1 Why *Online* Professional Development?

THE OPD FRAMEWORK

When I started designing and delivering online professional development, I didn't have a process to follow. Neither did most of the experts I interviewed. Instead we learned as we went along, sometimes through some difficult lessons. What was remarkable about sharing our experiences was how similar they were. It's not that we all followed exactly the same path, but we did build on what we knew about designing instruction, effective teaching, professional development, and the skills and knowledge from related areas to harness the growing number of online technologies to support online professional development.

If you've picked up this book hoping to find a list of technologies and tutorials on how to use them, you might be disappointed. There is a lot of information about different technologies and how they support the many different forms of online professional development you might consider, from formal facilitated courses to incorporating social media and virtual environments to build and sustain an online community. But while the technologies you use are a major component of online professional development, there are other factors you need to consider to design and deliver a successful program. Too many projects focus so much on the technologies up front that the end result is over budget, underutilized, and—all too often—ineffective.

Now when I go in to consult with organizations that want to develop online professional development, I've got a few tools to use to help them think about the bigger picture. Those tools are presented in this book and should be helpful whether you're planning to find, purchase, or develop all or parts of your online professional development program. They're organized around a cyclical framework I developed and have used with several clients, who ultimately helped me to refine it (see Figure 1.1). It's a great conversation starter, and I use it to help them grasp the scope of their project, determine what resources they may already have, and better understand what they'll need to find the best solution

for them. It's an easy way to see it's not just about the technology. In the best of situations, the framework helps them understand many related parameters required to put a successful program into place that can grow over time. It's flexible and can address new professional development needs that arise, incorporating relevant new technologies as they become available. But if you're focused too much on a specific technology, one that may be obsolete by the end of your project, you're not going to have that kind of success.

You may be in a different place in the framework than the district next door or the organization across the street. It's also an iterative process, so you may return to some of the steps each year as your program grows and expands. It should be flexible enough to inform you about parameters to consider and strategies to address them, should you need them, when and where you need them most. Your solution can and will likely look different from mine or those profiled in this book. And that's okay. The framework is a checkpoint to make sure that your solution is the most successful it can be for your given circumstances, the resources you have, and the outcomes you hope to obtain.

Each chapter addresses one section of the framework, along with suggested strategies, research when available, and best practices from other experts. I propose a tangible outcome for each step, but the degree to which you create these things, like a vision statement, gap analysis, technology specifications, or others is up to you. I encourage you, however, to consider each of the components in the framework and determine the most appropriate outcomes for your own project. If ignored, some of them can really come back to haunt you and can delay or derail your project.

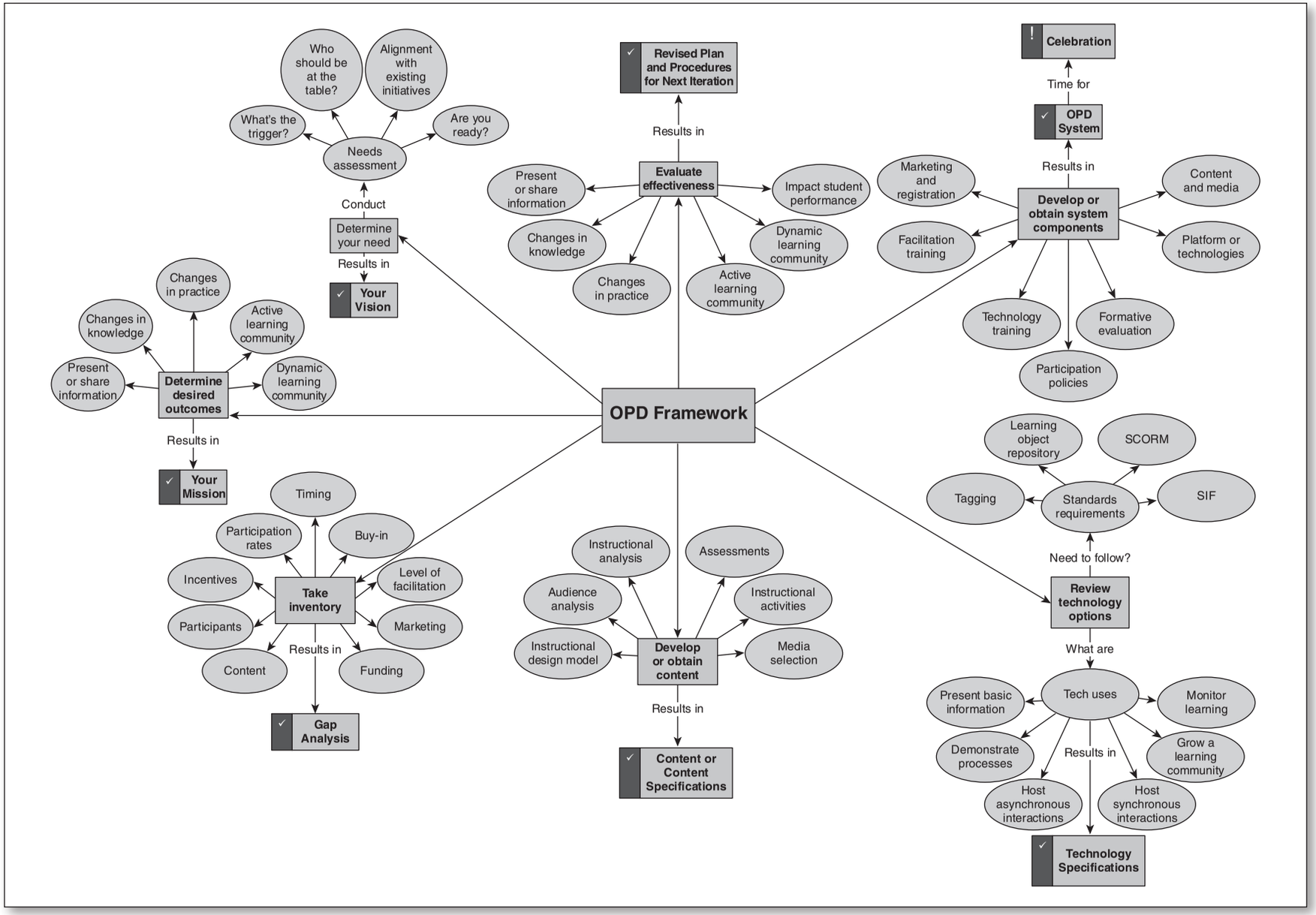
I start with one of the most important components, yet one that is often not considered: determining your need. I approach this through the question, Why *online* professional development? It's surprising to find so many groups that have not considered this crucial question. Don't be one of them.

