

e-Learning for Educators: An Innovative, Capacity-Building Online Professional Development Initiative

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Introduction

e-Learning for Educators (eFE) is a five-year, eight-state, capacity-building Online Professional Development (OPD) initiative that brings together talents from Public Television Stations (PTVs), eight State Departments of Education (DOEs), and premier training consultants from the field of OPD to offer teachers a rich array of professional development workshops. Supported by collaborative leadership, decision-making and collaboratively developed assets, states create a delivery system of high quality online professional development that meets individual state teacher quality and student achievement objectives.

The initiative is coupled with the largest evaluation of its kind with data collected from more than 7500 teacher participants, as well as from course facilitators, course designers, and state leadership teams. Now in its third year, eFE has generated a broad array of evaluation findings that include impacts on teachers' content knowledge, classroom practice, and the following findings: (a) goals in delivering teacher workshops and enrolling teachers, including enrolling a high percentage of teachers in "high need" schools exceed targets, (b) across and within states, eFE course and facilitator ratings have been consistently high, revealing deep levels of teacher satisfaction with the project, and (c) teachers report strong implementation patterns of eFE curricula.

Implementation

Alabama Public Television (APT) together with Education Development Corporation (EDC), the project training consultant partner, mentor leadership teams from eight partner states (AL, DE, KY, MO, MS, NH, PA, and WV) to help them develop a comprehensive OPD system that addresses state-level OPD objectives. State-level mentoring and training is conducted in three areas: state team leadership responsibilities, OPD facilitator training, and OPD course developer training. Instead of external marketing of OPD courses to state DOEs, eFE collaborators work with state leadership teams to build state-level capacity to perform these tasks which are fundamental to a sustainable system of OPD:

- Work with state leaders to identify, meet, and address state OPD objectives that are aligned with state instructional and academic improvement priorities
- Develop, mentor and sustain a cadre of quality OPD course facilitators and designers
- Develop a cadre of OPD courses aligned with state-level objectives
- Create a state-level infrastructure for housing and maintaining state-developed OPD courses
- Nurture key contacts and identify funding sources vital for project sustainability

Leadership teams

Participating states identified key leaders within each state to serve as advisors and supporters of the state efforts and to assist in marketing the OPD courses. Extensive research about the composition of the leadership team shows that this team is particularly important to vitality of the state effort. Leadership teams receive professional development related to the field of OPD and participate in collaborative decision making to guide the state project. This element of collaborative decision making is a key trait that separates the e-Learning for Educators efforts from existing systems of OPD.

Facilitators and Course Designers

Within each participating state, 48 facilitators and designers have been trained by EDC, a leader in the field of OPD. These facilitators and designers are mentored by a full time project leader within each state. They work closely with prominent leaders from the state departments of education and the public television stations to promote the state programs and attract teachers to the online courses. After their initial training, this cadre continues to teach and create new online courses—functions that are essential to sustaining the fledgling system of OPD.

Housing and Maintaining State Courses

Each state team makes decisions about the platform for housing courses and course maintenance. e-Learning for Educators states use three course management systems: Moodle, Blackboard and Desire to Learn (D2L). Housing courses is a state-level decision, often influenced by a system that is readily available from the state department of education or the public television station.

All OPD courses and materials created in the eFE project are freely shared within and across all participating states. This unique collaborative sharing of resources is the single most unique and distinguishing feature of eFE from all other systems of OPD.

Facilitators and course designers are trained to assist in keeping the OPD courses viable and fresh. A specially trained group of course designers review courses and update them periodically. Imbedded evaluation instruments, surveys, and participant feedback from each course provides useful data that is used to continuously improve and routinely freshen courses.

Accomplishments and Results

Since the project began mid-year in 2006, more than 12,500 teachers have enrolled in an e-Learning for Educators online course across the eight states (N=12,575; n=10,395). In the second year, OPD course enrollment increased by more than fifty percent over the first year enrollment with 7641 participants in 435 courses that focused on improving teacher content knowledge and pedagogy. The distribution of courses according to general topic is presented in Table 1. The enrollment far exceeds the annual project goal of reaching 880 teachers in 50 workshops per state.

In project Year 1, each of the eight participating states trained a cadre of course facilitators. These new trainees subsequently facilitated online courses that were professionally developed and provided by EDC. In Year 2, a cadre of course designers was similarly trained by EDC.

Table 1: Course Focus

Course Focus	Number of Courses
Pedagogy	49
Subject Area/Content	146
Assessment/Curriculum Standards	18
Technology	59
Other	29

Upon completion of the course design training, the novice designers created new state-owned courses that were aligned with each state’s identified professional development and training needs.

Teachers in both EDC and state courses took Pre, Post and Follow-up surveys that provided descriptive data as well as information about teacher perceptions, instructional habits and cognitive knowledge in key content areas (math and English language arts). To assess long term impact, Follow-up surveys were administered to teachers six months after the courses were concluded. These findings from these surveys show:

1. The majority (68%) report having used the information learned in the eFE courses.
2. Most (54%) report “moderate” use; 32% report “strong” use of information learned in the eFE online course.
3. Almost all implementers report that eFE workshops have prepared them “Moderately to Very Well” to perform a variety of pedagogical tasks.
4. Almost all implementers “Agreed” or “Strongly Agreed” that students responded positively to eFE content used in the classroom.
5. Teachers’ perceived levels of content knowledge registered statistically significant increases from the Pre- to the Post-Survey embedded in each course.
6. A slight decrease in the level of content knowledge reported is noted Post to follow-up Survey; this difference is not statistically significant but this same pattern is noted when the comparisons are broken down by Title I eligible and ineligible schools.
7. Across states, teachers show statistically significant increases on the three cognitive surveys, however, these gains are small and are tied to only a few items on each survey.
8. Across states, most (>75%) report that the content of the online courses was new to them.

Teachers (n=504) report that eFE course content helped their students and their instructional preparations in the following ways:

1. Address the needs of students with disabilities
2. Address the needs of students with diverse learning needs
3. Address students with diverse cultural backgrounds
4. Integrate new assessment techniques
5. Integrate instructional technology into lessons
6. Implement new methods of teaching
7. Implement lessons focused on state standards

Although an unintended outcome, teachers also report gains in their comfort level in using technology, their use of technology in the classroom and improved classroom interest among students.

Summary

The e-learning for Educators project has quickly reached and exceeded the project benchmarks toward the ultimate goal of establishing a state system of OPD. Most project states have experienced great success.

Teachers taking online PD courses give very high ratings to the new state courses and the facilitators of the courses. This indicates strong satisfaction with the online learning process, the quality of the courses, and utility of the courses and course content. Teachers also report a high degree of student impact.

A small group of states will join the e-Learning initiative in Year 4. These dissemination states embrace the emerging collaborative model of OPD implementation and decision-making. From the beginning, dissemination was identified as a key goal however dissemination was planned for Year 5. Because the project has matured extremely fast, dissemination efforts, like the bulk of the project work, are progressing much faster than expected.

Presenter Biographical Information

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