or blogs**

(See Glossary of Terms on p. 4 for definitions and examples.)

But facilitating in a distance environment also presents unique challenges when the facilitator is trying to ensure the high level of learning that would occur in a face-to-face setting.

CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES

Remote facilitators need to develop skills specific to the learning environment. Deep familiarity with the technology and equipment will give session leaders the capacity to focus on content and group development.

Attention to the differences in how participants communicate in different environments is critical. In a chat environment, questions come fast and furious; in a longer-term

online course, discussions can be carefully crafted.

Making large group sessions effective and engaging can be difficult both in person and remotely. Depending on the equipment setup, a videoconference facilitator may not be able to see the entire audience at once. Similarly, a web-based conference may not require attendees to sign in or otherwise declare their presence.

Tyson conducts professional development onsite and via videoconferencing; she runs a consulting practice and often delivers services through the Center for Interactive Learning and Collaboration (www.cilc.org/), a nonprofit organization in Indiana. She said there is often a lag time when she tries to invite participation from a large or widely dispersed group. She has learned to drop some strategies and adopt others to use the medium to its best advantage.

She has also learned that planning is key. To set the stage for an effective session, Tyson e-mails her onsite contact ahead of time to explain what should be available for participants. She also e-mails handouts and asks her onsite contact to make copies for participants. This aspect isn't so different from a consultant who is contracted to work on location.

MULTIPLE DISTANCE LEARNING OPTIONS

The convenience of videoconferencing and its relative cost are big factors for participating schools, said Tyson. The state of Indiana established a videoconferencing network 10 years ago that serves hundreds of schools and libraries.

Cost and convenience also make other e-learning methods attractive to districts that are spread over a large area or to schools in remote areas that generally have less access to in-person assistance. (*See list of distance learning methods at left.*)

The ability to get much-needed content to a large number of teachers outweighs some of the disadvantages.

Different methods require different equipment, support, and training. Selecting the best method for a school or district requires a careful examination of many factors, including geography, cost, number of learners, existing equipment and training, and most importantly, desired learning outcomes. (*See Considering E-Learning Options on pp. 5-6 for a questionnaire to guide selection of distance learning tools.*)

HELPING LEARNERS TO LEARN

With so many distance learning methods, a significant challenge for remote learners is new equipment and forms of technology. Although more than a quarter of schools offer distance learning programs for professional development (Technology Counts, 2005), facilitators can't assume participants are comfortable with the technology used in a specific learning experience.

Even participants who are frequent e-mail

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users and savvy about web searches may still be unfamiliar with online learning. As the authors of *Facilitating Online Learning* point out, participants in online courses, perhaps out of fear, “seem to lose their usual set of problem-solving strategies” (p. 52).

Facilitators can assist participants by giving them an overview of how everything will work in a remote environment in advance of the session. Having a place or time set aside just for technical support enables participants to find answers without distracting a group from the main content of a session.

ATTENDING TO PROCESS

Effective facilitators become accustomed to being very explicit about process. This becomes even more necessary when a piece of potentially unfamiliar equipment stands between the learner and the content.

For example, when Tyson is working with multiple sites, she may ask the equipment operator at one location to zoom in on an individual or group so she can check on the understanding and engagement of participants. This reminds participants that Tyson is really listening and “in the room” with them and acknowledges that everyone is communicating via a camera. In Tyson’s terms, this is called “reaching through the glass.” (See “Videoconferencing setup” at right for a description of Tyson’s equipment logistics.)

When she plans interactive work, Tyson tells groups in advance that she will be checking in periodically and seeking their input.

MIXING METHODS

When possible, facilitators should combine strategies to connect to learners and to create working groups. Tyson varies the ways she works with participants to best meet their needs. For example, Tyson sometimes facilitates stand-alone remote sessions on topics such as phone-awareness and reading assessments. With longer-term relationships with schools, she may work with teachers onsite and conduct follow-up through videoconferencing. Often she conducts

large-group videoconferencing sessions and uses e-mail during a session to answer questions that arise. Finally, Tyson works with groups such as literature circles over time and across districts where she uses a combination of videoconferencing and group discussions for those in the same locations.

Online moderators can combine small and large group strategies just as an onsite facilitator does, and explicit directions always help. E-mail is another wonderful tool for online facilitators.