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

Why is a part of the famous "Five Ws"—who, what, where, when, why—that most students are encouraged to consider when conducting research and presenting information. The Five Ws offer a simple way to monitor whether you've covered your bases. But in this familiar list, Why usually comes last. While I'll get to all of these questions, and even some How questions—which is what most people are interested in—I believe that Why is best addressed up front.

Why questions are the hard questions. Why questions are the ones teachers use in classrooms to push students to higher levels of thinking and to help students and teachers monitor their own understanding. Margaret Heritage from UCLA, an expert on formative assessment, once said at a conference I attended that the Why questions are the essential questions to ask when assessing learning. They make students think, and they can help teachers better understand what students do or don't know, going beyond just getting the answer correct. Why questions make adults think, too, and I wanted to begin with a little reflection before charging into the How questions.

Figure 1.1 Online Professional Development Framework



You may frame your need for online professional development from different perspectives. You may want to develop your own system from the bottom up while others are trying to purchase parts or an entire system—whether just delivery technologies, or content, or the whole shebang. Up until just a few years ago, there was much more activity in the development range, but now there are many providers who offer solutions for purchase, with some free materials also available. These include learning management systems (LMS) that you can populate with your own content or entire hosted solutions that include the software, content, training, and facilitators. Throughout the book, I will address decisions from both perspectives. (The term *learning management system* or LMS is used to refer to systems that manage the data related to course content and users. These and related systems are explored in greater detail at the end of Chapter 5.) Activities will be included in each chapter to guide your thinking, whether you're developing or purchasing online professional development. Regardless of your perspective, Why is still an important question to answer first.

WHY ONLINE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT?

As educators, we know a good deal about professional development, or staff development as it's also called. (In this book, I'll use the term *professional development*.) We've studied professional development efforts for decades. Different models have evolved over time and have been evaluated and researched. The U.S. Department of Education sponsored the National Awards Program for Models of Professional Development in the late 1990s, whose findings were used to create a free toolkit for educators (Hassel, 1999). Seminal research conducted by experts such as Joyce and Showers (2002) has led to the development of different models of professional development that have proven effective over time. The topic of "what works" in professional development is a perennial one and is the focus of much research and publication (Birman, Desimone, Porter, & Garet, 2000; Gall & Vojtek, 1994; Guskey, 2003; Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss, & Shapley, 2007). The methods used to determine what works range from case studies, evaluations, and observations of programs through—albeit less often—rigorous research designs that can be considered experimental or quasi-experimental. Even the young field of online professional development, specifically, has received scrutiny (Dede, 2006).

Standards for professional development have been developed by state and local education agencies as well as national and international organizations such as Learning Forward (formerly called the National Staff Development Council [NSDC; 2001]). With the growing opportunities to use networked technologies to support teaching and learning, new standards for this medium have been introduced by the International Council for K–12 Online Learning (iNACOL) for online courses (2010b) and online

teaching (2010a). The Southern Regional Educational Board (SREB; 2004) developed standards for online professional development specifically, while Learning Forward published guidance for using e-learning to support its own standards (NSDC, 2004).

If you're considering online professional development, you likely have models that you currently use or are considering. You're also likely to be aware of standards for professional development and may even have your own. One of the reasons to consider online professional development is that it meets many of the criteria of what researchers and practitioners consider critical for effective professional development. In fact, I've found in my own work that online professional development may be better able to meet more of those criteria than more common models of professional development. As online technologies have become commonplace in our homes and schools, they provide greater opportunities to reach more educators through high-quality professional development opportunities that are sustained over time. Let's consider one list of criteria as a point of reference.

In 2005, as the director of part of a large contract from the U.S. Department of Education for the nonprofit educational lab I was then working with, our team conducted a review of professional development studies to identify components of effective professional development (Larson, 2005) with the aim of describing effective *online* professional development. The lab had conducted professional development for more than 40 years and had entered into the realm of online professional development a couple of years earlier. The review was conducted to inform the education community about the components of effective professional development and to help implement and improve our own efforts.

After reviewing over 100 abstracts, articles, reports, and dissertations published between 1985 and 2005, 21 studies were identified that met established criteria of rigorous research. The studies had to have research designs that could be considered experimental or quasi-experimental with a matched control group. Each had to use and describe strong research designs and good data measures. From reviewing the 21 studies, nine components of effective professional development were identified. Some of the components had more evidence than others, being found across more studies, but the list looks similar to many that might be found in the literature or published in standards. From this report, effective professional development

- is linked to student learning outcomes;
- is job-embedded;
- is ongoing and sustained with follow-up;
- incorporates authentic, active learning experiences;
- includes subject-matter content;
- encourages reflection on pedagogy, content, and beliefs;
- incorporates collaboration with colleagues and/or experts;
- provides support for teachers; and
- measures impact on student achievement.

