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21st Century Professional Learning Communities for Teachers and Students

By Patricia Iannacone

First there was the Industrial Age (circa late 18th and early 19th centuries) and then the Information Age (around 1956–present). In the December 2008 issue of the George Lucas Educational Foundation (GLEF) *Edutopia* magazine, the editors dubbed this century “The Collaboration Age.”

Authors Hord and Hirsh, in their article entitled *The Principal's Role in Supporting Learning Communities*, state that, “Research on professional learning communities indicates that teachers reap such benefits as collective responsibility for student success, increased understanding of teachers’ roles in helping students achieve, feedback and assistance from peers, and professional renewal. Research shows that learning in a social context is deeper than independent learning.” Brigid Barron and Linda Darling-Hammond point out in their article, *Powerful Learning: Studies Show Deep Understanding Derives from Collaborative Methods*, “Cooperative small-group learning — that is, students working together in a group small enough that everyone can participate on a collective task — has been the

subject of hundreds of studies. All the research arrives at the same conclusion: There are significant benefits for students who work together on learning activities.” What is a professional learning community? The term professional learning community describes a collegial group of administrators and school staff who are united in their commitment to student learning. They share a vision, work and learn collaboratively, visit and review other classrooms, and participate in decision-making (*Hord, 1997b). The benefits to the staff and students include a reduced isolation of teachers, better informed and committed teachers, and academic gains for students. Hord (1997b) notes, “As an organizational arrangement, the professional learning community is seen as a powerful staff-development approach and a potent strategy for school change and improvement.”

There are several ways a district can set up a professional learning community. One way is to use an online learning management system (OLMS) which can facilitate the development of a professional learning community

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21st Century Professional Learning Communities for Teachers and Students

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by providing a dynamic, central space accessible by teacher-participants any time and any place. Using an OLMS eliminates the need for physical space, time coordination, and saves teachers time by removing the commuting element while increasing the flexibility of time and places for learning. Having anytime, anywhere access to a significant amount of varied resources facilitates the construction and discovery of knowledge.

In addition, an OLMS provides teachers with time to practice working with different technologies, while fostering a collaborative environment in which they can pool their collective expertise. Expanding access to information, networks, people and ideas is another benefit of an OLMS.

Teachers would use the virtual meeting place to access, share, and store resources such as websites, lesson/unit plans, curriculum maps, images, videos, podcasts, and handouts. More importantly, teachers can tap into the collective expertise of the professional learning community by sharing their ideas, experiences and knowledge, using tools such as chat, messaging, and the discussion board within the virtual meeting place. This will help teachers improve both their teaching and the learning of their students. These environments allow teachers to ask questions of the community and also to discuss and share what works in their classroom.

In the March 2009 issue of *Phi Delta Kappan*, the editor notes that professional learning occurs when teachers have the opportunity to (Richardson, p.458):

- Work together
- Be guided by a knowledgeable leader
- Collect evidence
- Pool knowledge
- Make decisions as a team
- Re-examine their assumptions and conclusions.

In turn, teachers can practice what they've learned as a result of being part of an online professional learning community, by using the same strategies with their



students. Teachers, using the same online learning management system used for their own professional learning community activities, can set up a professional learning community for their students. The teachers would be able to post resources such as videos, images, articles, multimedia activities, assignments, and assessments to the online learning management system. Groups can access this anytime and anywhere, i.e. in school, after school, and weekends, using either a computer or mobile device, as many times as they need to. In turn, the group would be able to retrieve the resources, upload assignments, and take assessments, all within the same system. Online learning management systems also allow the students within the group to easily communicate with other students in the group as well as with the teacher. Tools such as safe chat, discussion boards, and secure messaging, allow the students to collaborate with each other, and enable the teacher to provide timely feedback. Also, the teacher can monitor student progress through electronic tracking of student usage, uploads, and postings. The effective use of an online learning management system can help ensure that students are on track with their learning and enables the teacher to provide instant support if the group is struggling with concepts.

Professional learning communities benefit both teachers and students by tapping into the power of a group's collective expertise and sharing of knowledge, ideas, and resources.

For information on any of CIT's programs,

including back issues of CIT Response, up-to-date education news, NCLB, special reports, new services, and more, visit the Curriculum, Instruction and Technology Website at:

www.nassauboces.org/cit

NCLB Title III Grant Funded

iPod/Video Professional Development for Educators of English Language Learners (ELLs)

A grant was written by Nassau BOCES Bilingual Education Technical Assistance Center (BETAC) to provide professional development to teachers of ELLs, promoting the use of iPods, videos and podcasts in the classroom to help enrich instruction and enhance learning for English language learners (ELLs). In order to conduct the grant activities, we contracted our CIT programs for the best services around.