Although e-mail is very useful for probing for understanding, the online facilitator needs to be cautious about becoming the equivalent of a workshop leader stuck at the head of the room with one participant while the group waits to continue an agenda.

Ultimately, the efficacy of any method comes down to “how intentional a group is with its own goals and objectives,” according to Tyson. She says that in establishing high-quality professional development experiences, it is “important to work with schools that are aligning staff development with school improvement goals.”

And as for the technology? “Videoconferencing needs a champion in the building, whether it’s a technology person or a teacher,” says Tyson. Like adoption of any innovation, it isn’t natural for teachers to just start using something new. ■

Videoconferencing setup

Kimberly Tyson has a video camera focused on her, usually run by an equipment operator. She also has a television monitor in the room so she can view the audience she’s addressing.

If she is working with four or fewer schools, she can see every site that is participating — the picture on her television monitor is divided in four. A camera operator is stationed at each remote site and transmits video and audio to her monitor.

With more than four sites, she can’t see everyone at once. But she can ask her equipment operator to show her the video feed from a camera at any site at any time. Participants at all sites see her.

Tyson has a document camera, which functions like an overhead projector so she can display information and student artifacts or books on the television screen. She can also use PowerPoint to display information.

Sometimes the equipment operators at an individual site are not necessarily technical staff. It might be the principal or other school leader who acts as both a site facilitator and an equipment operator.

G L O S S A R Y O F T E R M S

Asynchronous: In the context of e-learning, refers to situations where all learners are not participating at the same time. Examples: web-based discussions or e-mail lists, where participants can read and respond at their convenience.

Blog: Short for weblog. Describes a web site where an author or group of authors write periodic journal-type entries, often commenting on and linking to other web-based information. Most blogs allow readers to post comments on entries.

Computer-based training (CBT): Refers to courses presented on a computer which are most often self-paced. A course of this type does not necessarily require Internet access; it could be presented on a CD-ROM.

Computer network: A term used to describe two or more computers that are linked together and capable of sharing data. Such networks may exist in one classroom, across a district, or across the world, and may or may not be linked to the Internet.

E-learning: Learning experiences facilitated through the use of electronic resources and designed to support the development, exchange, and application of skills, knowledge, aspirations, and behaviors. May take many different forms.

E-learning community: A purposeful gathering of individuals who share common interests and goals for learning, improvement, or professional development and who collaborate through electronic means.

High-bandwidth: Bandwidth is the transmission capacity of a computer network; high-bandwidth methods that are commonly available include cable modems, T1 lines, and DSL lines.

Handheld computer: A class of small digital devices that can be held in a hand. Many offer functions similar to desktop computers. A PDA, or personal data assistant, is one type of handheld computer.

Internet-based (or web-based) training: A form of computer-based training in which course materials or resources are accessed via the Internet or an intranet.

Online learning: A term used to describe intranet- or Internet-based learning experiences.

Streaming audio/video: Audio or video that is available through the computer as it is downloaded from the Internet. Images are not typically stored on the computer's hard drive.

Synchronous: In the context of e-learning, refers to situations in which all participants are present at the same time. Chats, instant messaging, and web conferencing are forms of synchronous communication.

Threaded discussion: A structure for online discussion where the topics provide the structure of the discussion. The first message posted on a topic provides the basis for a structure where the responses to the initial message are displayed visually to indicate a continuation of a discussion.

Videoconferencing: Interactive communication among two or more sites that includes at least the transmission of video and audio to all sites and some synchronous communication via fax, telephone, e-mail, or video.

Voice over Internet protocol (VoIP): Refers to capacity to conduct voice or telephone conversations using the same network lines that provide Internet service. VoIP often reduces costs and allows for integration of phone with other Internet activities, but is not as reliable as traditional phone services. Allows for free long-distance voice calls where non-phone line Internet access exists.

Wireless network: Describes a means of providing network or Internet access to one or more computers not attached directly to the source of Internet access, such as a modem. In a wireless network, a router is connected directly to the source of Internet access, and uses radio waves to transmit information between the router and any computers that are members of the network.

Source: Adapted from *E-Learning for Educators: Implementing the Standards for Staff Development* (NSDC, 2001).

Tips on facilitating via technology

Facilitators should find opportunities to experience different types of events as a participant to gain a better understanding of that perspective.

