Rural Creativity: A Study of District Mandated Online Professional Development

Cynthia Johnson
Jefferson County North Unified School District 139

Jennifer Summerville
University of North Carolina

Introduction

According to the annual industry report in "Training" magazine, money spent on employee training dropped approximately six percent—the first time that training expenditures have dropped since the mid 1990's. At the same time, web-based training increased from 48% of all computer-based training to 61% in just one year (2002-2003). The most "bang for the buck" in the business sector is in one area of rapid growth—e-learning. (Galvin, 2003).

School districts are not exempt from this growing trend. Rodes, Knapczyk, Chapman & Haejin (2000) suggest that the population most in need of e-learning is "[c]ontinuing education students, teachers in rural areas, and inservice personnel in need of professional development". However, how well "e-training" meets the needs of professional educators remains to be seen.

In the spring of 2002, the professional development committee and administrative team of a rural school district in the Midwest decided to implement an online staff development learning opportunity. Each educator at the middle and secondary education level would enroll in and complete one online course in his or her chosen discipline. This course would be paid for by the school district as part of staff development.

Background

In a forward-thinking technology district, administration is constantly challenged to come up with new and creative ideas for faculty and staff support and development. During a professional development committee meeting, the superintendent offered the idea of online staff development. Members of this committee included the curriculum director, high school principal, and faculty representatives. The faculty representatives included the chairperson, one elementary teacher, one middle-level teacher, one high school teacher, and one at-large teacher.

The committee believed the online opportunity would allow teachers to become more familiar with the technology they had available, help teachers better understand the experience of students enrolled in online courses, and provide specialized training that would not otherwise be available. The committee agreed that the online staff development would be required of all secondary teachers.

Although all the teachers had laptops and technology provided by the district, the diversity of the faculty also included a wide range of integration and comfort-levels issues dealing with technology. The flexibility of studying a variety of subjects online might improve the effectiveness of the staff development as it was important subject matter to the educators taking the courses.

Requiring educators who were unfamiliar with the expectations and happenings of online learning to take an online course might foster negative feelings. Creating a survey to analyze how the faculty felt about the online experience would provide helpful information for future district online staff development and for other districts considering the implementation of online professional training.

Methodology

Subjects

Subjects were not chosen at random as this was a district mandated program. Each educator teaching grades six through twelve was required to select and complete an online course; kindergarten through fifth grade educators would not be required to fulfill this requirement. In all, 23 secondary educators, two administrators and one full-time tutor participated in this program.

Technology Training

The school district would provide the technology, time, and money for the endeavor into online learning. During the year and a half prior to participating in the online program, each educator was given a personal laptop and received training on how to use the laptop properly.

District-level staff development time scheduled in mid-August before school began was utilized to teach the faculty how to set up and use the computers. One session was held for the elementary and middle-level faculty while another session was held for the high school faculty. Additional required sessions included learning how to use the email system and grading programs. As the programs and computers were updated, required building-level training was provided during scheduled in-service days.

Online Courses

Although educators were allowed to choose their courses based on personal preference, most educators chose topics that were specialized according to his or her particular area of teaching. For example, music educators completed "Internet for Music Educators." The remaining educators chose broader subjects that would benefit the school as a whole or were more traditional in-service topics. These included such topics as classroom management, sexual harassment, and curriculum compacting.

Of the 26 participants, 22 educators chose online courses provided by a recommended provider, three educators chose graduate courses offered by a regional university and one educator chose an alternative online course provided by an additional provider.

The recommended courses ranged in cost from $72 - $120; 20 of the 22 courses cost $72. The three educators who chose graduate courses each enrolled in three-hour courses and were reimbursed $180 total. University graduate courses were reimbursed at the rate of $60 per credit hour as outlined in the district's negotiated agreement. The approved alternative course by an outside provider cost $100, which was paid by the district. Courses offered through the recommended provider were completely paid for by the district.

Courses were to be completed by May with the exception of three educators enrolled in graduate-level, semester-length courses. The remaining educators enrolled in courses that were independent in nature and allowed the educators to work at their own pace. While a few were able to complete the course in one intensive day session, most of the educators completed their courses in two months.

