

LEARNING CURVES: PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ON THE HUB - April 2003

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Literacy practitioners have limited time and resources to participate in professional development, yet they are often hungry for it. Practitioners want and need to continually update their skills and knowledge, for example, to: discover new and interesting ways to teach reading and writing; explore different methods of delivering tutor training; and learn more about how to support learners in their classes, including those with learning disabilities, fetal alcohol syndrome, and addictions. In short, they want to share and reflect on their experiences and their practice, and learn from each other. But where do they find the time, energy and resources for conferences and workshops?

Many literacy practitioners and other educators in BC are finding access to "informal" professional development through electronic conferencing on The Hub.¹ We define these opportunities as informal to distinguish them from more traditional and formalized professional development such as online courses with a set curriculum and requirements for participation. Informal online professional development takes place through moderated and interactive electronic forums. These forums make learning and collaboration through discussion and critical reflection possible within the realities of the working lives of literacy practitioners.

An electronic conference allows a group of people to send messages to a central place, and to read and respond to each other's messages, as well as to share files, all in asynchronous time. The software used on The Hub – FirstClass – offers sophisticated features that enhance participants' engagement and effective use of time. These include the capacity for "threaded" discussions, the ability to view the history of a message and see who has read it and to sort and view messages by various criteria such as name and subject, among other features.

Our role in providing professional development on The Hub is to identify topics for discussion that are of interest and importance to our constituents, recruit and assist guest moderators, set up electronic conferences, encourage and support participation, develop corollary materials, and publish conference reports. Some of the conferences we have offered include: letters home from a Canadian literacy worker living in South Africa, sharing power with students, phonological awareness, and youth literacy. Through our experience we have learned several important things about what works and what doesn't, and have developed our own set of best practices.

On-line communities are intentional communities. A group of people comes together online to explore and reflect on a common interest. In order for this to happen successfully, a number of things need to be in place, including "protocols" for online discussion. Clearly articulating how we will communicate defines our intentional community. It ensures that participants will feel a sense of safety, that there is respect and tolerance for each other's views, that diversity is allowed and, in fact,

¹ The Hub is a partnership of Literacy BC and Capilano College and is funded by the BC Adult Literacy Cost-Shared Program.

encouraged. Establishing protocols for an on-line discussion enables a group to create a sense of common values, a critical feature in collaborative work.

It is our best interest to help an online group understand how to use the electronic medium efficiently and productively. We ensure that we are knowledgeable about how to use the software to its full advantage and try to transfer this knowledge to our participants. For example, we have developed several "ground rules" that facilitate discussion, including brevity in messages, the efficient use of "reply with quote", and others. We also recognize that people need and benefit from technical shortcuts. They often don't have the time, skill, or desire to find their way around a conferencing system. If it is cumbersome, many will just give up rather than struggle through. To this end, we produce easy-to-read basic software tips, and make ourselves accessible to participants for one-to-one support if they have questions or problems or want to learn more about how to use the software.

YOUTH LITERACY: WHAT WORKS? - AN EXAMPLE

In February January 2003 we initiated a conference called *Youth Literacy: What Works?* The conference was designed to stimulate discussion about critical issues related to youth dropping out of school, entering the workforce unprepared, and/or engaging in antisocial behaviour. Heide Wrigley, one of the senior researchers at The New School @ Surrey² was recruited to moderate the six-week electronic conference. The New School is a national research and demonstration project in Surrey, BC that works with adolescent youth who have significant difficulties with reading and writing and cannot keep up with the standard high school curriculum. The three-year project is looking into the issue of best practices with a guiding principle of "high expectations and high support" for their learners.

This was an exciting opportunity for discussion on a current "hot" topic. We had a group out in Surrey researching and developing the demonstration project; people out in the field working in a variety of youth literacy programs; and people who develop and affect policy. Youth literacy is also a topic of interest to adult educators who may be working with young people under the age of 25 and with adults who experienced difficulties with school in their youth. At the same time, the issue of youth literacy offered us an opportunity to reach out to other groups who work directly with adolescent youth and are not part of our regular constituency in the adult literacy field. Thus we ventured into areas we hadn't been before, offering FirstClass conferencing to people who are not regular participants on The Hub. To broaden the scope of who would be able to participate in this conference we created a conference that could be accessed by people using their web browsers and a temporary FirstClass ID. Potential participants were not limited to our Hub subscribers.

The Process: Planning and Delivering

Working with the senior researchers at the New School, we developed a six-week plan for discussion on the topic. Since we were doing something we had never done before, we held a two-week pre-conference to identify any technical snags and to give participants an opportunity to introduce themselves and become familiar with

² In partnership with Literacy BC, the New School @ Surrey is jointly funded by the National Literacy Secretariat, Human Resources Development Canada; the National Crime Prevention Centre, Department of Justice; and School District #36 (Surrey).

the technology. Then we started promoting the conference. We sent over 500 emails to secondary schools in BC, groups working with youth nationally and internationally, and literacy organizations across Canada. As a result, 96 people registered to participate through the conference web site, the majority principals and teachers in BC schools. Others included youth workers in community groups in Canada, Australia and the UK. Many expressed an avid interest in the topic and were eager to participate in this online forum. A youth worker in Queensland, Australia who works with youth from 11 – 20 years of age responded:

I am passionate about these kids and have found them so rewarding as well as challenging. It would be wonderful to share any info for topics that have worked successfully with young people. What a wonderful idea! I hope it will be a success.

It was a success. Dozens of people checked in, read the messages, responded, downloaded the materials and we hope, learned a thing or two they didn't know before. The conference ended on March 28. Some people still check in and exchange a few words, but the main piece is over. We have yet to formally evaluate the conference and make recommendations, but a few things are obvious to us already.

What We Learned

- **First, you need to have an active moderator** moving things along, sort of an "Oprah Winfrey" type moderator. The moderator doesn't need to be an expert on the topic, but does need to have an engaging on-line style and be able to get people talking so the ideas can get flowing.
- **Second, you need to continually update people**, or summarize discussions for people who don't sign in every day. These regular updates enable people to stay on top of things without having to read messages daily. We provided three summaries of the conference and put them in PDF format to make downloading and printing possible for nearly everyone.
- And most importantly, **you need to be able to respond to problems quickly** or you will lose people. When the learning is something "extra" and not attached to a job or a deadline, any barrier will stop the participation. Not many people will slug their way through complex technological barriers, on their own time, to be able to communicate online.

Like any learning curve, ours was steep, at times vertical! The value of being able to communicate with others in the field allows for such an amazing cross-pollination of ideas, that we believe it to be a wonderful mode of professional development. It still needs refining, but stay tuned for the next on-line conference.

To find out how to participate in professional development on The Hub, contact Sandy Middleton, SMiddleton@literacy.bc.ca