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Face-to-face interaction is best for developing cultural literacy

As schools began installing computers and networks in classrooms two decades ago, few of us could have imagined how integral technology would become to our professional practice and our everyday lives. Technology has facilitated new ways of teaching and learning.

Technology has affected not only the way students learn, but the way teachers learn as well. Informally, teachers learn from one another by documenting and discussing their work on the Internet through video sharing, social networking, and blogging. More formally, teachers take online courses, attend webinars, and participate in virtual conferences to stay current with professional standards and practice. Increasingly, school districts and other professional development providers are turning to technology.

Online professional development has distinct advantages. Because most teachers have access to the Internet at home as well as at school, teachers can access online professional development at their convenience. Whether a teacher works best early in the morning or late at night, online learning is available when the teacher is ready. Similarly, whether teachers prefer to work incrementally for short periods or go from start to finish in one session, online learning accommodates varying styles. Additionally, teachers can use electronic archives to review previous learning. Much like professional book collections, schools are creating libraries of electronic resources.

Although high-quality online learning is expensive to develop, online learning can be surprisingly cost-effective when the costs are spread across large numbers of users and the content is standardized. A single school district likely does not have the resources to develop its own online modules, but many organizations are developing online learning resources that schools and districts can access through a subscription. Subscription costs are typically based on the number of educators who use the resource and the length of time the subscription is active. This allows schools to match online resources to the district size and budget.

Because of the advantages of online learning, school districts are increasingly looking to e-providers for professional development. This often makes good sense, especially when funding for professional development is constrained. However, online learning has its limitations. Professional developers must be aware of the kinds of professional development best suited for electronic formats and the kinds of professional development best delivered face-to-face.

VARIETIES OF ONLINE LEARNING

The most common type of online learning is a self-contained course, often called web-based training. Web-based trainings are ready-made courses that present content in a linear fashion as participants work through a series of lessons. Participants are often required to successfully complete a multiple-choice assessment before moving to the next lesson. Although web-based trainings often have built-in supports such as video or graphics to enhance learning, there is no interaction between the participant and instructor. This means there is no opportunity to differentiate the learning, and participants receive little to no feedback. Web-based training is best suited for routine workshops intended to provide participants with standardized information. Web-based training is especially useful for compulsory, compliance-based training since participant progress and completion is easily tracked.

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More interactive forms of online learning are also available. Many online professional development resources use a variety of electronic tools including blogs, wikis, social networks, podcasts, or virtual classrooms to facilitate interaction between and among facilitators and participants. Online learning may involve both synchronous and asynchronous technologies, depending on the purpose of the session. In many cases, these online learning opportunities are just as effective as face-to-face sessions. What many don't realize, however, is that developing and facilitating online professional development that allows for a high degree of interaction and differentiation is far more expensive and time-intensive than face-to-face professional development. Additionally, online learning is not the best mode of delivery for every topic.

WHEN HUMAN INTERACTION MATTERS

Cultural proficiency requires educators to have deep cultural knowledge and asset-based beliefs about students and families from diverse backgrounds. Developing deep cultural knowledge means going beyond surface-level understanding about cultural norms and traditions and learning about hidden and invisible culture, the aspects of culture that drive communication, interaction style, and world views. Educators can acquire cultural knowledge through a variety of activities, including community events, book studies, and film analysis. While a skilled professional developer could facilitate similar activities using online technologies, what is lost in using technology to build cultural knowledge is the opportunity to practice using intercultural interaction skills.

The second aspect of developing cultural proficiency, addressing personal beliefs, is even more difficult to facilitate online. Personal beliefs are deeply held, often unconscious

assumptions that drive our thinking and behavior. Acting as structural frames, personal beliefs help us make sense of the world. They tell us what to expect, how the world should be. When we come across something unfamiliar, we rely on our personal beliefs to help us understand what we see or experience. When what we see or experience is too different from what we expect, our personal beliefs tell us there is something wrong, and we make negative attributions about the person or situation involved. This tendency to assume difference is negative is known as deficit thinking and is at the root of cultural misunderstandings. Developing cultural proficiency requires becoming aware of personal beliefs and reframing those that lead to deficit thinking.

Because personal beliefs are deeply held, they are difficult to unpack. Yet unpacking personal beliefs is essential to becoming culturally proficient. Without addressing beliefs, teaching practices are unlikely to change (Guerra & Nelson, 2009). No matter how unconscious deficit beliefs are or how hard educators try to mask them, students and families know when educators hold deficit beliefs because such beliefs seep out in the way educators communicate, the way they interact, and in the expectations they convey.

As important as it is to surface and reframe deficit beliefs, doing so is a troubling process. Educators who rightly believe they are good people doing good work are disturbed when they learn they hold deficit beliefs about some of the students and families they work so hard to serve. Helping educators come to this painful realization and supporting them in changing their beliefs takes a skilled facilitator who knows the educators well enough to respond to differing needs. Some educators need reassurance that holding deficit beliefs does not make them terrible people or bad teachers. Others need a detailed explanation of where such beliefs come from and how

they can be changed. Still others need to be challenged before they will accept that deficit beliefs even exist. Knowing what kind of support to provide so the experience is one of growth for the educator rather than debilitating largely depends on the professional developer's ability to read the situation and respond to the cues educators give. Cues often come through body language and facial expressions and are not easily detected in online forums.

Additionally, professional development of this type does not solely rely on interaction between facilitator and participant, but also between participants of diverse backgrounds. The goal of developing cultural proficiency is to acquire the knowledge and skills to effectively engage with people of differing backgrounds and experiences. Professional learning sessions provide a safe place to practice with the guidance of a skilled facilitator. With a facilitator's assistance and encouragement, participants are able to recognize hidden and invisible cultural knowledge and begin to address deficit beliefs that surface. In face-to-face settings, the facilitator is able to model working through a culture clash and help all participants engage productively. Current forms of technology do not allow this kind of interaction. In fact, technology reinforces distancing and isolation that contribute to cultural misunderstandings.

Technology holds tremendous promise for helping teach and learn in new ways, but there are still instances when face-to-face interaction is needed. Developing cultural proficiency is one such instance.

REFERENCE

Guerra, P. & Nelson, S. (2009, Summer). Cultural proficiency: Love and compassion challenge taken-for-granted assumptions. *JSD, 30*(3), 61-62. ■