Instrumentation

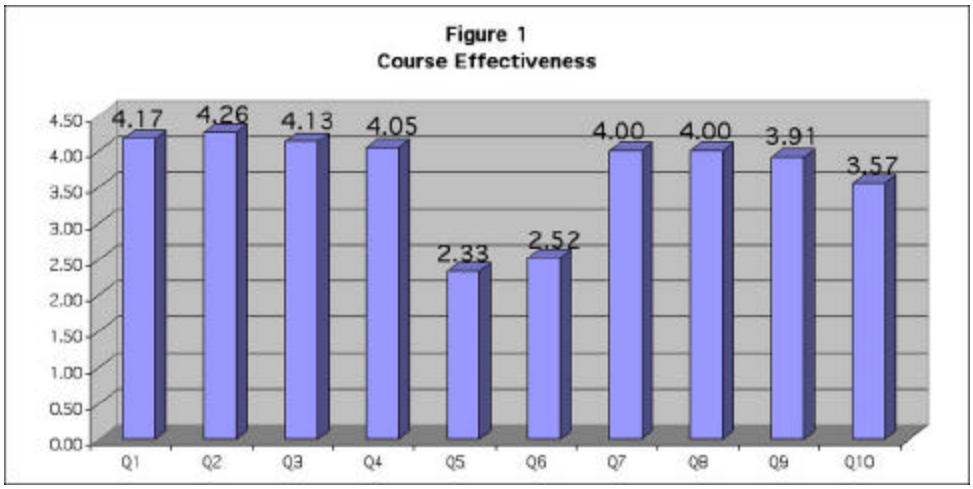
The data collection instrument was a survey consisting of 26 likert-scale questions and four open-ended/short answer questions. Question categories included course effectiveness, instructor effectiveness, self-perceptions of the educator as a student, and support services and technology. See Appendix A for a copy of the full survey. A source of reference was an online course survey from a regional university that was completed by students near the end of a semester online course. Particular points of interest from the professional development standpoint included whether the faculty felt comfortable with the technology, whether the online format was effective, and would the faculty consider enrolling in another online course.

Data Collection

The survey was sent via an email attachment and hard copies were also placed in each educator's mailbox. 88 percent (23/26) of the participants completed and returned the online staff development survey. 21 respondents returned the hard copy that was placed in their mailboxes, one respondent printed off the attachment and sent in the completed survey, and one respondent returned the completed email attachment.

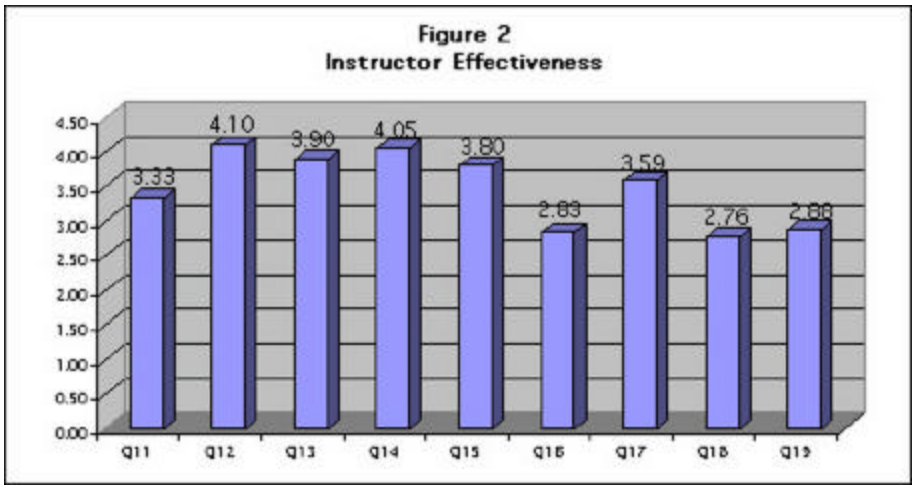
Results

As displayed in Figure 1, the majority of the questions in the first section titled Course Effectiveness received high marks. Respondents believed the syllabus accurately described course content and objectives (Q1) and that the course pace and difficulty was appropriate (Q3) and assignments were reasonable and appropriate (Q2).



Interaction with fellow students (Q5) and interaction with the instructor (Q6) received relatively low rankings. Two respondents noted that there was no interaction between fellow students and no interaction with the instructor. Respondents agreed, as indicated by the 4.00 average that the online course increased their interest in the subject (Q8) and they would recommend the course to other students (Q7).

In the second section, Instructor Effectiveness, overall effectiveness as a teacher and facilitator of online learning (Q11) received mostly positive responses as did the class was well-prepared with stimulating lessons (Q13) and used grading procedures that were fair and equitable (Q17).