In my estimation, our online professional development met *more* of these criteria than more traditional delivery modes. It held more opportunities to provide ongoing, job-embedded professional development with resources available anytime, anyplace. Not only were activities authentic, participants often had the opportunity to practice the activities or implement new strategies within the context of working with students or other colleagues and then reflect on their actual practice—in real time. That's not to say that face-to-face professional development opportunities cannot meet these criteria. Some do. However, the technologies used to support online professional development proved to be powerful tools that made it easier—and ultimately more cost-effective—to provide high-quality professional development opportunities to the educators served.

Some of the identified components are commonly incorporated in most models of professional development regardless of the mode of delivery. These include incorporating authentic, active learning experiences; including subject-matter content; and—hopefully—linking to student learning outcomes. Following are those components that I believe were *better* met by online professional development than face-to-face efforts. These are presented as some reasons why you might consider *online* professional development.

Effective Professional Development is Job-Embedded

There are certainly job-embedded models of professional development that are not delivered online. Technical, peer, collegial, challenge, or team coaching are examples. There are also mentoring programs that use exemplary educators to guide new principals and their staff and programs that connect new teachers with veteran teachers. But more traditional forms of job-embedded professional development such as these are time-consuming and costly. A coach can only work with a limited number of colleagues and can find it difficult to schedule preobservation and postobservation conferences and classroom visits within teachers' busy schedules.

Instead of completing training in 2 or 3 days during the summer or during other inservice days, online technologies provide educators the flexibility to work through material over a period of weeks or even months during the school year. The groups may be able to determine their own timelines, set benchmarks and deadlines, and set the expectations for participation. By dividing course content up into smaller chunks of information delivered during the school year, participants are able to learn and practice new material during relatively short periods of time that better fit into their busy schedules and then go apply it—sometimes the next day! They could then come back to their group and provide real data from their experiences highly specific to the content and skills being studied. Even aspects of coaching and mentoring, mentioned earlier, can be augmented by online technologies. This potential

for job-embedded learning is a powerful reason why you might consider online professional development.

Ongoing and Sustained With Follow-Up

The one-shot workshop has been much maligned. Adjectives used to describe it are often linked to the concept of "one-size-fits-all." What is usually lacking in these models is ongoing and sustained follow-up. A recent review of empirical research (Yoon et al., 2007) found that while some workshop-based professional development can have a positive impact on student learning, a more important finding is that the time spent in the professional development and the subsequent follow-up were critical factors leading to improved student learning. Workshops that contained more than 30 contact hours proved to positively impact student learning, and eight of the nine studies in the sample included significant structured follow-up activities.

It is hard to provide follow-up in more traditional face-to-face settings. Sometimes, a multiday workshop in the summer is paired with half- or full-day workshops during the school year as a form of follow-up. It is this follow-up, however, that is most often cut in negotiations with clients. Many districts or schools are willing to bring in a trainer for an initial workshop, but the costs begin to mount when you consider bringing that trainer back during the school year. Travel costs still exist whether you bring someone in for one day or several days, although there may be some savings in terms of lodging and actual contract time for a single-day visit.

With online professional development, participants are provided greater opportunity to receive follow-up feedback and support throughout the year, from peers and experts. After attending a workshop, faculty members can participate in an online learning community with other participants from the workshop. E-mail, discussion lists, and social networking tools all provide opportunities for continued dialogue, reflection, and collegial interaction around new skills and knowledge. These and similar digital technologies also provide a record of personal and community growth, documenting efforts to implement new methods, barriers and challenges faced, and how they were overcome.

The result is a string of connections, not just back to the original workshop, but forward to monitor implementation and identify future professional development needs. New staff can also access artifacts from past professional development efforts they could not attend and can benefit from those work products—lesson plans, classroom videos, instructional activities, curriculum guides, policies, observation protocols, and more—developed by previous participants and providing an opportunity to maintain organizational knowledge. While it's possible this can be accomplished through face-to-face professional development, the ability for digital technologies to provide a cost-effective means to deliver professional development and provide ongoing follow-up make this opportunity for ongoing and sustained professional growth much more of a reality, and it's a key reason why you might consider online professional development.

Encourages Reflection on Pedagogy, Content, and Beliefs

Professional development that aims to change educator practice often fails to achieve its goals if participants are not allowed to spend sufficient time considering and questioning their own values and beliefs about their roles and how new skills and knowledge align or conflict with those beliefs. Many more traditional forms of professional development can also encourage reflection, but the ongoing nature of many online professional development efforts provides opportunities for more mature reflections. Changing beliefs is a tall order—even more so if you expect to do it in a day or two far removed from actual practice.

The key here is time, and that is what online professional development can provide. It's not that online professional development can magically create time, but it can distribute time by providing periodic opportunities to develop deeper reflections over weeks or months. It can also shift time required for professional growth by embedding professional learning and reflection at the same time as actual practice. You can reflect after a 3- or 8-hour workshop, but a series of reflections over 3 or 8 weeks while you're implementing new strategies in your classroom is likely to have greater meaning.

Teachers participating in online professional development may be asked to reflect on their current practices, and then are required to collect data over a week or two to support and sometimes challenge those reflections. In one professional development course I designed, teachers at first self-reported they were already doing a good job helping their students read at or above grade level, which actually begged the question of why they even needed the professional development in the first place. There was more than a little grumbling from the participants about having to take this training. However, once they actually collected data about their students' performance and shared it with others, perceptions changed. It was not uncommon that as many as 40% of students in the participating schools were not reading at grade level (these were schools targeted for low student achievement in reading to begin with). Knowing this data was highly motivating to many of the teachers, and they were then more willing to engage in efforts to reflect on and change not only their classroom practice but school policies, as well. The reflections at the end of the course indicated a greater understanding of the need for the professional development and included descriptions of how the content and resources were actually incorporated into their practice (see Box 1.1: "Learning From Experience: Comprehensive Literacy Program" for more information about this program).

