

# Preface

## WHY THIS BOOK?

In July 2004, I attended the Secretary's No Child Left Behind Leadership Summit in Orlando. The meeting drew together state and national leaders to explore technology's potential to support the implementation of NCLB, especially through e-learning options. Earlier that year, I had launched an online learning portal for the nonprofit educational lab I worked for and had delivered online professional development to more than 1,200 educators in Tennessee. I was developing a follow-up course for the fall, and the future looked bright for our growing online professional development efforts, so the topic was of special interest to me.

At one of the sessions, a panel of K–12 distance learning experts related their experiences. They all agreed that students who participate in distance learning programs had to have certain qualities. They had to be motivated, manage time well, and be independent learners. They had to be focused, have good study skills, and should be able to find and evaluate information. I thought to myself, I wanted *all* of my students to have those skills! I commented to the panel that when I was a classroom teacher, I didn't have the luxury of working just with those students who were motivated or resourceful. The characteristics they were describing were important characteristics for all learners. I proposed that a teacher's job is to reach all students, despite the strengths they do or don't bring to the classroom. The same is true in e-learning, including professional development. One of the panelists responded that essentially what I said was true—in spirit—but we just weren't there yet. I think we're there now.

This book presents a framework you can use to design and deliver online professional development to meet the needs of the educators with whom you work. It's a framework based on my experiences developing and delivering online professional development for multiple state and regional organizations for more than a decade. The framework combines what we know about designing effective professional development—across many modes of delivery—and the resources available to deliver it online. It will help you make decisions and answer critical questions every step of the process, including determining why you want to deliver professional development online, policies and practices to support your efforts, the technologies that are right for you, and whether it worked.

I field requests for developing and delivering online professional development from staff at state departments of education, school districts, and other education providers. The number of requests has definitely increased over the past several years, especially with the hope of cutting costs for providing high-quality professional development using online technologies. When I started, I didn't have a process to follow, nor did many of the people I worked with, so I hope that the framework will help you make better decisions, uncover and deal with hidden costs and considerations, and ultimately find or develop a solution that best matches your needs. The book is the result of concern—concern that too much online professional development is following in the footsteps of previous distance learning efforts—efforts that have been far from successful, for some, dismally so. In the 1990s, many colleges and universities tried putting their course offerings online, asking college professors to not only become instructional designers but also web programmers. Many of these efforts failed, some with significant price tags and glaring scrutiny in the media. I see schools, districts, and others following along these same misguided paths as they consider online learning and professional development, but they don't have to! They *can* be successful! *You* can be successful.

As an education community, we know many things about how people learn. We know how to provide successful instruction that addresses different learning preferences, styles, and needs. We know what we want learners to know and be able to do in different domains, and we can identify activities and resources that not only help promote learning but demonstrate mastery of learning. Unfortunately, much of that knowledge seems to be forgotten when technology comes into the picture. In my experience, technology has a blinding effect. Just because you *can* use something doesn't mean it's effective.

The access to powerful digital technologies pervades our lives. We can take digital pictures of our family and share them with friends and relatives across the globe in just a few seconds. We can plan our vacations online, seeing movies and pictures of the places we want to stay, and then book tickets from the comfort of our living rooms. We don't even need to enter a single store to successfully complete our birthday or holiday shopping lists and have all our gifts show up on the doorsteps of our loved ones—on time, wrapped, and with a personal greeting. Unfortunately, our familiarity with these technologies often encourages this blinding effect when it comes to education. The spurious logic somehow follows that since we have e-mail, websites, and other online technologies, we must be able to put professional development online. In homage to the movie *Field of Dreams*, I describe this logic as the “if we build it, they will come” philosophy about technology, and I run into it time and time again. Unfortunately, unlike the movie, the adage is rarely true.

The answer to whether you can use ubiquitous and common technologies to provide effective online professional development is a resounding “Yes, you can!” I have some successful experiences doing this, as have other organizations across the country. But the idea that if you just put something online you'll change professional practice ignores that critical knowledge we have about how people learn, how we can support different learning preferences and needs, and how technologies best match those needs. It's not impossible, but it

takes some planning and maybe broadening your understanding of what online professional development is or can be.

