

Bright Ideas



Supporting Organizational
Excellence & Innovation

Professional Development in the 21st Century

A world of options

A few months ago someone asked me for the names of trainers on a particular topic in her city. While I was happy to oblige, it struck me as rather an “old school” approach to professional development. Those of us who went to the original “old school” can unintentionally limit ourselves. We may miss out on great learning opportunities that are available, affordable and take advantage of 21st century technology familiar to members of Generation Y.

Old School Rules

When I started out, learning options were pretty much limited to books, articles, classroom instruction and conference presentations. When they are good, these still work very well.

Books and articles appeal to visual learners and those who like to control when and where they learn; you don't have to wait until everyone else is in the same place and ready to read.

Classroom instruction allows learners to interact with the instructor and peers. In adult learning situations, such as professional development workshops, that

peer interaction results in multiple teachers sharing what they know. Classroom instruction has benefited from the introduction of various audio-visual aids from the blackboard to the whiteboard, and from the overhead projector to PowerPoints with audio and video clips. Even taking notes may be supplemented with podcasts of the lecture. Role-plays and other activities allow people to learn by doing. While losing the ability to control the pace

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of one's exposure to knowledge, the classroom supports learners regardless of whether they prefer to learn by seeing, hearing or doing.

A variation on classroom instruction involves going to a conference. Presentations by experts in their subject

matter generally set aside time for Q&A. Or you might be able to catch the expert later for some deeper discussion. Like books, the conference presentation gives the learner access to the original developer of the knowledge; unlike books, this knowledge can be given personal meaning through interaction. The downside is the cost, particularly if travel is involved.

New School 101

New technology or new applications of existing technology have expanded the options for professional development. Where once I consulted my Encyclopedia Britannica, now I visit Wikipedia. Information is so readily available electronically that party hosts have had to ban the use of cell phones during trivia games. Just as one has to be careful of the validity of information in print sources (e.g., UFO reports in the *Weekly World News*), the fact that anyone can publish anything online means that Internet sources (<http://weeklyworldnews.com>) also need to be vetted.

The equivalent of the conference presentation is the webinar.

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All you need to attend a webinar is a computer with Internet access, a phone and a blank time in your calendar when it is scheduled to take place. When you register, you receive the codes for the conference call line and the website URL for the visuals. Some webinars use a PowerPoint presentation structure, while others let the presenter change visual information on the fly. During the presentation part of the webinar, learners can type questions to be answered along the way or at the end. Some webinars have also used the phone connection to support final Q&As. There is usually technical support available for connection problems, because not everyone has the same computer set-up.

Although a webinar can be attended in the privacy of one's office, many professional organizations have set up locations where a larger group of people can share the cost of a single hook-up. While some webinars are free, others can cost hundreds of dollars. To host a group, the only additional equipment an organization needs is a

standard multimedia projector and a speaker phone with good range. My personal preference is for a room with tables (not just chairs), because I still like to take notes.

Online learning has brought distance education closer to the classroom learning experience. Thanks to software advances, we can do just about everything in an online class that we do in a face-to-face class. And with a few exceptions, we can do them at our own pace and at a time that works for us. Staff who work evenings or at night used to have to attend training on their own time; now they can access the training modules whenever there is downtime on the job. Course materials can include text (with or without audio), video and downloadable podcasts. Learners can interact with the materials by clicking on images or text to view more detailed or advanced information or to answer a question. Class discussions can be held asynchronously using an electronic bulletin board; members add comments that draw on their own experience and allow them to learn

from the experiences of their peers. Learners in distant cities can set up mutually convenient times to work on group projects or carry out role plays via Skype-like applications or chat rooms. Sometimes these synchronous learning activities involve the entire class setting aside a single block of time to "meet," while others only require a few learners online at once. Online learning can support, to some extent, both those with more basic computer set-ups and those with all the "bells and whistles." Some online courses support learners with limited reading skills by allowing them to "click to hear" the text material and to respond in discussions with audio or video reports. While such technology-laden modes of knowledge transfer are second-nature to those just entering the world of work, they can be an equally effective way for more established workers to learn new information and skills.

So, the next time you are looking for professional development opportunities, remember that there is a world of options available.

From Where I Sit



Brave new world

When William Shakespeare wrote, "O brave new world, that has such people in't!" I'm sure he was not talking about designers of online learning software applications. And yet, these sorcerers of computer code have indeed helped to create a brave new world for those of us who labour to re-create online the best of what a classroom can offer.

As a life-long learner, I know how technology can support people to expand their knowledge,

skills and perspectives. I remember when a teacher first rolled a TV set into our classroom and turned on educational television. Now software with the unlikely names of Moodle and Elluminate let me view and discuss video of distant cultures while in my house slippers.

That's why I'm excited to have recently joined the ranks of online training developers. As a long-time adult educator, I know the value of learning by seeing, hearing and doing. Knowledge becomes personal when learners incorporate new facts to re-interpret their own experience and professional practice. It

is indeed a brave new world.



K. K. Biersdorff Consulting supports organizational excellence and innovation through an array of planning, research, communication and training services that take projects seamlessly from start to finish.