Model Schools and BETAC staff are conducting a series of four full-day professional development sessions, with additional in-class coaching hours for teachers from our fifteen consortium member districts. They are: Bellmore, Bellmore-Merrick Central High School, Bethpage, East Rockaway, Island Park, Island Trees, Malverne, Manhasset, Massapequa, North Bellmore, North Merrick, North Shore, Plainedge, Seaford, and Wantagh. Data Warehouse analyzed our consortium members' test data to support data-based professional development activities. MicroComputer Support negotiated with Discovery Education for our access to video files, and the Help-Desk supplied laptops for our participants.

The focus of the grant provides multimodal/multisensorial, limitless access to reinforceable language and academic concepts. iPods support ELLs in developing the skills necessary to formulate and articulate concepts in daily classroom activities, state assessments, homework assignments, etc.

Students can synch to teacher-selected or teacher-made podcasts with sound and video of news features, 'how to' projects, teacher presentations, lessons, quizzes, audiobooks, homework, test review, and music, among other items. iPods provide individualized learning options for ELLs. Students can take them anywhere, listen to a download at their own pace,

repeatedly if needed, create podcasts, and monitor their own learning.

Many ESL teachers in the consortium are itinerant. The portability of the iPod and its numerous uses provides extended opportunities for ELLs to have access to

models of English language production and vocabulary development. ESL and content-area teachers from the districts are working together to create multi-media lessons in order to meet the varied needs of each ELL student. Teachers

have learned to use a variety of 21st Century tools, such as the Flip video camcorder, PowerPoint, MovieMaker, Discovery Education streaming, and the iPod with voice recorder. These technological skills assist teachers in providing highly motivating, rigorous, and engaging activities in the classroom that can be student-generated as well.

Tutoring for ELLs is also provided through this Title III Grant. ESL and ELA teachers use strategies they learned to provide additional support and tutoring for their ELLs, including strategies to improve test-taking and study skills, as well as promote higher order thinking and literacy development.

This comprehensive, funded program has been well-received by the districts and teachers, making a difference in the education of ELLs.



See all the latest Professional Development offerings

Nassau BOCES' CIT has to offer:

<http://www.nassauboces.org/cit/catalog/current/index.htm>

Tech Toys

BRETFORD has come out with the Netbook32, its first cart for mini laptops, also known as netbooks. Schools can store, charge, and transport up to 32 netbooks in this lightweight steel cart. The cart contains two 16-outlet electrical units with a timer/charger that automatically switches the electrical current from one charging unit to another, allowing both sets of outlets to use one circuit. In addition, the cart has a four-outlet strip for powering accessory equipment such as projectors and document cameras. Computers can be protected from theft and tampering inside the cart, which includes a 14-gauge locking point and two combination locks that secure both the front doors and rear access panel. www.bretford.com/products/section.asp?section=42

Canson PAPERSHOW is the new digital writing kit for digital flipchart work and interactive presentations. Simply write on the Canson Papershow digital paper and see your notes projected onto your screen via a Bluetooth connection between the Digital Pen and USB Key. www.shoppapershow.com/

QIT30 Prodigy Interactive RF Wireless Tablet

The QOMO QIT30 RF Wireless Tablet is a breakthrough in interactive technology. All other wireless tablets being sold today use “Blue Tooth” technology which was designed for cell phone headsets, printers, and other short-range items, not interactive products. The QIT30’s unique design solves all those problems by using the same 2.4 GHz RF technology used by long-range wireless networking products.

www.qomo.com/Product.aspx?ProductID=10

Digital Movie Creator

With 32MB of internal memory and an expandable SD memory card slot, you can capture even more videos! Start making your own movies! Even star in them! Then turn your computer into the ultimate editing suite. There’s so much you can do!

http://digiblue.com/digital_blue/dmc3.html



Upcoming Events

NYSCATE METRO Conference

When: May 18 and 19

Where: Hilton Rye Town Hotel
Rye Brook, New York

This year’s conference theme, Discovering your Digital Destination, is another example of NYSCATE’s ongoing commitment to lead the statewide transformation of teaching and learning through the efficiency of technology.

For more information on the upcoming events, visit www.nassauboces.org/cit/it/mcs