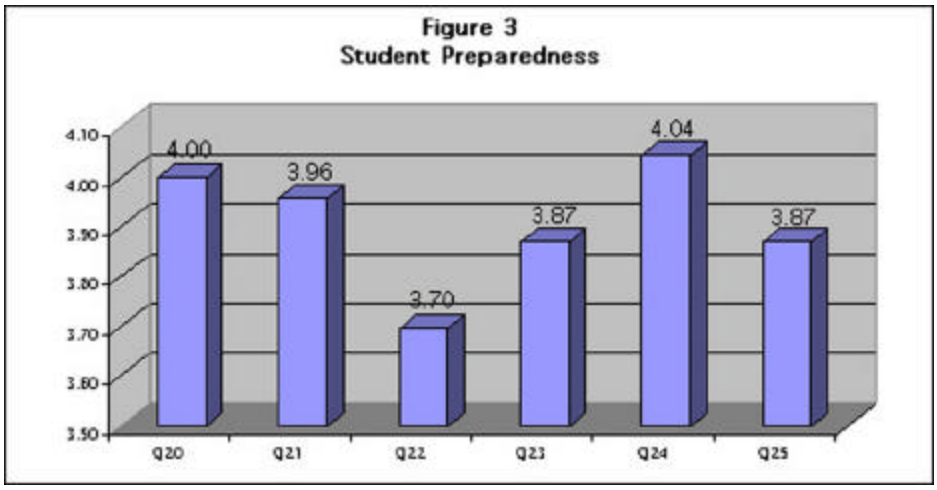


Questions 16, 18, and 19 all received 2.88 and below ratings. Respondents did not feel like instructors commented on their work in ways that helped them learn, instructors did not realize when students did not understand, and instructors were not willing to help students outside of the class. Five respondents did not answer question 16 because instructors did not comment at all on assignments or coursework. Six respondents did not answer questions 17 – 19 concerning fair grading practices, realizing when students did not understand, and helping outside of class. Two respondents commented there was not an instructor presence because it was an online course.

In the section on Student Preparedness, graphed in Figure 3, all of the questions received relatively positive ratings. Question 20 rated interest in taking the course, which the respondents rated as a 4.00.

The next question related to effort applied toward learning, which remained high even though the course was required. The amount learned in the course received the lowest rating of the student section with a 3.70. One respondent commented that the course was better suited for a new student instead of an experienced educator. Confidence in using the learned information was the highest rating in the section with a 4.04. The freedom to choose any course allowed educators to select online courses that were relevant for their particular

situations or teaching fields.



Question 23 rated prior computer experience, which received a rating of 3.87. Each educator was provided a laptop in the fall of 2000; educators had the computers for one-and-a-half years before the online requirement. Subsequent in-service opportunities have been provided and technology support staff was available for additional help during the regular workday. The last question in the student section asked if the respondent would consider enrolling in another online course. With a score of 3.87, respondents leaned toward agreement.

The ability to receive technical assistance from appropriate support services received a rating of 3.52. Respondents were able to use support services from the online provider, the professional development committee, and the technology support staff. Respondents also referred to other educators for assistance.

Results and Relationship to Research

Successes of Online Experience

Flexibility of Time Five respondents specifically mentioned flexibility of completing the course as a benefit of online learning. Educators could use the two in-service days set aside for the course or they could use their own personal time. Coursework could be completed at work or it could be completed while at home. Since educators each had a laptop, they could work on their online course anywhere they could find an Internet connection. The courses were also asynchronous so educators could log on at any time of the day.

Online staff development also provides "just in time" learning when educators need it most (Richardson, 2001). The increased accessibility allows educators to log on at anytime but it also allows them to retain online resources and refer to them at anytime during the semester or in the future (Barkley and Bianco, 2000).

Self-Paced Courses Five respondents also added that working at their own pace was a benefit of the online learning atmosphere. Some educators completed their courses in one session on one of the provided in-service days while others worked on the courses as it was convenient to their schedules.

The self-paced atmosphere also allowed educators the privacy of reviewing materials they did not feel they mastered. Educators did not have to worry about fellow peers realizing they were reviewing past information. "Constructivist research has demonstrated that teachers, as well as students, generally prefer to be in charge of their own learning and prefer to build their own knowledge," added Odasz in his article on Alaskan professional development (1999).

Educators enjoy the self pace because they can move as quickly or as slowly as they feel is necessary. Odasz also added that once the teachers were comfortable with the instructions and course, they appreciated "not being specifically led, but being left to learn on their own, in their own way" (1999).

Viable Content and Information The district allowed the educators to choose what course they would enroll in for their online learning experience. By providing the educators with the topic choice, educators could choose

whatever topic they felt would benefit them the most. The educator was also allowed to select the provider, which allowed more opportunity for specialization and refinement of content.

