

Online Professional Development Using a Mentoring Approach Evaluation Plan and Report

Submitted by Donna Zener, External Evaluator

Evaluation Plan

The project began in the fall of 2003 and was completed in September 2004. Since it is a web-based project, much of the development time was spent by the project developer and the website developer on the computer. They researched, field tested and redesigned the three major components of the project numerous times. My responsibility, now that the project is completed is to study and evaluate the results. Since I was contracted to be the evaluator at the beginning of the project however, I had the luxury of observing the project as it took shape and was in fact encouraged to give feedback throughout. This gave me valuable insight as to the reasons for choosing certain formats or options over others.

Plan developed for the ongoing evaluation of the project entitled "Ongoing Professional Development Using a Mentoring Approach"

The project was approved for the following activities:

3 major components to the project

1. Design and build a website to house six modules of Professional Development Training
2. Develop, test and launch a model for delivering online training that includes a mentorship /coaching approach
3. Develop a PD Training database for the purpose of documenting, tracking and storing information and assessment for each training participant.

The evaluation plan is to study and report on each part of the project for quality of material including ease of use and relevance to the LBS practitioner within the school board setting and to the broader field. The evaluation of the components was accomplished through an ongoing monitoring of the progress, attendance at meetings in person or by teleconference and discussions with the project coordinator throughout the project. I also looked at the feedback that was collected by the field testers and discussed this with the project developer. This last aspect greatly helped to understand how the target audience felt about the material.

Final Report of Practitioner Training Website using Mentorship

Understanding the Context

The project coordinator developed the original Practitioner Training modules for use as a CD-ROM within the context of a Practitioner Training Strategy. These modules were distributed to all school boards along with training for their use. They received very positive feedback. from both the management level as well as the practitioner level of staff. LBS Managers have consistently requested ongoing professional development to meet individual instructor's needs. Since instructors have varying needs and time availability and many people like the option of working with another more experienced person, while others prefer to study alone, there is a very broad spectrum of expectations when it comes

to offering professional development suited to all. So an online approach to accessing professional development seems to be an excellent solution to the “anyplace, anytime” requirement, and by adding the mentoring component as an option, practitioners gain added support through objective feedback if they prefer. Accountability is also strengthened by involving mentors who have experience in the LBS field. The first two components of this project address LBS managers requests while at the same time expanding and enhancing professional development options already offered by individual school boards. We work in a field where there is no official certification for an LBS practitioner in place at the present time, however consistency of the quality of LBS delivery is necessary for accountability and for possible future accreditation. Potential practitioners want to know how they can become qualified, new practitioners want to get up to speed when they enter a new working environment and experienced practitioners want to keep up with the ever expanding resources that are available. Greater flexibility when providing professional development can help staff be better prepared to meet the needs of the learners with whom they work. I believe that this project is filling a gap by providing a type of professional development that is not currently available. It has the potential to become a very practical, cost efficient method of delivery.

Since this is a web-based project, the best way to evaluate the completed project is to go to the home page on the web. I have spent many hours over the course of the project watching the web design evolve. I know that the design of the web page underwent changes based on feedback from a variety of sources. Besides LBS practitioners who were involved in specific areas of field testing, a *Project Advisory Committee* guided the entire project and gave valuable feedback. Most of the time spent on the project was focused on the first objective, namely the online professional development training and its accompanying website. But it was time well spent since the final product is exemplary. The end result is pleasing to look at and above all very user-friendly. The buttons on the left side of the page give excellent information at a glance of topics included in the modules, tips on taking on line training, and understanding the mentoring component. There is no need to register at this introductory stage, so viewers can look at the website without feeling that they have to make a commitment. For example, the introduction tells you how much time each module might take and there are comments made by people who have field tested the material. The reader is also reminded in the “tips” section that the modules are stand-alone units so they can be studied individually or in any order, adding to the flexibility of the project. Even the self-assessment tool has explanatory notes to help the casual reader understand what to expect. Jane, the project developer has an outstanding ability to write notes that “set the stage” in a friendly, welcoming manner while giving helpful suggestions in an intuitive way.

eMentor

The eMentor section of the website was constructed by an external software company but it was field tested within the LBS environment in order to validate its relevance and ease of use for LBS. Too many plug-in, off the shelf software packages end up not being cost effective or easy to use. The forms used are clear and user friendly. The practitioner can learn about eMentoring before actually choosing that as their method of training. They can choose the option of working with a mentor at any stage of their PD. There is also a button

to allow you to meet the mentors. Across the distance of cyberspace this is an excellent way to feel like you have met your mentor in person by putting a face to a name and learning something about each one. The mentoring relationship is personalized for each pair. They set up their own parameters to ensure their needs are met and their working relationship can be adjusted or ended at any time. It is secure for each pair but it also allows for certain data to be collected in an anonymous way in order to gather statistics that will be useful for future planning. This area will continue to develop as the current project monitors mentor/practitioner pairs as they work together.

Self-Assessment

There is a self-assessment tool built into the website. Although it was not originally part of the Practitioner Training modules, the project developer realized the potential value of self assessment for people thinking about taking online professional development. I believe it is one of the most useful and interesting sections of the website. In the introductory part of this section, the practitioner is quickly given a good idea of the time commitment required before beginning the process. It allows practitioners to carefully look at the skills that they have and to consider where they might want to start their PD. It was thoroughly tested and revised before going online. It is not essential to take the self assessment before one begins training, but those who take advantage of it find it very useful. A personal plan for taking the PD training is the bonus that one receives after taking the self-assessment. Self-assessment is an important element of a good professional development program. It allows people to take a close look at their skills in a private way without concern that they may be judged negatively because they have a gap in a particular area and it compliments the adult education philosophy of self- directed learning.

