


Innovations in E-learning

New Promise for Professional Development

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Over the past few years, as educators we have had the opportunity to design, develop, and deliver online courses for low-tech, high-touch students. In Wisconsin a child care administrator credential program was created. Early childhood e-teaching institutes for faculty and trainers were organized and held in conjunction with the World Forum on Early Care and Education in New Zealand in 2002 and in Mexico in 2003. Instructors and trainers in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Kansas, and Illinois also have experienced e-teaching institutes.

Trends and examples

From our experiences with e-teaching, and with what we have learned from others in distance learning programs and those who teach early childhood courses online, we have identified elements of successful e-learning programs, innovative uses of technology, and promising technology tools and applications that support

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professional growth and development. Following are eight trends and examples of model programs and practices that we continue to watch closely and learn from. You can click on any of the links below to go to the Web site mentioned.

1. Online certificates, credentials, and degree programs

A number of higher education institutions offer online degree programs for early childhood professionals. A few of those with the most experience include Concordia University–Saint Paul in Minnesota (<http://web.csp.edu/cshs>), Kansas State University (<http://www.dce.ksu.edu/dce/cl/earlychildhood>), Northampton Community College in Pennsylvania (<http://www.northampton.edu/distancelearn/programs>), Nova Southeastern University in Florida (<http://www.fgse.nova.edu/ecaa>), and Pacific Oaks College in California (<http://www.pacificoaks.edu>). See “Promising Directions for Early Childhood Professional



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Development” (Donohue 2003) for a more complete listing of online degree and certificate programs.

2. Collaboration

A number of examples exist of collaborations that are improving and expanding e-learning opportunities. One promising partnership between higher education and business is the online CDA (Child Development Associate) Credential offered by Professional Training and Consulting (PTC) (<http://www.ptctraining.com>) in Stone Mountain, Georgia, and the Early Childhood Learning Community (ECLC) at the University of Cincinnati (<http://www.ucollege.uc.edu/eclc>). Credits earned for the CDA count toward an Associate of Applied Science (AAS) degree from the University of Cincinnati, a completely online degree program.

A number of states have developed virtual universities that allow students to take courses from a number of institutions in the state and apply them toward a degree at their home campuses. Examples of this type of collaboration in higher education include the Colorado Community Colleges Online (<http://www.cconline.org>), the Kentucky Virtual University (<http://www.kyvu.org/home.htm>), E-Lect E-Learning for Early Childhood Teachers (<http://www.elect.mnscu.edu>) from the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities, and the New York State Early Childhood Education (ECE) Online (<http://www.nyseconline.suny.edu>).

3. Community-based training programs

An exciting trend is the emerging role of child care resource referral agencies and other community-based

training programs in the delivery of online modules, noncredit courses, and CEUs (continuing education units). Excellent examples include E-Learn (Eager-to-Learn) classes from the Minnesota Child Care Resource and Referral Network (<http://www.mnchildcare.org>) and the online training from Child Care Resources in Missoula, Montana (<http://www.childcaretraining.org>).

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4. International initiatives

Technology can make the world a smaller place and can improve the quality of child care through enhanced child care training opportunities and resources. The World Bank supports the development of effective online learning through the Global DistEdNet at the World Bank Global Distance Education (<http://www1.worldbank.org/disted>). Another innovative use of technology is the Early Childhood Development Virtual University (<http://www.ecdvu.org>) of the University of Victoria, Canada, School of Child and Youth Care, with projects focused on capacity building and leadership development in sub-Saharan Africa and Middle East-North Africa.

5. Beyond courses

There are a number of examples of technology tools and solutions that support or go beyond the provision of training programs and courses. The need for basic technology skills has been addressed in Illinois in the course Director Technology Training, developed by the Center for Early Childhood Leadership at National-Louis University (<http://www2.nl.edu/twal>), and in the Technology Toolbox Administrator Technology Training series offered in Wisconsin by the Early Childhood Professional Development Programs at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee (<http://cfprod.imt.uwm.edu/sce/dci.cfm?id=241>).

