THINK 'E'

for ENGAGEMENT

**USE TECHNOLOGY TOOLS
TO DESIGN PERSONALIZED
PROFESSIONAL E-LEARNING**

By Shari Farris

As faculty chair of early childhood education at Vanguard University of Southern California, I was challenged each day by questions: How can I provide high-impact online professional learning to adult continuing education students? What barriers exist for adult learners seeking meaningful professional learning? How does my practice as a facilitator shift in an online learning environment?

I have experienced professional learning that was at times a mile wide and an inch deep on content, short on engagement, and often overcrowded with participants hoping to fulfill continuing education requirements in a three-hour workshop. I returned to my classroom with a binder full of ideas and strategies but little follow-up or opportunity to collaborate beyond the workshop session.

I have also experienced dynamic face-to-face professional learning that was engaging and relevant, sustained community, encouraged collabora-

tion, and had a positive impact on my practice. The greatest impact came from professional learning that challenged me to take my learning beyond the workshop and into my practice.

Those experiences, plus the work of Malcolm Knowles and Margery Ginsberg and research into the role of technology in adult learning, helped me understand that it is essential to provide that same type of engaging learning experience when considering professional development through e-learning.

UNDERSTAND THE LEARNERS

In 2011, I directed the launch of two new online degrees and a series of continuing professional education units for Vanguard University in the School for Graduate and Professional Studies. This program would be the first of its kind at Vanguard. I was experienced in professional development and adult learning, but e-learning was new to me. I was skeptical yet committed to providing high-quality and relevant continuing education courses.

The first group of students included practitioners in early childhood education serving in both public

and private settings. They ranged in age from 30 to 50 years old. Most had no experience with online courses or much experience with technology. I knew that the learning experiences in these courses needed to be meaningful, relevant to their practice, accessible, and engaging.

TIPS FOR DESIGNING ONLINE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Consider the following when designing online professional learning:

- Research how other providers of professional learning format and structure experiences using technology.

- Research learning management systems that will best meet learners' needs.

- Collaborate and share your ideas for professional learning using technology with other leaders, experts, and those with course design experience.

- Think about your goals and objectives for the learning experiences you are developing.

- Conduct a preliminary needs assessment for learners to assess content pedagogical knowledge as well as technological pedagogical knowledge.

- Carefully embed opportunities for true collaboration (Ingram, 2005).

- Establish online etiquette, protocols, and rubrics for discussions and feedback.

- Consider adult learning principles such as motivation, engagement, and trust (Knowles, 1984; Ginsberg, 2011) when designing online learning environments.

- Be flexible and willing to adjust as you proceed.

- Offer design choices to ensure that the learning experience translates into meaningful and transformative practice (Pappas, 2014).

Dorothy was one of the first students to enroll. She had no online course experience and limited experience using technology. She said she chose online professional learning because she wanted to improve her instructional practice and needed continuing education units while working full time in a public preschool. The online format was convenient, accessible and fit into her busy schedule.

She called me a few weeks before the course started and described her apprehension with using technology, fear of failure, and need for support and collaboration. I discovered in the technology preassessment process that many of the adult learners in the course shared her apprehension.

The technology preassessment assesses skill level, technology literacy, and anxiety about using technology. Questions in preassessments may include:

- How regularly are you able to log into a course or training?
- How familiar are you with using tools such as Microsoft Word, Excel, and PowerPoint?
- Are you comfortable with using computers?
- How much time each week are you available to participate in online discussions?
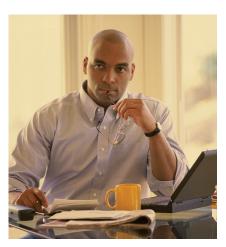
Information gathered from the preassessment can be used to provide support or additional tools and tutorials to help students get the most out of their learning experience without feeling anxious about using the technology.

These additional tools include online learning tutorials, calendars for time management, or checklists to help students keep track of steps to access materials and assignments. Students may also benefit from brief technical skills assessments such as how to use software, how to attach documents or use drop boxes, steps for accessing the library for support, or tips on creating a quiet study space.

PROVIDE A HIGH-TOUCH EXPERIENCE

I looked carefully at the courses I had designed with Dorothy in mind. Reflecting on my own experience participating in and facilitating traditional professional development, I sought to re-create those engaging and relevant learning experiences while using the technology tools available. Would this be enough for Dorothy and her peers?

One of the best tools for facilitators of online professional learning is the use of video. Facilitators can create short yet targeted videos (five to 10 minutes) for each session or new learn-

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ing concept. Videos allow adult learners to see that an educator is partnering with them and guiding their experience, even though that educator may be several hundred miles away.

Videos can be used to introduce course concepts, highlight specific pedagogy within the topic, and review learning objectives for each week. This targeted approach is a shift from the traditional workshop in that the facilitator is providing short and targeted information and asking open-ended questions that can be accessed when it is convenient for the learner and as many times as needed throughout the week. Dorothy said that she would often review the short videos from our class right before a lesson to refresh her understanding of the concepts.

It can be difficult to arrange synchronous time with students. VoiceThread is another option for engagement. VoiceThread allows the facilitator to attach voice lectures to slide shows, charts, photos, and videos, and allows students to attach a voice comment or question to the VoiceThread they are viewing. Students can create their own VoiceThread assignments and receive oral peer and facilitator feedback.

In addition to weekly short videos or VoiceThreads is the concept of high-touch instruction and facilitation. High-touch instruction is a personalized and accessible learning experience, establishing meaningful and intentional interactions between facilitator and learner as well as providing structures that promote sustained collaboration with peers. Weekly or daily discussions online allow students to practice concepts in the classroom and engage with peers later that same day about what worked well in the lesson and what still needs more practice.

