Enriching professional learning with online collaborative tools

Sandra Canniff, Senior Education Officer (Educational Leadership), School Leadership and Executive Learning Unit, Professional Learning and Leadership Development Directorate, NSW Department of Education and Training

Professional learning is a sustained learning opportunity that enhances understanding, capability and/or skills leading to an altered professional understanding and improved student learning outcomes. Professional learning should be challenging, containing intellectual rigor in a complex layered experience. It should be relevant to the workplace and engage learners in their learning. The manner in which professional learning will enrich each participant will differ. According to Webster-Wright (2010) these differences are based on the individual’s prior experiences, the perceived relevance of this learning to their daily practice, how they understood the learning, their way of looking at things and their way of interconnecting these to make new understandings:

...change in professional understanding is the crux of all the experiences of authentic professional learning [APL] described by participants. Only when change in professional understanding occurs is APL experienced.


Adding online tools to the professional learning provides another avenue through which this professional understanding can occur. Some of the main advantages for using online collaborative tools are to add a multilayered experience to the learning, provide a forum for reflection plus the shaping and reshaping of ideas and provide a flexibility for the time to participate in the learning. Using asynchronous (no fixed time) online tools means that team members can participate when they have the window of time available to them rather than at set meeting times. Working digitally also provides an evidence trail and a reference point for the refreshing of memories or for further extension of thinking and/or products.

Using collaborative learning in your professional learning programs will extend the team's understanding of concepts and their professional understanding as they work together to reach a common goal. It will also aid in the development of your professional learning community. Online collaboration is easier now than ever with the advent of new tools and the increasing access to older communication tools.

Increasingly, both students and their professors see the challenges facing the world as multidisciplinary, and the need for collaboration great. Over the past few years, the emergence of a raft of new (and often free) tools has made collaboration easier than at any other point in history.


The collaborative process involves participants exploring the issues individually, and then learning from each other by grappling with the concepts and data while sharing prior experiences to make innovative leaps and gain a greater understanding of the topic. Leaders need to provide effective feedback and rewards to encourage further collaboration.

Collaborative learning is an umbrella term for a variety of educational approaches involving joint intellectual effort by students, or students and teachers together. Usually students are working in groups of two or more, mutually searching for understanding, solutions, or meanings, or creating a product. Collaborative learning activities vary widely, but most center on students’ exploration or application of the course material, not simply the teacher’s presentation or explication of it.


The transfer of this pedagogy to the online environment will be easier if the team members are effective collaborators in a face-to-face environment. If they have the capacity for relationship building, negotiation and evidence gathering, then working online is just a shift in thinking. In the online environment, participants are being asked to mould and develop a product with others who are not in the room with them, they may also be asked to use tools that are new to them e.g. wikis.

The creation of a learning community supports and encourages knowledge acquisition...The total outcome of knowledge acquired and shared is far greater than what would be generated through independent, individual engagement with the material.
Effective online collaborative learning will require support from the school leader. This support will include their personal support but not necessarily their personal daily contributions. This consistent participation can be delegated to other leaders who have the facilitative role with the group. The principal will need to spot the barriers that may exist which could prevent the collaboration occurring and tailor solutions to overcome these barriers. This will be much easier to accomplish if they have experience with a range of online collaborative activities themselves.

The idea of disciplined collaboration can be summed up in one phrase: the leadership practice of properly assessing when to collaborate (and when not to) and instilling in people both the willingness and the ability to collaborate when required.

Hansen, Morten T. (2009), Collaboration: how leaders avoid the traps, create unity and reap big results, Harvard Business Press, Boston, Massachusetts, page 15

A learning community

One strategy that can assist in giving the collaboration activity more meaning and sustainability is the development of a learning community. Instinctively teachers create learning communities within their classes. For collaborative professional learning, these communities can be expanded in two fundamentally challenging ways: to teams and then into an online environment.

A professional learning community is an inclusive group of people, motivated by a shared learning vision, who support and work with each other, finding ways, inside and outside their immediate community, to enquire on their practice and together learn new and better approaches that will enhance all pupils’ learning.


An online professional learning community has the same definition but uses different tools for communication and collaborating. Online communities can transcend single schools, regions and Communities of practice (CoPs) are groups of people who share similar goals, interests and practices, and in doing so, employ common practices, work with the same tools and express themselves in a common language.

Why use online communication and collaborative tools?

