By Jennifer Demski

Solving the PD Puzzle

As U.S. classrooms increasingly become hubs of twenty-first century learning, professional development remains firmly rooted in the last century. With the "anytime, anywhere, any way" learning model provided by online professional development content providers, why hasn't online PD become the norm—or at least more mainstream?

T.H.E. Journal recently engaged a small panel of thought leaders from professional development providers, including David Hargis, director of content development for ASCD; Valda Valbrun, director of professional development for ASCD; M.C. Desrosiers, chief of program development for ASCD; and Mark Atkinson, founder and chief strategist for Teachscape, to discuss the barriers that have prevented online PD from taking off, the current state of online PD, and what to expect in the near future.

We know how effective online courses can be for K-12 students. They allow teachers to provide personalized and differentiated learning; they enable collaboration; and they allow schools to offer coursework that they couldn't offer in a brick-and-mortar setting, due to either lack of resources or funding. Yet, district- or schoolwide online professional development initiatives are still a rare bird. From your perspective, where are we in the acceptance of online PD as a mainstream option for professional learning?

Valbrun: I think that people in general are more digitally savvy than they were four years ago, and I think that increased comfort level with technology is helping us out. Things like iPads, personal mobile devices—the culture is changing and it's so much easier to have access to the internet. Five years ago, broadband was not where it is today, and add to that the fact that you can now access online content from anywhere with a cell phone signal, and that all definitely contributes to the increased adoption of online material.

Are you talking about teachers' willingness to adopt or districts' adoption?

Hargis: We monitor usage of our online courses very carefully, and since 2009, there's been a vast increase in the number of enrollments of those courses. I think there's a snowball effect to the growth, where it started out slow, but as time passed the growth became exponential, and I think that's due to both word of mouth and just an increase in people's general comfort with technology. Traditionally, it was individual teachers seeking out these technologies, but in the past six months we've had several large districts adopt PD Online and PD In Focus [ASCD online professional courses], and that represents a real change toward wide-scale initiatives in the market.

So, there are a few things—ubiquitous broadband, personal mobile devices, better apps, and content delivery systems—converging in this moment to create this shift?

Atkinson: Well, I also think it's important to look at the cultural shift in regards to our perception of the quality of teaching in the classroom. At some level there's been this gut feeling that the quality of teaching is not where it needs to be, and yet the way in which teachers are evaluated would lead you to believe that every teacher is above average. There's no need to provide personalized, differentiated PD when everybody's doing great, according to the data.

How does this shift in perception of teacher quality play into the increased adoption of districtwide online PD initiatives? And how does a district ensure that teachers are getting the professional instruction that they need as individuals?

Atkinson: Well, I think that one of the reasons why there's optimism around online PD is the value of differentiation. However, in order to provide effective differentiated learning for teachers, you need a valid and effective instrument for objectively evaluating teachers and looking critically at the skills that they have. For the first time for the adults in the system, there's actually a tool for differentiating teachers' strengths and weaknesses. A number of companies, including Teachscape, now offer evaluation systems.

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How do the evaluation systems work?

Atkinson: Ours is based on *The Framework for Teaching* by Charlotte Danielson. Teachers videotape their lessons, upload it to a server, and multiple observers view and score their performance from afar. Suddenly, now you have a data-driven, scientific diagnosis of individual teachers' strengths and weaknesses, and you can provide access to online content to address those deficiencies. We've been doing this for kids for a while; we just haven't been taking the time to do it for adults.

So, differentiated online learning based on objective, data-driven evaluations. This is the future of PD? What's the role of traditional PD at this juncture?

Hargis: It's funny, for a long time there was a battle between doing everything online versus doing everything face-to-face. However, what the research is showing is that there's something very powerful in combining the polarity of the two methods.

Atkinson: We also advocate for a blended approach because we think that's the best way to get differentiation, scalability, powerful analytics, and a continuous support system in place. However, the truth is, very few districts do good PD, period.

Desrosiers: The best thing that can happen is to recognize how the best practices that we put in place in our classrooms transfer over to the world of PD. Those best practices show us the future. We'll see more online PD in terms of adaptive, hands-on, user-driven, personal-ized learning, but teachers are going to still want to go to conferences and have that face-to-face time. However, I even think that in traditional face-to-face models, you'll see elements of online learning.

Like what?

Desrosiers: Flipped learning. ASCD and other organizations are doing flipped conferences now, meaning educators access digital materials and participate in online learning communities before attending a conference, and then use their face-to-face conference time participating in collaborative learning. User-driven conferences, like un-conferences, where teachers come together and then plan the conference at the start of the day based on what they'd like to learn. I think that blending is important because both online and traditional learning are different models of instruction that are used for different reasons at different times. In general, we look to the K-12 space when we think about personalization and differentiation, but its adoption has been a lot slower in PD because the dollars are less and teachers have less time.