One technology coordinator agreed that "tailored training would certainly be more motivation to our staff than the en masse training that is currently typical" (Zahner, 2002). Requiring the online staff development and allowing individual educators to select course topics provided a wonderful opportunity for customized learning for each educator's needs (Richardson, 2001).

New Ideas In addition to useful content, the online courses also provided the educators with the opportunity to meet new colleagues and share new ideas. Online collaborative tools allowed the educators to "develop new insights into pedagogy and their own practice" and to "explore new or advanced understandings of content and resources" (Zahner, 2002). Educators were able to engage in learning with other online students with similar interests and to "facilitate the exchange of ideas and information" (Simkins, 1998).

Considerations for Improvement

Online Course Offerings Some educators commented they did not have enough information on how to find an online course or evaluate the providers of the online courses. One respondent specifically mentioned that a list of available courses and a synopsis of content would have been helpful during the selection process. Although there was an information packet distributed to the participants, little information was included on the content of specific courses.

The majority of the educators enrolled in the recommended courses primarily because they were recommended in the notification and the tuition would be completely covered by the school district. One educator did research an additional online course provider but encountered problems logging in, accessing the course, and receiving assistance.

A list of colleges with graduate level online courses would also be helpful as well as web addresses to online course offerings. Web sites that provide links to example course pages would also help educators make a more informed choice on the type of online course and level of interaction. Educators could also use these graduate hours to recertify with the state department.

Support Staff Technology support staff was available during the course of the semester but the hours of availability were somewhat limited. Each member of the tech support staff was also a part-time teacher and had teaching responsibilities throughout the regular workday. Educators who did not share plan time or tech support time with a support staff member had difficulty receiving help during the workday.

Time was available if educators were willing to report before or after school. Odasz commented, "Anxiety is reduced knowing help is readily available, anytime they need it" (1999). If a support staff member was available during each hour of the workday, this would decrease anxiety and help solve problems while they were still small and manageable. Educators would also be able to seek help and advice during the regular workday and would not have to make appointments before or after school.

Also an initial meeting with all participants could have eased the transition into online learning. Many of the problems encountered by the educators were problems with the initial log in and compatibility issues with browsers. An initial meeting with tech support could have provided an opportunity for educators to log in, try passwords, and choose the best browser for the online course.

Time Allowance Most educators who did not enroll in graduate-level, semester courses spent an average of 10.8 hours on the course. Two other educators estimated it took 20-30 hours to complete the online coursework. The majority of the participants worked on the course during their personal time. Working on the course during personal time may have also made it feel like there was not enough compensated time (a total of two inservice days) set aside to complete the assignments and the necessary research.

Facilitator and Student Interaction The majority of the respondents felt their online experience could have been improved with more interaction from the facilitator and fellow students. 23 of the online courses chosen by the professional development committee were designed as self-paced, independent lessons for individual professional development. The benefit was the educator could work through the content at his or her own pace.

The disadvantage was the lack of interaction. Educators did not feel like there was a facilitator or instructor for the course, and there was very little interaction between the educators enrolled in the courses. One high school educator commented, "If I want to read more about it, I'll go to the library and check out a book and read it at home, on my deck or in my recliner, rather than at a keyboard."

Educators enrolled in graduate courses were able to experience more interaction between the facilitator and the fellow students enrolled in the course. The graduate courses used more interactive collaborative tools such as discussion forums and chat rooms. The graduate courses also included assignments that required group projects in which the educators had to work online with fellow educators to complete assignments.

Student-to-student interaction plays a vital role in online learning. Students can post questions to discussion forums and have peers offer assistance. This student-to-student interaction improves the communication between the students during the course, helps relieve the number of questions the facilitator must answer, and builds colleague relationships that will extend beyond the length of the online course.

As online students, educators learn how to use online collaborative tools to exchange ideas with peers; continuing to use these communication tools will allow educators to stay more up-to-date with the ever-changing world of education. This new opportunity for peer collaboration and simply "talking" with fellow teachers is something teachers often cannot find time for during the standard school day (Killion, 2000).

Conclusions and Suggestions for Future Research

Overall, requiring educators to take an online course as part of staff development appears to have been a positive endeavor. In an environment where time is often an opponent and funding for staff development is scarce, it is important to find alternatives for providing training opportunities.

However, several issues arose during the analysis of the data for this study. These issues may be important for future research. First, what types of information should be provided so that educators could make informed decisions about online courses? How can this information be provided in an unbiased manner without appearing to advocate certain courses?

Next, should a "starter" online course be provided before taking the required course? In other words, would a "how to learn online" course be of benefit to the overall feelings of success in online course environments? If so, how would this be developed, delivered and funded?