This is a shift from some traditional professional development, where a three-hour session may have as many as 50 participants with limited access to the facilitator and brief, timed opportunities for table talk about practice.

In designing online learning, I begin by assessing how high touch my course will be and then how high tech the tools used in my course will be.

RETHINK COLLABORATION STRUCTURES

With user-friendly tools, carefully designed experiences, and supportive and sustained access, Dorothy settled easily into her first eight-week online continuing education course and was able to focus on her teaching practice and the course concepts.

Some of the best professional learning I have experienced

over the years was engaging and collaborative. Content-related table talk with other educators about teaching, learning, and assessment offered an opportunity to discuss relevant problems of practice. Writing about engagement in online learning, Albert L. Ingram states, "True collaboration is probably a fundamental part of building an effective community of practice or learning community" (Ingram, 2005, p. 55).

How does true collaboration shift when creating online learning communities? Margery Ginsberg's work on transformative professional learning through reflective group work (Ginsberg, 2011) guided my thoughts as I considered how reflective collaboration occurs in an online format. How can facilitators and designers of online learning for adults create a cooperative learning climate that adult learners require?

Using targeted learning outcomes, carefully crafted discussion prompts, and intentional grouping, the practice of true collaboration can easily translate into an online format. Paper, markers, and note cards used in a traditional workshop format to facilitate collaboration and promote thinking shift to tools such as discussion threads, chat rooms, and videos in an online format. Adult learners and facilitators can choose to have synchronous (real time) or asynchronous sessions, depending on their schedules.

For large classes, students can be grouped into smaller teams who teach and practice at the same grade level or even grouped across grade levels to enhance perspective. In many of the courses I design, students share videos of teaching practice with others in the course to receive rubric-guided feedback and promote reflection. A climate of trust develops as students practice giving feedback on lessons, challenge the concepts in the course through intentional questioning techniques, and have frequent celebrations as students share success with the concepts in their practice.

Learning is reciprocal in online formats as learners and facilitators build their knowledge base through shared experiences about teaching, learning, student achievement, and leadership practice. Feedback from students shows that this highly engaging approach was effective and transformative. Dorothy said that the online course encourages students and the facilitator to share experiences about teaching, classroom management, curriculum, and other challenges and successes in practice.

Other students said that the opportunity to engage with peers gave them a safe forum to share and give voice to their specific challenges with others who have similar experiences. They have time and space to receive and give advice to peers, go back to the classroom and change practice, then share successes. This level of sustained sharing and engagement does not always happen when time is short in traditional workshop format professional development.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The insights I have gained providing online professional learning have challenged me to be more intentional regarding my choice of learning activities; more clear, concise, and explicit in my expectations, purpose, and directions for activities that impact practice; and more open to opportunities to provide choice and personalization when assessing learning.

Adult learners need choice and experiences that are meaningful and easily translate to their practice and build on their experiences as educators. I want students like Dorothy to pave their own path within the content area. My goal is to have these adult professionals see technology as a valuable tool to strengthen and transform their practice.

Much like traditional professional development, students in online learning are asked frequently to communicate what is relevant about their new learning. They are also asked what is missing from their learning at benchmarks throughout the course. I also ask students to give me feedback about the embedded technology tools. As a facilitator, I can adjust my course content and tools to meet students' needs. Student feedback enhances my practice and skill as a course facilitator.

LEARNER-CENTERED CONSIDERATIONS

Traditional professional development can shift to a more personalized experience in an online format. I was able to offer Dorothy personalized guidance as she completed each module of the course. She valued frequent contact with me throughout the course. She gained confidence in her ability to access and work with technology, participated in meaningful collaboration with her peers regarding teaching and learning, and practiced worthwhile reflection to improve her own teaching practice. Dorothy said that she developed important, collegial, and long-lasting relationships with peers who were also in the courses that she took.

My goal for Dorothy and other adult learners is for them to conclude their professional learning experience not only with the required continuing education units but also with an arsenal of tools that can transform practice and improve student achievement. I want them to have evidence that the time and resources that they invested to complete the courses had a significant impact on their practice while building their capacity to share their learning with others.

As a facilitator and instructor, I use forum discussions and online journaling for students to post questions or challenges regarding practice and course content and receive timely feedback and ideas from peers and/or facilitators. I follow up with students to see if they implemented changes in their classroom, using online journaling or mini portfolios as evidence of improved practice. The online journal serves not only as a formative assessment tool for benchmarking evidence

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of improved practice but also is a valuable end-of-course artifact as I consider revisions to the course.

After taking several continuing education courses, Dorothy called to say, "Thank you for talking me off the ledge when I started this journey. I am much more confident not only about the concepts from the courses but also with using technology within my own learning and also with children to improve their learning."

I replied, "Thank you, Dorothy, for being willing to step out of your comfort zone and share your knowledge and experience with me and with your peers. Professional development is about growing in professional practice together to improve student achievement, and you made a significant contribution to that process."

If done well, providing continuing education in an online format to adult professionals like Dorothy has the potential to not only transform educational practice but also increase access to meaningful professional learning that is enhanced by relevant technology tools.

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Activities vs. outcomes

They saw changes in their knowledge and skills and made changes to their practice, which resulted in increased student achievement as measured by growth on pre- and post tests.

Using a logic model as a road map to reach intended results, and collaboratively engaging in learning the six strategies for change, the 3rd-grade teachers were able to reach the desired goal by thinking about outcomes, not activities, first.

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