The previous story is an example of how online professional development can shift time for professional growth, by embedding reflection within practice. Whether taking a course, as described, participating in an online lesson study, or attending a series of webconferences with colleagues over a semester, online professional development provides greater opportunity to support reflection closer to actual practice. Summer workshops can promote reflection, but embedding reflection within practice and professional development at the same time is another reason to consider online professional development.

Box 1.1 Learning From Experience: Comprehensive Literacy Program

Project Title: Comprehensive Literacy Program

Organization: Edvantia, Inc. for the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE)

Contact: John Ross, former Senior R&D Specialist

URL: www.epd.edvantia.org

Date First Implemented: 2004

Audience: K–3 teachers and principals; K–12 teachers of special education

Need: *What Was the Initial Trigger?*

The TDOE identified online professional development as a strategy for providing access to the same high-quality professional development to faculty in all 56 (later 75) schools that received Reading First funds and contracted with Edvantia to develop and deliver it.

Intended Outcomes:

The goal was to provide access to the same high-quality professional development content to all Reading First schools in Tennessee.

Incentives:

Faculty and administrators from schools that applied for Reading First funds were required to participate in one of the two 13-week courses per year and received 30 professional development hours for their participation.

Instructional Design Considerations:

Building on the expertise of internal staff in face-to-face professional development as well as multimedia and online instructional design, the course was designed to capitalize on the best available research for online professional development. Special attention was paid to the development of learning communities and the needs of adult learners. Reading-specific content and skill acquisition were emphasized over technology skills. Guidelines for content development included internally developed instructional design guidelines as well as application of Keller's (1987) ARCS model of motivational design.

Lessons Learned:

Two significant barriers to success identified by participants were time and technology. Teachers reported lack of time to complete the course and conflict with other school commitments. Strategies to address the barrier of time developed through consultation with participants include making sure there is buy-in for the program from the principal and that the school leadership places as much value on the online program as other professional development

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programs. Most teachers completed the course at school, so it was encouraged that time be made available during or immediately before or after the school day to allow teachers to work on the course activities.

Several technology-specific problems were noted, including older computers or low-bandwidth Internet connections, although the most common problem faced by participants was forgotten passwords, so several automated password reminder options were developed. Because the course included videos, CDs containing all videos and handouts were mailed to each school to allow teachers to access these materials offline. Other technology problems included not being able to install software on school computers as well as pop-up blockers, spam filters, firewalls, and network caching software. These problems were addressed by including answers to Frequently Asked Questions on the website as well as including solutions to these topics in the facilitator training and supporting materials.

A "group self-paced" model was developed for the program based on the premise of developing an online learning community that has a designated leader with content expertise. The course included supports for this leader, such as a facilitator's notebook and companion CD, guidance on preparing for course modules at the beginning of each, additional tips and hints indicated by a leader icon throughout the content, administrative reports to monitor group progress, and a separate online leader community in which they could ask questions and share advice.

Evaluation:

Pretest and posttest scores of the participants were compared during the first semester and statistically significant gains were made by the participants, with posttest average scores above 80% for every module. When interviewed, a majority of the literacy leaders reported that the initial reaction to the program was not positive; however, by the end of the program, literacy leaders reported an overwhelming positive reaction to the program by their teachers, with an agreement at a rate of 2:1 that their teachers ended up liking the program.

Professional economists external to the organization conducted a cost-benefit analysis of the program that showed significant savings in terms of delivery as compared to having to deliver the same training face-to-face at each school in the program (see Chapter 7 for more information on the cost-benefit analysis).

See the book's companion website for more information about the profiled programs. **www.corwin.com/rossonlinepd**

Incorporates Collaboration With Colleagues and/or Experts

Social networking and Web 2.0 tools have changed the way we learn, work, play, and live. The very nature of these technologies implies collaboration. Certainly, you don't need to use these technologies to collaborate with

colleagues or experts, but they do provide greater opportunities for collaboration within and beyond the walls of a school. Collaboration can occur between two colleagues, a small group, or an entire faculty.

A good example of peer collaboration is the mentoring relationship that many schools or districts create between new and veteran teachers. A well-structured mentoring program can certainly be considered professional development, especially for the new teacher. But problems occur when the mentor teams don't have corresponding periods of time to get together. Even worse is the new teacher who may be paired with someone out of his or her content area or with someone who teaches the same subject at a different school. I was one of those teachers. If it hadn't been for informal networking at Friday night football games, I might have floundered that first year. Later in my career I discovered online discussion boards where I could learn from and share ideas with other teachers across the globe. Now, some colleges of education routinely use technology to connect with student teachers and first-year graduates to facilitate collaboration once they are in the field.

There are many different kinds of collaborative groups that are formed in schools. Some groups may focus on specific issues, such as curriculum and instruction, lesson planning, analyzing student and program data, or considering issues related to school culture. Sometimes these teams are created out of convenience rather than purpose, with every teacher who happens to have the same planning period put on the same team whether they have the interest or skills to be on that team or not. Others may be organized around proximity, with all teachers having classrooms in the same part of the building being on a team. Certainly, there are excellent models of group collaboration at schools that don't require technology, but technology provides greater opportunity to connect those with similar needs or interests who can't connect during the school day because of scheduling or lack of proximity.