Comments on Training Modules

When I looked at the topics that are contained in the modules, I looked for breadth and depth in each area. Jane, the project developer handled that in an excellent fashion. The modules are constructed in a way that recognizes that not all school board programs are alike. This allows practitioners from one-to one, small groups or classroom settings to gain knowledge that is applicable to their particular situation. One can easily get a quick overview of what each topic contains or one can also look at more detailed contents to help plan learning strategies. The “side trips” allow those who wish, an opportunity to investigate further. The journal writing at the end of each section encourages self reflection. That is a strategy for professional development that is gaining recognition because it encourages review of what has been learned and it also helps the practitioner to express his or her own thoughts and personal reflections on a specific topic. The final assignment, using a demonstration format correlates to the same language and approach used in the LBS program with learners. A great deal of new material appears in the online version of the training modules. This will help position the training website to be the location of choice for practitioners from all sectors of the LBS Program to participate in professional development. I have included comments pertaining to the transferability of the information in order to appeal to practitioners both in and outside of the School Board Sector.

Literacy and Basic Skills 101: This section provides a variety of information that is basic to the larger LBS environment. In my experience, working with many practitioners over the

years, I was surprised to find that many people had little basic knowledge of the LBS world outside of their own classroom. They were good teachers but were very focused on their own classes or groups of learners. With so many changes taking place in LBS over the past few years, I think that this module is important for even the most experienced practitioners. One section is entitled “*Working in a School Board Setting*”. I think it is helpful for practitioners in each sector to have some knowledge of the other sectors. If one wished to expand this section for a broader audience, a brief comparison of the different sectors could be included. Learners frequently move across sectors for their programs and it is useful for staff to understand what a learner may experience in order to assist in the transition.

Approaches to Adult Learners and Adult Learning: This section contains information that is essential to all LBS programming. It is the backbone upon which all of our learner interactions are based. It should be required reading for all practitioners before they begin to work with LBS learners.

Working with Adults with Learning Disabilities: The area of Learning Disabilities is one of high priority for all LBS agencies now. It seems that more and more adult learners are recognized as having some type of LD. It can be a frustrating experience for both the practitioner and the learner. In the past, many practitioners simply had to search for help and resources on their own. Not all School Boards or LBS agencies have access to Special Ed Consultants to support the adult education programs. This section can offer support to those who have, or think that they have, a learner with a learning disability.

Planning the LBS Program: This module covers the essentials of the LBS program and helps practitioners understand how to apply the skills they have learned. Language that is specific to LBS is clearly explained. Once again, this section provides essential training to all types of LBS programming.

Most Effective Training: This module assists the practitioners with their day to day teaching of reading, writing, numeracy and assessment. It has the breadth to appeal to all sectors of LBS and it also includes section on teaching to different goal paths such as employment or further training or education.

Professional Issues for LBS Practitioners: This module includes topics that are not always covered in a typical professional development course because the focus is not directly on teaching skills. These are the so-called “soft skills” that are vital to a positive working environment. They can easily be applied to many work environments.

I found that the topics covered by these modules will appeal to a broad range of practitioners because of the flexibility for learning that is included. The project developer did extensive research into the topics that were included in order to offer so much relevant information. Feedback was collected during the development stage and changes or suggestions were carefully considered. The field testing in this first phase of the project was limited to the school board as required. However, now that the website is fully functional and the second broader mentoring phase is in progress, it will be interesting to see if different comments arise from practitioners who are from different sectors. There is

no restriction on who can participate in the online training and there are already several community based practitioners involved.

The database is functioning now in a practical way to assist the mentors who are currently working with practitioners. It has the elements that one would expect for flexibility, ease of use and a quick search feature. In the phase of development on which I am commenting, it appears to be well thought out and easy to use. More feedback will be gathered in the current phase of the project as the mentors and the administrator work with it over a period of time. As time unfolds, more questions will undoubtedly arise. Administrators will want to watch trends and patterns that can help in planning for future needs. It may be helpful to add additional methods for gathering data that are not currently in place. This can only be learned by field testing with a variety of people for a valid period of time. The more data gathered the more information available, the more useful the training.

General Comments

I am pleased to see that the online mentoring phase of this professional development project is continuing to be field tested. It deserves to have serious consideration as an ongoing option for practitioners who choose to have support in their personal PD training. As expected, I found this project to be a pleasure to observe and evaluate. It's exciting when one finds such a useful tool that meets so many needs. LBS have had many challenges during its growth. Professional development and training for staff is one of the key components required for overall success. I believe that the choice of online training will be very popular and will allow practitioners a viable option. When searching for professional development through the Internet, it is important for the practitioners to be able to access the right type of training for their needs. A number of LBS agencies have produced different types of resources and training for practitioners. I feel that there is a lot of confusion about what where one should go to look for online material and training.

My recommendation would be to make it as easy as possible for those in LBS to find the services that they are seeking. A website or portal that links different services is important to get in place soon so that the valuable work currently being developed is not wasted.

Respectfully submitted,

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