Finally, how much time should be allotted for staff development? Should additional time be allotted and funded (as this was a district requirement) or is the traditional allotted time (one or two inservice days) sufficient for online courses? Should the district provide alternatives other than inservice days (such as a monetary incentive)?

It is the opinion of the authors of this article that online venues can provide ideal training alternatives for educators in rural or other districts who may not have access to the varied courses available in larger metropolitan areas. Districts considering such proposals will need to be aware of potential issues over which they have control—time, compensation and information. Armed with this knowledge, we hope educators and administrators can make informed decisions about implementing online staff training and development.

References

Barkley, S. G. & Bianco, T. (2000). Part digital training, part human touch. *Journal of Staff Development,* 23(1), 42-45.

Galvin, T. (2003). 2003 Industry Report: Training magazine's 22nd annual comprehensive analysis of employer-sponsored training in the United States. *Training,* 40(9), 21-39.

Killion, J. P. (2000). Online staff development: promise or peril? *NASSP Bulletin,* 84(3), 38-46.

Odasz, F. B. (1999). Alaskan professional development: lone eagles learn to "teach from any beach!". *T.H.E. Journal,* 27(4), 90-92.

Richardson, J. (2001). Online professional development. *School Administrator,* 58(9), 38-42.

Rodes, P., Knapczyk , D., Chapman, C., & Haejin, C. (2000). Involving Teachers in Web-Based Professional Development. *T H E Journal,* 27(10), 94.

Simkins, M. B. (1998). Teachers go online for staff development. Thrust for *Educational Leadership,* 27(7), 19.

Zahner, J. (2002). Teachers explore knowledge management and E-learning as models for professional development. *TechTrends,* 46(3), 11-16.

Appendix B

Online Staff Development Evaluation

Name: _____ Position: _____
Course Title: _____ Course Provider: _____
How long did it take you to complete the course? _____
Please give honest and thoughtful answers to the following questions. The evaluation contains five sections. The first section is course effectiveness. Section two is instructor effectiveness. The third section relates to you as a student. Support services and technology is the fourth section. The final section contains open-ended questions. Please respond to the questions in each section. You may omit an item if you feel unable to make a fair judgement.

Please rate your level of agreement using the following scale:

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No Opinion/Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

---

COURSE EFFECTIVENESS

4	Syllabus accurately described course content and objectives	1	2	3	4	5
5	Assignments were reasonable and appropriate	1	2	3	4	5
6	Course pace and difficulty were appropriate	1	2	3	4	5
7	Exams and quizzes reflected important course aspects	1	2	3	4	5
8	Level of interaction with fellow students	1	2	3	4	5
9	Level of interaction with the instructor	1	2	3	4	5
10	I would recommend this course to other students	1	2	3	4	5
11	The course increased my interest in the subject	1	2	3	4	5
12	Having completed the course, I feel knowledgeable in the subject	1	2	3	4	5
13	Overall, the course and instructor met my expectations	1	2	3	4	5

INSTRUCTOR EFFECTIVENESS

14	Overall effectiveness as a teacher and facilitator of online learning	1	2	3	4	5
15	Making clear the goals and objectives of this online course	1	2	3	4	5
16	Being well prepared for the class (ex. designing well planned lessons and activities)	1	2	3	4	5
17	Explaining the subject matter so you understand	1	2	3	4	5
18	Stimulating you to think more deeply about the subject					

	(applying information, analyzing, solving problems)	1	2	3	4	5
19	Commenting on your work (tests and assignments) in ways that helped you learn (ex. online discussions, etc).	1	2	3	4	5
20	Using grading procedures that were fair and equitable	1	2	3	4	5
21	Realizing when students did not understand	1	2	3	4	5
22	Being willing to help students outside of class (give assistance via email, phone, virtual office hours, and supplemental mailings)	1	2	3	4	5

YOU AS A STUDENT

23	Your interest in taking this course before you enrolled	1	2	3	4	5
24	Your effort to learn in this course (studying, completing assignments, brainstorming ideas)	1	2	3	4	5
25	The amount you have learned in this course	1	2	3	4	5
26	Your computer experience prior to this course	1	2	3	4	5
27	How confident do you feel about using the information presented in this course	1	2	3	4	5
28	Would you enroll in another online course?	1	2	3	4	5

SUPPORT SERVICES & TECHNOLOGY

29	Your ability to receive technical assistance from the appropriate support services	1	2	3	4	5

30 What could be done to make it easier for you to be a distance learner?

31 Describe any frustrations or problems with technology in this course.

32 What did you like best about this online course?

33 What did you like least about this online course?

Thank you