For example, not all of your math teachers may be able to meet at the same time during the day, but by using a file server and a discussion list or a more sophisticated LMS or social networking application, all of your math teachers can collaborate around instruction and assessment. They can create and revise lesson plans, post videos of classroom instruction for comment, or include digitized samples of student work for analysis. Using these technologies can allow grade-level teams, or content-specific teams—even those from both the middle and high school or middle and elementary schools—to collaborate and engage in relevant professional growth all year long.

One of the harder forms of collaboration to implement is that between educators (and students) with experts outside of schools. Educators and outside experts are pretty busy, after all, and few have the time to significantly engage with schools regardless of how much they want to, but there are some examples of collaboration that would not be feasible without online technologies. I helped organize an online book study where the authors of a book participated in a live webconference—providing deeper insight into concepts addressed in the book and answering questions directly to participants. The audio portion of the webconference was recorded and incorporated in a web-based facilitator's guide for future book study groups. Several conferences now incorporate webconferencing or webcasting technologies to connect distant participants. I have

even attended a conference in the virtual environment Second Life that drew speakers and participants from across the nation and beyond. The ways that online professional development can support and extend collaboration with colleagues and experts described in this section are certainly a reason for considering why online professional development might be right for you.

Provides Support for Teachers

Just as it's common to turn to the Internet for news, shopping, entertainment, and even teaching resources, it's easy to conceive the many ways that online professional development provides ongoing support for teachers. Educators can access high-quality content in a variety of formats—text, images, videos, simulations, and more—at any time of the day, sometimes as just-in-time training. They can also find content and pedagogical support from others, whether colleagues from across the hall or across the country. Even experts may be available for support, whether in real time or through an artifact such as the book study archive described earlier.

Online professional development also offers ongoing support for educators through personal reflection by creating online portfolios, blogs, journals, or websites related to professional growth opportunities. These artifacts can be used to document growth or to help educators determine the need for future growth opportunities. Individuals may organize their portfolios around a set of standards and can review which standards they might want to cultivate most. School leaders, including teacher leaders and master teachers, can provide ongoing support for their colleagues through formal and informal discussion and dialog around these artifacts conducted wholly or partly online. Policies and guidelines can be posted on a learning community website so that staff meetings can focus more on professional development activities. Online forums or webconferences can allow educators to deepen knowledge and skills learned during workshops or can provide one-on-one support for specific needs.

More traditional forms of professional development can offer support for teachers, but that support is often limited in terms of scope or time. Resources and technologies common to the many forms of online professional development described here provide ongoing support through a variety of means, and this is one more reason to consider online professional development.

Box 1.2 The Potential for Online Professional Development: One Perspective

Joellen Killion is the deputy executive director for Learning Forward (formerly the National Staff Development Council), which is arguably one of the most influential organizations that impacts professional development in the country. Their standards for professional development have been adopted or adapted by many professional development providers across the country, and their conferences and publications keep educators informed about new trends in

professional development policy, practice, and research. In an interview, Killion described her perspective on the potential for online professional development as well as advice for how providers might reach that potential.

According to Killion, online professional development is a tremendous opportunity to access high-quality information to support professional learning. It can provide models of practice, and that information can be presented to just about everyone who wants it. She does caution, however, that it has to go further. Receiving information is not enough. Professional development requires supporting "transfer to practice," as she puts it, to "transform how people think."

She believes we're in a good place in time right now, but we have work to do. She's convinced that we now have technology that has the capacity to replicate anything we might normally do in a face-to-face environment, which may not always have been the case. She encourages online professional development providers to move beyond what was once possible, though, and use technology to not only do what can be accomplished in a face-to-face setting but to do more. Consider means for providing feedback and guidance during practice. Leverage technology's capacity to address social interaction and support deep learning, transform thinking and belief systems, and accommodate ongoing professional learning.

To do this, she echoes the sentiment that online professional development providers need to truly understand the learning process and that professional learning is intended to support ongoing implementation. It's not just the one-time presentation of information. It's changing practice by changing what educators think and believe—about content, pedagogy, and their own ability to truly help students reach their maximum academic potential. That takes interaction. It takes follow-up and support. It takes more than just thinking you're going to do something cheaper. Hopefully, through this book and the efforts of online professional development providers, including you, we can use technology to reach the potential that Killion describes.

Box 1.3 Caveat Emptor: Talking to Vendors

These research-based criteria make good questions to ask vendors when considering whether to purchase online professional development. After determining your need, use the following questions to interview or research online professional development providers.

Linked to student learning outcomes

- What student learning outcomes are addressed?
- Are they aligned to your local or state standards?

Job-embedded

- How does the professional development support the daily needs of the participants?
- What content or skills are addressed that are immediately applicable?

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Ongoing and sustained with follow-up

- What is the duration of the professional development? Is it flexible?
- What kind of follow-up is provided?

Incorporates authentic, active learning experiences

- What kind of activities do the participants complete? Ask for examples or guest access.

Includes subject-matter content

- What subject-matter content is included? How is it used to leverage new skills and knowledge?
- Does the subject-matter content match the needs of all of your participants?
- Does the subject-matter content align with required content standards, or preferred pedagogies or philosophies?

Encourages reflection on pedagogy, content, and beliefs

- What kind of reflective activities are included? Who participates in them?
- Is a process for deep reflection nurtured in the professional development?

Incorporates collaboration with colleagues and/or experts

- How is collaboration supported? What technologies are used?
- Are your participants ready, both in terms of technical skills and process, to collaborate in the ways supported by the course?

Provides support for teachers

- What kind and degree of content, program, and technical support is provided? Does it match the needs of your participants?