With the increase in the number of teacher computing devices and collaborative tools in conjunction with the upgrading of Internet access, online is becoming a viable option. The main reason for adding an online component to collaborative activities is that of time. Having access to the ideas and conversations at any time rather than only when in meetings gives:

- the participants scope to reflect and build on the ideas when they have an idea rather than waiting for the next meeting
- those who require time to think things through before committing to a stance more time to reflect before contributing to the development of the concepts
- those who lack confidence have a way to contribute their ideas
- everyone can refer back and follow the development of the ideas, to refresh their memories, and check for omissions in their evidence or thinking
- there is evidence of their participation in the process
- the facilitator can provide feedback throughout the process.

What are the online communication and collaborative tools?

Online communication will generally be done using text through: instant messenger, social networks, email, forums/discussions, chats, microblogs and blogs. These tools provide a range of different communication methods. Each tool has a particular form and function. The following is a brief list from the numerous tools.

- Instant messenger – e.g. Skype, AOL, Windows Live Messenger, included in content management tools
- social networks
- email
- forums/discussions
- chats
- microblogs – e.g. Twitter, Yammer
- blogs – e.g. BlogEd, Edublog, Wordpress

There are also tools that allow for visual and/or audio input:

- Video conferencing – using Internet tools (free and subscription) or corporate tools (e.g. Polycom)
- VoIP – (Voice over Internet Protocols) most popular is Skype and most are free

In addition there are online tools that can be used to collaborate in the creation of documents. Examples include:

- Suite of applications – e.g. Google docs, Office live, Ajax13, peepel, ThinkFree, PBWorks
- Word processing only – e.g. Buzzword, iNetWord
- Presentations only e.g. Prezi, Zoho, PreZentit, Empressr.com
- Concept maps – e.g. bubbl.us, Gliffy, mind42.com, mindmeister, edistorm
- wikis – e.g. wikispaces, PBWiki
- desktop sharing - e.g. Bridgit, Skype, Yugma, most online meeting software
- online whiteboarding – e.g. Dabbleboard, skrbl, virtual whiteboard

If you are working with staff who are in a number of sites, there are also tools that can be used to share documents, photos and videos such as:

- Email – as attachments
- Photo sharing – e.g. Flickr, Photobucket, Picasa, Fotki
Enriching PL with online collaborative tools

- Video sharing – e.g. YouTube, Vimeo, Videoegg, vSocial
- Audio sharing – e.g. yourlisten, Audioboo, Chirbit
- Document sharing – e.g. Google docs, Office live, docShare, Scribd, Acrobat.com
- Sharing PowerPoints – e.g. SlideShare, SlideBoom, myBrainshark, pptShare
- Sharing large files – e.g. YouSendIt, MediaFire, SendSpace

Some of these tools are similar to what staff already use and some will be new. This can be a challenge for those who are not familiar with this mode of learning. There is an extra challenge for them in learning how to convey their ideas and negotiate the task. For these reasons, effective online collaboration requires facilitation.

What is the role of the facilitator?

The creation of the proper climate within the school community before starting online collaborative activities will support the entire process. Facilitators need to be aware of the following general issues.

- Continuous feedback is required from the facilitator to help everyone in the groups have confidence that they are moving in the right direction. This can be done either face-to-face or online.
- Facilitators need to try to ensure that the team members keep the scope of the task and the process for achieving the task in proportion to the time available.
- If the team has a leader it is important to watch for burn out of that leader. This is most common when the others are creating obstacles to collaboration. If the team leader is trying unsuccessfully to coordinate timelines and negotiate consensus, they may just give up.
- When determining small team membership it is advisable to put strong online communicators in each team and not leave one with most of the members having weak online skills. Strong digital learners would be characterised by prior commitment to completing online tasks on time and at a high level of intellectual quality. Often they have prior experience using these tools. They may also have been observing others to gain their skills.
- Impatience on the part of the over achievers can add an extra burden on the team members. With online communication, patience is very important. If the over achiever jumps in too early and completes the task, they will alienate the slower members and lose the richness of their contributions. The quality of the final product and the learning will be diminished by that omission. In addition, the alienated members may not have an opportunity to fully grasp the concepts and thus gain a feeling of ownership because they were not given an opportunity to grapple with the issues.
- Technical challenges for the team when trying to communicate online and create resources can interfere with creativity. Try to limit the number of tools used on any one activity and ensure that they are easy to use and/or training in their use has been provided. Encourage the team members to work within their technical expertise. If there are technical problems that impede the group communication, refer these to the technical support team immediately.

References


Hansen, Morten T. (2009), *Collaboration: how leaders avoid the traps, create unity and reap big results*, Harvard Business Press, Boston, Massachusetts, page 15