Give learners opportunities to socialize the way they would if they were sitting together — either in a discussion thread or through an ice-breaker at the beginning of a multi-site session.

Considering E-Learning Options

COMMENTS TO FACILITATORS: Use this worksheet to evaluate a particular remote learning method or a specific product. Use one sheet per method or product. Teams can share the workload of evaluating products by conducting research individually and sharing worksheets in a group before they choose a product or service

Our learning goal: _____
Method/product: _____
Provider/vendor: _____

Equipment

What equipment does this method require? _____
Do we already have the equipment? Yes _____ No _____
What can we buy? What can we borrow? _____

Training

What training will we need to be able to use this method effectively?

What internal capacity do we have for training and equipment support?

Who can we consult for training and support?

Total estimated costs

Equipment	_____
Training to become proficient in product use	_____
Event facilitation	_____
Ongoing support	_____
Other expenses	_____
Total:	_____

Can we afford this? _____

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**Considering
E-Learning Options**
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Meeting participant goals

How well does this method serve the content participants need?

How well does this method serve the goals of our learning event?

How user-friendly and engaging will this method be for our team?

How will we provide follow-up and ongoing support?

Final analysis

What advantages does this method have when compared with other methods?

What disadvantages does this method have when compared with other methods?

resources / technology

E-learning for Educators: Implementing the Standards for Staff Development

Joellen Killion, NSDC, and the National Institute for Community Innovations (NSDC, 2001)

Created to assist staff development providers in choosing and using e-learning products and services, this guide stresses the importance of the NSDC Standards for Staff Development in all learning environments. Guiding questions are included to help educators investigate different learning solutions from a standards-based perspective. Available online at www.nsd.org/library/authors/standards_tech.cfm and through the NSDC Online Bookstore (store.nsd.org). Item B155. Price: \$12 members, \$15 nonmembers.

Education Week: Technology Counts Annual Reports

Each year, the research staff of *Education Week* prepares a statistical snapshot of technology expenditures and use in schools, including information about professional development for teachers. Available online at www.edweek.org/rc/articles/2004/10/15/tc-archive.html.

Facilitating Online Learning: Effective Strategies for Moderators

George Collison, Bonnie Elbaum, Sarah Haavind, and Robert Tinker (Atwood Publishing, 2000)

This book describes the different roles of the online course moderator and the strategies effective moderators use in building communities that encourage substantive dialogue and learning experiences.

Learning Circuits web site

Association for Training and Development (ASTD)

This web site covers a variety of e-learning methods, with information about facilitation as well as coverage of specific products. Available online at www.learningcircuits.org/

The Moderators Homepage

A list of articles, many from research journals, about computer-mediated learning, with particular emphasis on moderation or facilitation. Most articles are from the 1990s, with some from 2000, but contain still-relevant information. Available online at www.emoderators.com/moderators.shtml.

Tips on facilitating via technology

To establish rapport with participants, Kimberly Tyson places herself in the room with participants by commenting on physical objects she sees through the camera. She'll compliment a person's bright sweater or mention that the snacks look good.

Tyson encourages facilitators to adapt many strategies that work in face-to-face situations; good group interactions need similar facilitation support regardless of the medium.

Think ahead of time about how you will check for learner understanding. When you can't see faces, you might not know who is confused.

Advance Planning Survey

NOTE TO FACILITATORS: Share this survey with your onsite contact as you plan a learning experience or use directly with participants. This survey assumes your discussions are already covering learning goals and logistical details. PURPOSE: To gather information about participants' experiences with different learning methods and concerns about technology and equipment use. The survey will also prepare participants to be explicit about process and questions during the event.

What remote learning methods have you used in the past? (Check all that apply.)

- Videoconference
Telephone conference
Online or e-mail discussion groups
Online courses
Chat rooms
Other (please specify)
None

How well did the methods used meet your professional learning needs?

Two horizontal lines for text input.

What facilitator behaviors did you find particularly useful in meeting the goals of the experience?

Two horizontal lines for text input.

What participant behaviors did you find particularly useful in meeting the goals of the experience?

Two horizontal lines for text input.

What support do you have available for technical support as part of such learning experiences? (Check all that apply.)

- Peers
Administrators
Technology resource people (technology coordinator or library media specialist)
Students
Other (please specify)
None

What concerns or questions do you have about our upcoming remote learning experience?

Two horizontal lines for text input.

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