Enhance your Opportunities to Learn: A Different Slant on Professional Development

Moursund, D.G. (April 1999). Enhance your opportunities to learn: A different slant on professional development. *Learning and Leading With Technology*. Eugene, OR: ISTE.

We are all lifelong learners. As educators, we know a lot about how to help others learn, and we know a lot about how to enhance our own effectiveness as learners. This article explores how to become a more efficient learner of information technology (IT). The goal is to help you and your fellow teachers learn to make more effective of IT.

**Learning is a Routine Event**

When you talk with a friend, you learn. When you watch television or read a magazine, you learn. When you teach students, you learn. When you teach students, you learn.

What does it take in order to learn? In brief summary, learning requires:

1. Appropriate and timely access to relevant information that is to be internalized as knowledge and skills. Remember, constructivism (building on one's previous knowledge and skills) is a key concept.
2. Feedback. When you are using a computer, you and the computer can provide excellent feedback on the correctness of what you are doing.
3. Time and effort.
4. Opportunity to apply the knew knowledge and skills—opportunity to "cement" the learning.

Before a person goes to school, learning comes in small bites. A child hears an adult use a word or watches an adult carry out an activity. The child imitates the adult and gets immediate feedback. The act of learning and of applying the learning are intertwined.

In school, this changes. Reading, writing, and arithmetic are complex subjects. It takes a lot of learning over a long period of time to develop significant levels of knowledge and skills in these areas. Thus, the learner is put into a "delayed gratification" situation. Learning is made still more complex because the one on one feedback mechanism between child and parent is now changed, as the teacher tries to deal with 20 to 30 or more students.

**Traditional Staff Development**

Traditional staff development consists of a group of people coming together for a significant period of time as they participate in a formal class or "inservice." Usually the participants vary widely in their current knowledge and skills about the topic being presented. Typically they have different learning styles and different interests, and there is a significant period of time between the inservice and the opportunity to apply the knowledge and skills being taught. Typically the instructor-participant feedback mechanism does not continue beyond the time of the formal inservice presentation.
It is clear that the traditional inservice leaves much to be desired. It is not surprising that traditional inservice is not particularly effective in helping a teacher make significant improvements in curriculum, instruction, and assessment. These are difficult areas to change, and the traditional inservice is not well suited to supporting such change.

**Taking Personal Responsibility**

Fortunately, there are alternatives. As noted earlier, as a teacher you know a great deal about the teaching and learning process, and you know a great deal about how best to facilitate your own learning.

Here is a simple example of how to do this. You want to increase your knowledge and skills in use of IT in curriculum, instruction, and assessment. To do this, you need to create an environment in which 1-4 listed above are satisfied. You need to be in charge of your own learning of IT.

Ask yourself a few questions:

- When I have leisure time and am channel surfing on TV, do I watch high tech educational programs? (There are a surprising number of these available.)
- When I am reading magazines and other periodicals, do I seek out IT materials? (Three of my favorite "leisure time" magazines have substantial IT content.)
- Do I take advantage of the IT knowledge of my colleagues, so that I can learn from them in our conversations?
- Do I structure my curriculum, instruction, and assessment so they help me to learn IT on the job? (Do I routinely learn IT from my students?)

**Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment**

The last item in the bulleted list is the most important. You can restructure what you do in the classroom so that it helps you to learn to make effective use of IT in curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Even the smallest of trials can get you started.

For example, for whatever topic that you are teaching, ask your students about how IT is affecting the topic. Note their answers. Does the class (collectively) know more and better answers than you could provide? How can you facilitate them developing some of the insights that you have, but maintain and build upon their vast collective knowledge and points of view?

Information retrieval and communication with other people are essential components of every academic discipline. Ask your students how IT is affecting information retrieval and communications. Have them provide specific examples of how it is affecting them within the disciplines you are teaching. What can you contribute to the conversation, and what do you learn from the conversation?

Ultimately, you want to move beyond a “talking” knowledge of IT. You want your students to learn to solve problems and accomplish tasks making use of the power of the IT tools. That is exactly what IT-assisted project-based learning is all about (Moursund, 1999). Any teacher can design a lesson that is a project, and design the project so that it is appropriate for students to make some use of IT. In this environment you will learn from your students and your students will learn from each other. You will be in a learning environment in which you can build on your current knowledge and skills and make immediate use of what you are learning.
Final Remarks

When you decided to become an education, you made a commitment to being a lifelong learner within your chosen profession. For some of this learning, traditional large group or small group inservice education is effective and cost effective.

However, the amount to be learned overwhelms the amount of resources that a school district has available to support such traditional professional development. Moreover, many aspects of IT in education can better and more effectively be learned in other ways.

You owe it to yourself and to your profession to seek out and to create IT learning experiences that meet your specific needs. The routine use of IT into your classes—for example, through IT-assisted PBL—is an excellent approach.

Reference