In your professional opinion, what does a good professional development initiative look like, and what is the role of online learning in that version of professional development?

Atkinson: What has been lacking and what is today, I would argue, extremely rare in school districts—regardless of whether it's online or offline PD—is a very disci-

plined approach to examining what kids need to be able to do; looking critically at the teaching, whether it's live—or technology-based observation; connecting the quality of the instruction with the quality of the learning; and trying different approaches to teaching the same concept to see whether you can get higher learning by teaching something differently—and then coaching teachers around all of those models.

Valbrun: There has to be an online community of practicing teachers with shared interests, so they can build a network of support. It will deliver benefits to the entire team. They'll be able to learn from, build from, and impact each other's practice. I think there also has to be an environment where teachers can create solutions together. With an online component, you're working with colleagues both near and far. They can be in the same building, and have discussions around this professional learning community, or they can be working with somebody who's not close by. However, there really needs to be a strong value to them, in regards to collaboration, so it's not an isolated practice. I think that online components help to eliminate the isolation, and help build collaboration around a community of online practice.

It sounds like the same best practices educators are trying to incorporate into the classroom. So, what's the next step for a district that's interested in adopting a blended model of professional development?

Atkinson: Teachscape's view has always been to build a case-based approach to modeling what good teaching looks like, and the way in which you access those cases is through the language of the instructional rubrics that are being used. So, in the case of a district that's adopted *the Framework for Teaching*, we can now show streaming video of what lessons look like at a higher performance level than the level at which the teacher was just diagnosed.

We want teachers to design more cognitively demanding lessons for kids, and to challenge students more in the classroom. However, the biggest asset here is not the streaming video content that we provide, it's the fact that teachers now have access to cheap, easily manipulated video, so they can try something in the classroom, and see how what they did was different than what they've previously done in the classroom or what was done in the example we provided.

Encouraging self-assessment as a part of their PD?

Atkinson: Exactly. Even if you never get feedback from anybody else, just being able to get outside yourself and examine how the student experiences the lesson you just

taught is revolutionary. It's one thing when you look at somebody else teaching something; it's another thing altogether when you compare that person to yourself. For an entire generation of online PD, video has been a passive tool used for watching content, but all of the questions that drive instructional improvement can be moved to the foreground when video is used as a constructivist tool for teachers to compare and contrast their own performance with those of their colleagues and of experts.

So, the focus of online PD should be less on delivering content to teachers, and more on modeling best practices for teaching the curriculum?

Atkinson: Right. If you were writing this article three years from now, I think that what you'd be seeing is a change in the number of districts that are formally and informally using existing technologies to create video so that teachers can really reflect in a deeper way on the quality of their teaching, and people like us building tools to support not so much this kind of online, course-driven model of PD, but to support iterative improvements in the quality of the taught curriculum.

Desrosiers: And we also have to model best practices for assessing and incorporating technology because the truth is, we can't specifically name the tools that are going to be at the forefront of online PD in the coming years. There are so many opportunities to use the tools that we're using in everyday life, but we have to reintroduce them to teachers in order for them to successfully use them for their instruction and their own learning. So the focus shouldn't so much be on what the trend is right now, but on how best to use tools in general to support learning and instruction. How do they vet technology? How do they use them as a team? Those processes are the most important because we all know that in six months, another technology will be coming out that completely changes the game. ∎

This article, with an exclusive video interview, originally appeared in *T.H.E. Journal*'s March 2013 digital edition.

Jennifer Demski, is a freelance writer in Brooklyn, NY. She and her husband, Brian, are the creators of PugSlope.com, a blog that chronicles city living with Sid, their neurotic pug.

Getting Involved With AAE in the New School Year

It's hard to believe that summer is coming to a close! We hope that our members have used the break to recuperate and recharge. This fall, both the excitement of meeting new students and the fresh start of a new school year bring a smile to all teachers. We hope another school year will provide you with the opportunity to avoid the mistakes of last year, and re-implement the ideas that proved successful.

Here at AAE, we are embracing the Back-to-School season like never before and want to make 2013-2014 our best year of serving you! Help your association grow and serve your colleagues with these Back-to-School suggestions for getting involved:

- **Back-to-school fairs:** Most school districts have some sort of beginning-of-the-year meeting, sometimes called an Opening Day, a Benefit Fair, or Orientation. With new and veteran teachers coming together to discuss the new school year, fellow teachers, clubs, and associations are often allowed to set up tables to answer questions and distribute information. If you have some spare time, why not set up a table for AAE? Contact your administrators for the details, and AAE can send you materials and promotional items!

- **Faculty meeting:** There's always that first Back-to-School faculty meeting for your school. It only takes a few minutes to tell your fellow educators about AAE and to pass out information. Just let your principal know, and you can ensure your colleagues are protected and supported this school year. We can provide you with suggestions of what to say and answers to frequently asked questions.