The opportunity to talk with experts in the field and to exchange ideas and information with other child care professionals is provided during the Time Out! Discussion Forums at the Illinois Center for Early Childhood Leadership (http://www2.nl.edu/twal/time_out.htm). Effective uses of Web sites, electronic newsletters, and Listservs for networking and advocacy are dem-



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onstrated by NAEYC (<http://www.naeyc.org>), the Children's Defense Fund (<http://www.childrensdefense.org>), and the former ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, whose resources are now accessible through the Early Childhood and Parenting (ECAP) Collaborative Information Technology Group at the University of Illinois (<http://ecap.crc.uiuc.edu/info>). In addition, the Child Care Information Exchange (<http://www.childcareexchange.com>) has developed ExchangeEveryDay as a way of sharing information.

6. Guidelines for appropriate practice

Three recent efforts help to define best practices in online teaching and learning for child care professionals. Project CONTACT (College Opportunity Networks Technology Access for Child Care Teachers) from the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (<http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~contact>) conducts research and develops tools that are downloadable, including a *Guide to Distance Learning for Early Childhood Students in North Carolina* and *Course Quality Rubric*.

The Minnesota Online Professional Development Workgroup (2003), including Concordia University's Professional Development Consortium, the Minnesota Child Care Resource and Referral Network, and the Minnesota Early Childhood and School-Age Care Association, created *The Guide to Effective Practices for Online Professional Development* (41 pp., downloadable)

(<http://etl.MNchildcare.org/effective.pdf>). Faculty (Keinath & Blicher 2003) at Metropolitan State University in Minneapolis developed a tool titled *Evaluating Readiness in Your Online Course: Student-Readiness Site Review Rubric* (<http://www.metrostate.edu/col/rubric.pdf>).

7. Faculty development

Early childhood faculty, instructors, and trainers need opportunities to learn about technology and training to teach online. Early childhood e-teaching institutes were offered for faculty and trainers from eight countries who participated in three-day, hands-on institutes on effective strategies for teaching and learning and learning at a distance in conjunction with the World Forum on Early Care and Education. An EC (Early Childhood) eTeaching Institute with an online follow-up component is planned for the next World Forum in 2005 (<http://www.childcareexchange.com/wf/eteaching.php>).

The emphasis of e-teaching institutes is on technology skill building, hands-on experience, and idea exchange. Participants discuss obstacles and opportunities in designing, developing, and delivering courses and training programs via technology. Issues of quality in online course development and delivery, including content conversion, instructional design, and outcomes assessment, also are demonstrated and discussed.

In 2002 the Early Childhood Education Faculty Development Project, funded by the Great Lakes Head Start Quality Network and Great Lakes Head Start Quality Improvement Center for Disabilities, QNet/QIC-D Region V, included innovative projects for effective online teaching from the Erikson Institute in Illinois, Ball State University and Ivy Tech State College in Indiana, Washtenaw Community College in Michigan, Minneapolis Community Technical College in Minnesota, University of Cincinnati in Ohio, and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in Wisconsin. The project funded faculty development projects and offered opportunities for an exchange of ideas and resources among the participating states. QNet, as it evolved, is now housed at the Early Childhood Quality Network at Ohio State University.

Another model for faculty development is the Distance

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Education Training of Trainers sponsored by the Minnesota Early Childhood School-Age Trainers Association (MECSATA) in collaboration with Concordia University's Professional Development Consortium and the Eager-to-Learn online training program (<http://etl.mnchildcare.org>).

8. Policy discussions

The discussion is no longer about *should* technology be used but about *how* it can be used to enhance and expand training and professional development opportunities for child care professionals. A report of the July 2002 meeting, *Technology and Early Childhood Professional Development: A Policy Discussion*, hosted by KnowledgeWorks Foundation (<http://www.kwfdn.org>) and the Education Commission of the States (ECS) (<http://www.ecs.org>), is downloadable from ECS's Web site (find it through Search ECS. org). Participants included representatives from national organizations and associations, colleges and universities, community-based training organizations, resource and referral agencies, and policy makers. Issues addressed included outcomes from distance learning, access, articulation, accreditation, implementation, and funding.

Next steps

The spirit of collaboration that has defined the early childhood e-teaching institutes in which we have been involved the past two years both excites and humbles us. We see wonderful opportunities for collaborative learning and the development of learning communities in online courses and training programs. When we see how willingly individuals and programs share what they have learned and encourage the best practices of others who are new to online teaching and learning, we are optimistic about the use of technology.

There are many next steps each of us can take to realize the goal of advancing the use of technology in the early childhood field. Most important is taking steps



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together by creating a community of online teachers and learners. As early childhood educators we have an opportunity to harness these new technology tools to make a real difference for the young children and families we serve. We look forward to sharing the journey.

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