Measures impact on student achievement

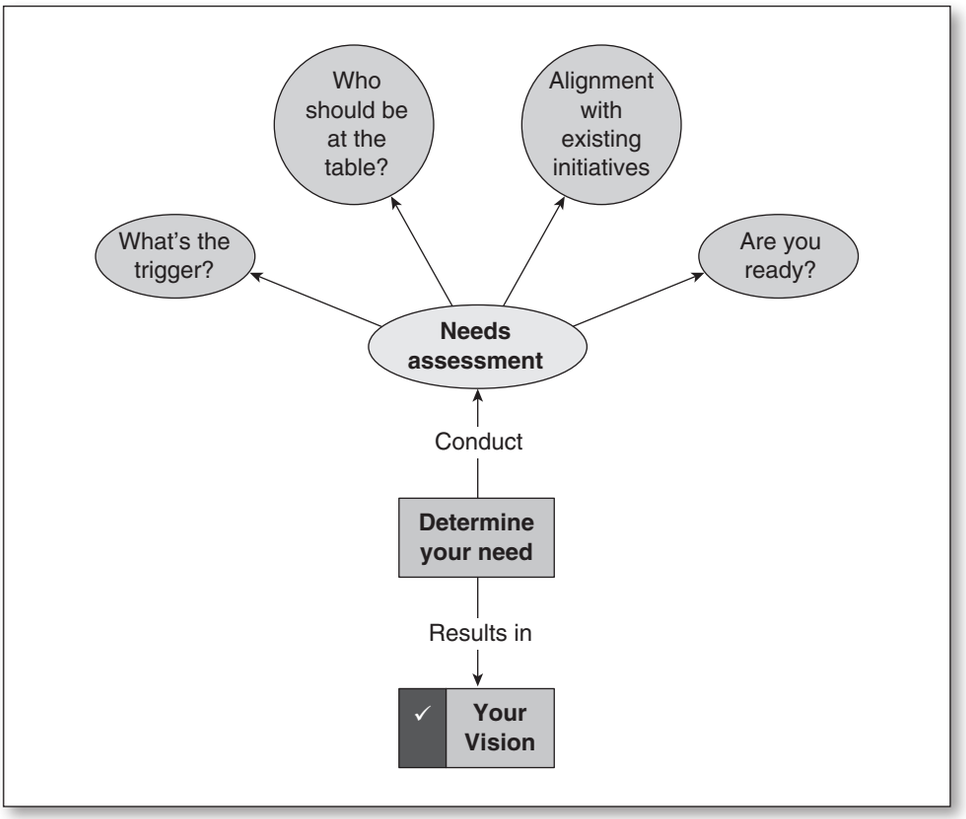
- What data indicates impact on student achievement as a result of participation in the program? How do those students compare to yours?

DETERMINING YOUR NEED FOR ONLINE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

In the previous section, many reasons were given as to why online professional development can be worthwhile and effective, but there is no one such thing as "online professional development." It comes in many shapes and sizes and can look different from school to school. No matter how it's organized or which technologies you use, with planning and monitoring, you can develop online professional development that effectively meets your needs.

In this section, the first part of the planning and implementation framework is introduced, *Determining your need for online professional development* (see Figure 1.2). As you might have guessed, it addresses the Why question. Now it's your turn to consider why online professional development might be right for you. All too often there is an assumption that online professional development is needed. The decision has already been made, although there has rarely been significant discussion or analysis to really justify online professional development. Very often, the decision is not fueled by need, but by what one individual or a small group perceives is needed.

Figure 1.2 Once truly determined, your needs shape your vision for online professional development.



Presupposing that online professional development is needed without exploring the parameters of the need can derail a project. Too many organizations have bypassed this important step, and the results are usually higher costs, missed deadlines, poor quality, and frustration all around. You can turn that trend around. Take some time now to truly determine why online professional development is right for you. This is important whether you're going to build a system from scratch or plan to purchase parts or all of it.

I approach most projects from the perspective of an instructional designer, and from that perspective the most common method for answering the Why question is to conduct a *needs assessment*. There are many different models for

conducting a needs assessment that have come from the fields of instructional design, organizational development, and even the military. You can conduct the needs assessment yourself or hire an expert from outside of your organization. It can be as detailed as you need it to be. Those decisions can depend on factors such as the scope of the proposed project, the resources (time, money, people, and material resources) you have available to conduct the needs assessment, and whether it would be beneficial for data to be gathered by internal staff or an impartial outsider. The important thing is that you truly determine whether you have a need or not.

A needs assessment usually involves collecting and analyzing data to determine if there really is a need and to describe that need if you find it. Steve Baxendale from the World Health Organization also notes that doing a needs assessment was one successful strategy he used for getting greater buy-in. Collect data from people who will be impacted by the project—such as the eventual users—through surveys, interviews, or focus groups. You can conduct brainstorming or group planning meetings. Bring in relevant data that can help to identify or clarify the need. These can be new policies or regulations, teacher certification and training data, or student performance data. Sometimes, current efforts aren't working, and this can be a reason to try online professional development. Use multiple methods; you may have to conduct several rounds of data collection and analysis until you've finally identified needs clearly. Your goal is to determine whether there's a gap between an expected outcome (e.g., number of highly qualified teachers, student performance levels, use of a desired pedagogy or resource) and your current practice. If so, there's a need. Regardless of how you conduct your needs assessment, there are a few factors to consider to inform the process. These factors are presented next.

What's the Trigger?

What prompted the decision? What happened that made you believe you need online professional development? Sometimes it's just the desire of an individual or group of individuals. It could be that someone at the central office or a school board member went to a conference and attended a good session on online professional development. It could be a pet project of someone with an interest in technology. Maybe the next district over has started providing online professional development, and you feel the need to keep up. Dig deeper to get beyond what one or a few people want versus what is needed.