- **Mailboxes:** In the busy life of a teacher, sometimes our mailboxes serve as the only life-line to the outside world. If your school allows, consider placing some AAE materials with a personal note about your experience as a member/why you are a member in a colleague's mailbox. Sometimes a few words of encouragement and your testimonial can make all the difference.

- **Discuss the issues:** Is your state experiencing new and exciting education reform changes? Do you and your colleagues discuss these issues and what they mean to educators? If so, mention that you are a member of AAE and share with your colleague AAE's member-driven philosophy. As a member of AAE, each member has the opportunity to take policy surveys and comment on the issues. Let them know, that with AAE, their voice is heard!

- **Social media:** Include AAE when emailing, tweeting, Facebooking, or blogging about back-to-school. "Like" the "Association of American Educators" Facebook page, follow us on Twitter at "AAE teachers," and comment on our daily blog. Share your thoughts about legislation, and new education trends in your state.

- **Use and share AAE's professional development resources:** Take advantage of AAE's professional development opportunities by applying for an AAE Foundation scholarship or grant. Share our professional development calendar and blogs with your colleagues.

We want to serve you better than ever before in this new school year. Help us promote the teaching profession and education reform by sharing us with your colleagues. Visit **www.aaeteachers.org/GetInvolved** for more ideas today! ∎

Ten Back-to-School Tips for Teachers

The joys and jitters of back-to-school are in the hearts of all teachers. Whether you're in the classroom teaching already or you're not starting back until after Labor Day, take a few minutes and peruse my list of back-to-school tips. They may not all apply to your situation, but just as with teaching, take the ideas that work for you and make them your own. Enjoy!

1. Start the year with a firm hand (not a mean hand); you can ease off later.

2. Set your rules by creating a clear discipline plan, a method for carrying out the plan, and the consequences for following and not following the rules.

3. Decide which routines and procedures you'll have in place. Model proper execution of the routines and procedures to your students. Next, practice, practice, practice the routines with the students frequently the first few weeks. Review them as needed; students will need reminders throughout the year.

4. Create or update a substitute folder. Include important information about your classroom like a seating chart, your discipline plan, and class bell schedules. Include a couple of emergency lesson plans (I had at least three, one for each semester).

5. Have your first week of lesson plans ready to go. Use the week to set your routines, rules, expectations. Get to know your students with different activities—in-class and homework.

6. Plan the first seating chart and have it available for students as soon as they walk into class. Take note: this is the first seating chart of the year, it can change quickly.

7. Set aside some time everyday to grade. Etch it in stone so that you will remember to grade and to enter scores into the grade book. Around grading time, you'll be glad that you did.

8. Start again—everyday. Each day of school is a new day. Give yourself a fresh start daily. Most students are forgiving; when you have a hard day, remember, tomorrow is a new day.

9. Be humble—we can all learn to be more effective in the classroom.

10. Smile—pretend like every student you meet is in need of a smile and a kind word; you'll be right most of the time. ■
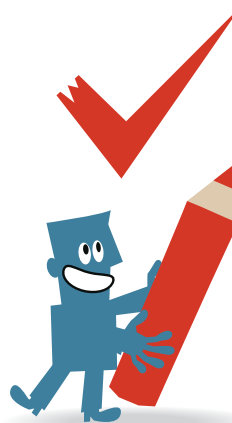
Member Mention:
Biba Kavass Fights Poverty While Teaching Students

AAE member Biba Kavass, an economics teacher in Memphis, Tennessee, recently led students on a trip to Tennessee, Mississippi, and Louisiana, in order to produce a video documentary on poverty, and how microfinance can eradicate poverty.

Funded by a generous three-year field research-based grant from the McCarthey Dressman Foundation, Ms. Kavass's excursion included: a visit to the second largest sugar refinery in Louisiana; a meeting with ASI Federal Credit Union to hear about their microfinance loans and community redevelopment programs in the 9th Ward in New Orleans; visits with several entrepreneurs who received the microfinance loans; and a meeting with the founder of the Good Work Network in New Orleans, a nonprofit that focuses on helping businesses owned by minorities and women, to start, grow, and succeed.

One student reflected on the trip saying, "Going on this trip helped me understand the possibilities of eradicating poverty."

Next summer Ms. Kavass will lead a trip to the Lakota Indian Reservation in Pine Ridge, South Dakota. In summer 2015, students will travel to the Dominican Republic to finish up the video documentary. ∎

AAE WANTS TO RECOGNIZE YOU!

Have you reached a milestone in your teaching career, recently implemented a new program, or received your Doctorate degree? AAE wants to know!

Please email **awards@ aaeteachers.org** to be recognized in upcoming editions of *Education Matters*.

AAE New Teacher Matters Promotion

Are you a new member? Are you new to the classroom? Do you have colleagues who are beginning their first year of teaching? Check out AAE's newest publication, *New Teachers Matter*! Email **profdev@aaeteachers.org** to receive your free copy.