I worked in an educational research lab for more than 10 ten years. I'm used to finding, using, and conducting research, especially related to educational technology and how it supports teaching and learning. Unfortunately, there's not a lot of conclusive research about online professional development available. If you're an educator, you understand how difficult it can be to implement a rigorous research experiment in the dynamic setting of a school, and very few studies provide conclusive evidence in relation to online professional development practices. The field is growing, and I've addressed this young body of work when it's present, but in order to get you started I've also turned to experts who are developing and delivering online professional development—including some, like me, who have evaluated their own work and conducted their own research. Their stories are shared throughout this book, with longer profiles on the book's companion website, [www.corwin.com/rossonlinepd](http://www.corwin.com/rossonlinepd). I also encourage you to share your own stories and resources on the book's companion website. You can combine what we have learned with what you already know about designing effective learning to design and deliver online professional development successfully.

Perhaps the most compelling lesson I've learned in writing this book, confirmed by interviewing these experts, is that what you consider online professional development may be different from what I envision, and both may change 3 or even 5 years from now, yet all can be effective. There are fundamental decisions to be made and steps to take to effectively provide online professional development regardless of the technologies you use. Those technologies are going to change over time, sometimes very quickly, so focusing on specific technologies up front is often a losing proposition. Any online professional development effort can both be effective and meet the needs of the educators you work with if you make some key decisions that will capitalize on good instruction and match it to the capacity of existing or even new and emerging technologies. This book can show you how.

## MY BACKGROUND

My career in developing and delivering online professional development in its many forms evolved over time, often serendipitously. I haven't kept track of how many educators I've worked with through my online professional development efforts. There have been more than a thousand principals in Florida, many thousands of reading teachers in Tennessee and Georgia, leadership teams from schools across the state of Alabama, technology specialists in West Virginia, coaches who work with English language learners in North Carolina . . . and the number keeps growing. Being an "online professional developer" wasn't a career path option when I was growing up, but being a teacher was. I became a teacher and still look upon myself first and foremost as a teacher. As the world of online professional development has grown and this career opportunity became an option, I believe being a teacher first has helped me to be successful in this growing field.

When I went back to school to study instructional design and technology, I spent time researching how students and teachers could use technology to support their learning. In the late 1990s, digital technologies were becoming more prevalent and showing up more often in classrooms across the country. In elementary and secondary schools, most of the new personal computers were grouped in labs, and many weren't even connected to the Internet. But college campuses were moving into the world of distance learning, putting material online, and trying to expand their reach through web-based courses. Blacksburg, Virginia, is the home of Virginia Tech, where I was going to school, and was what *Reader's Digest* deemed at that time as "the most wired town in America." The growing power of the Internet was of specific interest at the university, and efforts were under way on campus to create online courses and degree programs. An instructional technology masters program was developed while I was there, and I was asked to create some online grade reporting systems for it, since I had created some during my dissertation research. It was exciting work, though very crude by today's standards, just 10 years later. But it started me along this path towards designing and developing online professional development.

While I've had an interest in computers and technology since I was first introduced to the Mac Classic back in 1986, I maintain what may be considered a sense of "healthy skepticism" about technology. That's important to know as you read this book. I encouraged my students to consider the source of any information so they can determine what biases may exist. I continue that effort now with graduate students or when I present workshops or speak at conferences. I want you to know where I'm coming from. People who work in technology are often accused of pushing the latest and greatest. I admit that can be exciting, but I temper that enthusiasm with a bit of a reality check. I hope my background in instructional design helps temper my technology enthusiasm to a reasonable degree. The newest technology is of no value if no one uses it. And one of the ways we can do a reality check is to ask some of what I call the *why* questions. Why do you want to do this? Why online professional development? From reading this book, I hope you not only figure out why, but how.