There may be a change in policy, guidance, or regulations that requires training. A new policy that requires all paraprofessionals to have new qualifications can indicate a need for professional development. A new funding stream, such as a grant that is tied to specific resources and methods, may require professional development. Have you had changes in staffing? You may have significant growth in the number of educators in your district, or you could have had significant overturn in terms of new versus veteran employees, or your own professional development staff may have been significantly reduced. Your staff may have prompted the request in an effort to reap some of the benefits

described earlier in this chapter, like flexible access to support and resources, job-embedded activities, or ongoing professional development with follow-up. Have there been changes in the student population? A new industry entering or leaving the community can significantly impact the makeup of your student population. The introduction of people from different cultures or backgrounds can be seen as a need for professional development across a district on several topics. These are all real needs I've encountered.

Ultimately, since the goal of schools is to help all students reach their academic potential, collect evidence from student performance that suggests the need for professional development. Has student performance changed recently? For any particular group of students? Have you implemented or do you plan to implement a new intervention, instructional strategy, or curricular resource across a group of teachers or schools? Perhaps you've already identified an intervention that has been shown to address the learning needs of students like yours, but it requires ongoing professional development to ensure it's implemented with fidelity.

For any of these reasons, bring in data that helps to explain or support why you believe online professional development is needed. Data is objective and helps you move beyond guessing, perceptions, and opinions. Share that data with others charged with making the decision to go forward or not.

Who Should Be at the Table?

Consider who can help determine if there's a need and who *has* to be present to make the decision that online professional development is the answer. If you're leaning towards online professional development, make sure you have people who will be impacted by it all along the planning, development, implementation, and monitoring phases. Too often, this type of decision is relegated to technology staff that may not have expertise in curriculum and instruction *or* professional development. While you'll certainly need to include your technology staff for some decisions, don't forget your curriculum and instruction personnel, staff developers, and potential facilitators and participants. Not all of these people need to actually sit at the table every time decisions are made, but data from these groups can be collected and used when planning and decision meetings occur so the needs of these groups are represented.

Too often, the people who will use the system the most, often teachers or administrators, are not consulted in the process. Providing your participants a say in the process is critical. It not only increases buy-in for your project but can better help determine what you will or won't be able to do. Melinda George from PBS TeacherLine notes that sometimes they have to do a "double sell" if the district leader has bought into the project but the teachers have not, perhaps by not being involved in the decision. As she says, "You can't impose it on the teachers or they'll see it as a requirement and not an opportunity." (For more information about PBS TeacherLine, see Box 1.4: "Learning From Experience: PBS TeacherLine.") Get the right people to the table from the beginning.

Box 1.4 Learning From Experience: PBS TeacherLine

Project Title: PBS TeacherLine

Organization: PBS

Contacts: Melinda George, Senior Director, and Elizabeth Wolzak, former Senior Manager, Instructional Design

URL: www.pbs.org/teacherline

Date First Implemented: 2000

Audience: K–12 educators

Need: *What Was the Initial Trigger?*

PBS launched MathLine in 1995 with funding from the U.S. Department of Education, then built on this work through a Ready to Teach grant to develop TeacherLine, which expanded into other content areas. TeacherLine now has more than 100 courses that are fully online and fully facilitated, as well as a new Peer Connection component that makes the learning objects in those courses searchable and usable in a more standalone fashion for coaches and mentors.

Intended Outcomes:

The initial courses were designed to address the needs of K–12 teachers in core content areas.

Incentives:

Continuing education units and graduate credit

Instructional Design Considerations:

TeacherLine has done a lot of work around determining what an effective online course looks like and how it is structured. Wolzak developed a course outline for TeacherLine called a Performance, Objective, Assessment, and Activity Chart (POAAC) that guides the development process and facilitates conversations with partners or content experts. TeacherLine provides a project manager and an instructional designer, and the institutions they partner with provide a project manager and a writer. TeacherLine courses have similar strands, so they are familiar to those who take more than one course, and they have a 33% rate of repeat learners (some who take multiple courses).

Wolzak notes that it's important when designing online instruction to know the needs of your learners. The audience for professional development is adults, and they have different needs than children. She suggests modeling what you want them to do in their classroom. They come with a wealth of prior knowledge, so she encourages reflection and incorporates peer review and sharing of experiences.

All TeacherLine courses are project-based and have a direct real-world application to the classroom. There are often fewer activities in a TeacherLine online course than more traditional face-to-face instruction, and courses result

in something tangible and relevant. Language arts classes often incorporate case studies, and science courses model inquiry-based learning strategies. All courses have performance objectives, and every objective is assessed through the use of a rubric. Multiple-choice assessments are not used.

Lessons Learned:

One of the myths about online learning is that it's always the same, but in reality, there are so many flavors of professional development. Review what other people are offering and make sure you know what your audience wants.

TeacherLine created some self-paced learning opportunities in the past, but they were not very popular. Self-paced was a really tough way to get buy-in from teachers online, so everything they do now is facilitated. TeacherLine has a 94% completion rate, and George feels that facilitators make the biggest difference in whether a person completes successfully or not.

Much of the meat of the course occurs in the discussion area, so they think hard about discussion questions so that it can be manageable both for the learner and the facilitator. The discussion area can strengthen the development of community by connecting to and learning with peers. The facilitator is the "guide on the side" and does not necessarily direct the discussion.

