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Collaborative Technology: Using Web 2.0 to Advance Staff Development

By Cecilia Cunningham & Susan Restler

Emerging generations of teachers will bring their Facebook communities and digital ways of securing information and contacts to their practice as seamlessly as they now use e-mail. Through technology, they will be able to solve problems for themselves, find and give help to others, and develop and pass along new ideas. The process could be thought of as just-in-time knowledge generation combined with community support, and it has become possible only with the advent of Web 2.0, today's broadened and enhanced online capabilities.

Engaging in digital learning in this way can build competence and confidence. And while it may be challenging to keep an online community active and available to respond to inquiries, we believe this problem will resolve itself as education's social networks grow in size and become dominated by Web denizens.

Even large and engaged social networks, however, cannot lead consistently to deep, enriching, and effective staff development. The issue is not which software is used, but rather *how* it is used. And in our experience, leadership is key. Perhaps the greatest opportunity Web 2.0 tools offer education, in fact, is the possibility of helping school leaders use the power of technology to amplify and accelerate staff development.

Our respective groups, the [Middle College National Consortium](#) and [Knowledge in the Public Interest](#), have been working together for several years to facilitate and enrich staff development using Web 2.0 tools. Helping principals, staff members, and students in more than 20 schools across the country, as they establish and build their online collaboration, has been challenging, surprising, and always instructive. From our experience, we suggest to other educators a modified paradigm—one we believe will make successful work in this area easier to achieve. Here are the steps we have found to be critical in creating staff development the community can embrace and apply:

- Be clear about what you believe will be most beneficial to the team or community—what is your goal?
- Develop a clear message that succinctly communicates the goal (or goals).

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- Engage with the group to help each member understand the goal, and have the entire group participate in shaping the vision more precisely.

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Enable team members to shape their approach to the goal and pursue it. Here is where technology provides some magic: access to resources without limits, either in geography or cost. As online discourse occurs, a digital paper trail of the work content and process is automatically recorded. In this way, the work is captured to benefit the entire group, and potentially others interested in the subject.

Provide the human resources needed to actively guide the work. This is the key requirement for staff development that achieves specific goals. Staff members need to be encouraged and supported, questioned and guided, if this kind of work is to be done in the face of multiple competing demands.

In following this approach to staff development, we are active users of collaborative technology. Our platform is an adaptation of the open-source software Moodle. We create secure work environments for staff-development teams, post relevant resources, and invite experts to join conversations, which we call Jams. These are asynchronous discussions that take place over one or two days, so staff members can participate as their schedules allow. We facilitate each discussion, organize and analyze at the close, and help the team use the analysis to continue to move its work forward.

We have found that using this approach enables us to achieve several important objectives:

First, involving staff members in shaping development initiatives increases their engagement and commitment to outcomes.

Second, the rapid testing cycle made possible by technology allows staff members to develop ideas collaboratively online, put the ideas into play in their work, report back on the experience to the team, modify the approach, and reapply the learning.

And third, the use of technology in staff development opens staff members in turn to incorporating technology into their pedagogy, which holds the potential for a significant impact on teaching and learning for students.

When it comes to using technology to deepen and accelerate staff development, we are enthusiastic learners. The lesson we have learned so far is that leadership is as important as software, if not more so. Social networks will provide access and support, but achieving meaningful group advancement will require guided online collaboration.

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