TeacherLine uses metatagging (see Chapter 5 for more about metatagging, SCORM, and learning objects). They built the original database but engage an outside organization to actually tag the learning objects as they are put into the database. Schools or districts can also license TeacherLine content in a SCORM-compliant form.

Evaluation:

TeacherLine contracts with an outside evaluation organization to review the pre/post survey data, and data have been used to monitor what has gone well and how to offer new opportunities. Through evaluation of the first Ready to Teach grant, TeacherLine was able to determine what teachers wanted in terms of content and activities. The 100 courses were deconstructed and put into a searchable database embedded in a collaborative environment, called Peer Connection, intended to provide information to support coaches and mentors in a flexible environment.

See the book's companion website for more information about the profiled programs. **www.corwin.com/rossonlinepd**

How Will Online Professional Development Align With Existing Initiatives?

Make sure you consider the professional development efforts that are already in place and those that may be planned. Talk to more than just your professional development staff. In some departments, project staff in different content areas provide professional development. Will online professional development support existing initiatives? Will it conflict with existing initiatives? It may be possible that online professional development can fill gaps within existing initiatives, leveraging available resources.

Of course, consider whether online professional development can replace existing initiatives. It's very common to migrate a successful professional development program from face-to-face to online delivery. In this case, you may actually improve the existing program through some of the reasons described earlier in this chapter, such as providing ongoing support and follow-up in a job-embedded environment. You may also be able to get your successful program to more people by going online.

Are You Ready for Online Professional Development?

This "you" is the holistic you that includes everyone who will be impacted by the system. If you're working in a school or district, are the faculty and staff ready? Is there an organizational culture that will support online professional development? In a review of effective professional development models, Gall and Vojtek (1994) report that successful outcomes are more likely in schools that have norms of collegiality and experimentation. Determining readiness of this type can be difficult, but if your users aren't ready, the system won't be used, and you will waste your investment.

Schools also need to be ready to incorporate online professional development at a programmatic level. When will participants access the material? What computers will they use? Online professional development can be as rigorous as any model of professional development and shouldn't be seen as an add-on. Consider how online professional development will be incorporated into the daily operation of the school or district so that it's seen as valuable. Determine how you will support and reward participation.

Readiness also refers to technical readiness. Do you have the capacity to deliver online professional development, and can your participants receive it? Many district networks block streaming media, such as videos, or prohibit smartphones, social media, and other technologies. If you're planning to incorporate these now-common technologies, be sure they can be used. Schools and districts also often have very strong firewalls that may block e-mails or other communications from your system, especially if your system requires significant network resources.

After you've considered these parameters, try to determine your greatest area(s) of need. You may have several that you have to prioritize, because some may be more urgent than others. Some may not be possible in a year, or more. It's good to know what they are, though, because time for continued review of this and related data from your online professional development efforts is part of the framework (see Chapter 7). You need to know if your needs have been met, if they've changed, or whether new needs arise.

Take time to review the four questions in Box 1.5: "Take Action: Conduct a Needs Assessment and Create Your Vision." Consider the questions and examples presented in this section to help you determine why you need online professional development. These questions are the same no matter whether you're developing or purchasing online professional development. Use the answers from these questions to determine your greatest need(s). Finally, use the answers to these four questions to develop a vision to guide your online professional development system—your vision of where you want to be in 1 to 3 years.

I recommend you develop vision and mission statements for this work not just because I think they are useful but because they are common components in both education and commercial sectors. Educators are familiar with creating vision and mission statements for school improvement plans. The corporate sector incorporates them into business plans. When done well, they are a common means for guiding work in both arenas, so I encourage you to incorporate them into your own plan for providing online professional development. One of the principles of effective professional development, according to Guskey (2000), is "small changes guided by a grand vision" (p. 37). Regardless of the scope of your intended project, a clear vision will guide you.

Box 1.5 Take Action: Conduct a Needs Assessment and Create Your Vision

Take time to truly determine your needs and address the questions presented in this chapter. Record your needs and share them with all who will be working on or with your online professional development system. The needs you identify will also help you evaluate the success of your program.

Assess your needs using these four questions:

1. What's the trigger?
2. Who should be at the table?
3. How will online professional development align with existing initiatives?
4. Are you ready for online professional development?

List your greatest area(s) of need in priority order.

1.
2.
3.

Based on your needs, create your vision for online professional development. Describe where you want to be 1 to 3 years from now.

CONCLUSION

From your needs assessment process, you may determine there's a need that can be addressed by online professional development. The need itself doesn't imply that online professional development is the answer. In fact, sometimes you may discover that online professional development is not the solution to

addressing a need. But because so many reasons why you might consider online professional development have been identified, I'm going to assume the affirmative.

After determining your needs, draft a vision for your online professional development system. The term *system* is used in a broad sense. It doesn't just mean hardware and software. Your system is going to impact policies, practices, personnel, and all the resources necessary to get and keep your online professional development up and running. This is true even if you're just planning on purchasing a course or two. There are too many stories of educators who enrolled and paid for outside online professional development but never took the steps to determine if they could use it for recertification or opportunities for advancement in their job. If you don't figure that out up front, it's rare to get credit after it's over. Describe why online professional development is the answer and how it can meet the needs you've identified. Describe the broad outcomes you have for your online professional development system.

I'm not going to tell you how to write a vision statement. I once attended a workshop led by noted education leadership expert Bob Eaker, who said that as educators, we have been "visioned to death." We know how to write vision statements, and it doesn't take a year or a month to do so. But do put your vision for your online professional development system down on paper so that as you and your team move forward, you're all on the same page about what you want to accomplish. You just need to create the long view of where you want to be in 1 to 3 years in terms of your online professional development efforts. Once you have that vision, the rest of this book will help you find or develop a system that is right for you.