

# IDEAS for Excellence

*Featured Inside—Reflections  
of an Online Instructor*

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## Educators Enter the Virtual Classroom

### *Online Training Programs Meet the Growing Need for Professional Development*

by Constance O. Williams, Ed.D.

Professional development for teachers and administrators, commonly referred to as “teacher training” or “staff development,” has been an ongoing and integral part of the education profession for years. Professional development enables educators to increase their knowledge, refine their skills, and keep abreast of new findings and research that inform classroom practices. Most school districts strongly encourage and frequently require educators to take part in ongoing training. It serves as a mechanism for salary advancement, as a process for promoting professional collaboration among teachers, and as a means of fulfilling certification or degree requirements.

### **A Growing Need**

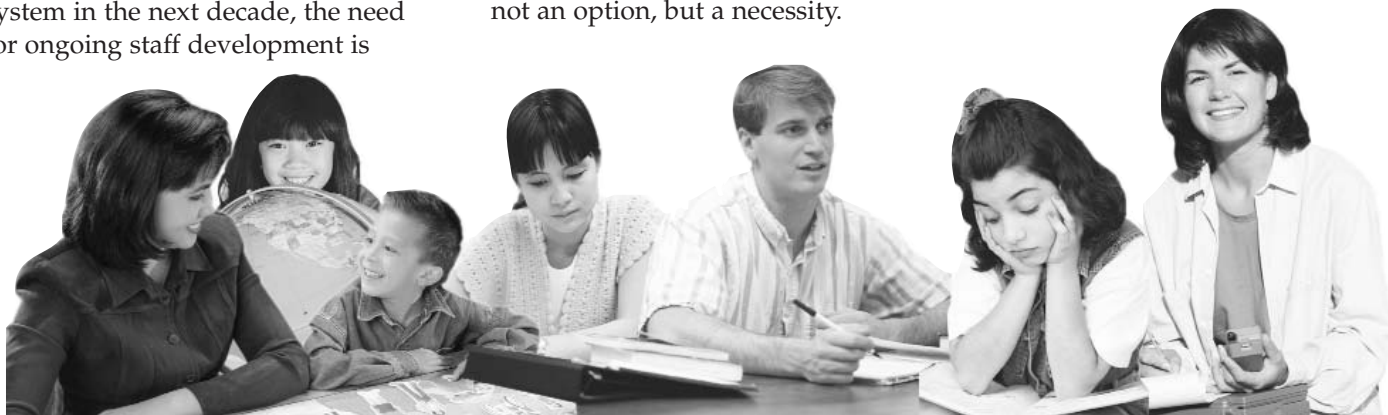
With almost three million teachers in the nation’s public schools, and an expected two million more entering the school system in the next decade, the need for ongoing staff development is

critical. New and veteran educators alike require training to help them keep up with the changing demographics in the classroom. The reported number of students identified as English language learners (ELL) continues to escalate at an unprecedented rate. This influx of immigrants directly impacts the work of teachers and administrators in schools across the United States. Educators seek training to help them understand their students’ linguistic and cultural needs—needs that will affect their delivery of instruction in any given classroom. While some schools are attempting to educate teachers about the academic and personal challenges English language learners face, the reality is that most educators are not fully prepared to teach in classrooms that reflect the diverse cultures and languages represented in today’s society. Professional development is not an option, but a necessity.

### **Problems with Traditional Staff Development**

Traditionally, educators have attended training programs at an established time and in a specific location. This common practice for staff development is much more complicated than one might suspect. First, there is the issue of cost. Quality independent consultants who conduct teacher training can be expensive and are sometimes not accessible to districts. Further, while some districts finance professional development, others do very little to defray training costs.

Second, conventional teacher training becomes an unrealistic option given the expense and shortage of available substitutes, not to mention the disruption to the instructional process for students. Some schools opt to have teachers train teachers, which alleviates some of the cost, but still requires release



time for preparation and the hiring of substitute teachers.

Third, conventional training often fails to provide participants with an opportunity to apply what they have learned. At the end of one-day workshops, for example, teachers are left alone to attempt the applications if they so desire. When they go back to the classroom, they often are unsure if they really are applying what they learned, and there is no opportunity for further feedback.

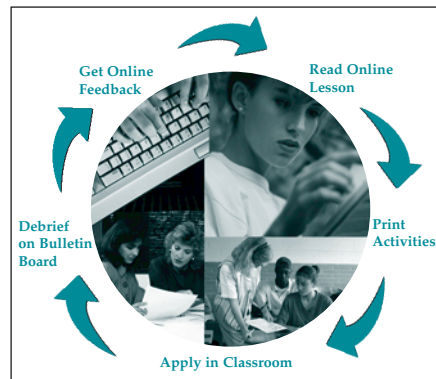
Last, some staff development programs are not carefully planned and executed. Many training programs target the average teacher and fail to address the needs of the novice teacher or the veteran teacher. Hence, the “one size fits all” approach has not been the most effective way to meet the needs of educators.

## New Mode of Instruction

Given the growing need for training and the problems with traditional staff development, many schools are turning to a new mode of instruction—online training. Online training allows participants to take part in professional development in the comfort of their own homes. Participants decide when and where they want to participate, and they work at their own pace. Online training is delivered via computers and the Internet, powerful tools that not only allow educators to access needed training, but also teach them how to stay on top of the highly technological society in which we live.

Online staff development courses provide educators with the tools they need to tackle the critical issues they are facing in their classrooms—from accommodations for English language learners, to standards-based instruction, to the integration of technology into the

curriculum. Online training can build teaching competence anywhere and at any time using inexpensive technologies that are convenient and easy to use. It’s an alternative to conventional staff development that is less costly, easier to schedule, and potentially more effective.



▲ Online course participants read the lesson, try the ideas in class, debrief on the bulletin board, and get feedback from the instructor and other participants.

## An Online Training Model

There are many online training models. For illustration purposes, this article will review the four-week, college-accredited course model. In this model, online staff development involves an instructor and a maximum of 20 participants (teachers or administrators) who take a four-week course delivered and conducted solely online. The participants are given a password at the onset of the course in order to access the class web site. This site is available at any time from any computer linked to the Internet.

The courses—interactive, rich in content, and designed to meet specific teacher needs and expectations—focus on the immediate application of knowledge and skills in the classroom. Participants learn practical strategies they can implement immediately. In some ways, online courses mirror traditional classroom courses. They include goals and objectives, a syllabus, a

bibliography, course readings, and homework assignments. Unlike a typical college course, however, the teacher is not in front of the room lecturing to participants. The participants play an active role in how they receive the content—they determine the pace at which they are taking in the new information and have the option of pursuing the concepts in further depth.

## Weekly Modules

The course content is divided into four weekly modules. Each module begins with a “mini-lecture” in which the participant reads the content on the computer screen. The mini-lecture is embedded with contextual clues in the form of graphics, pictures, examples, vignettes, anecdotes, and vivid descriptions. It also includes links to additional information and visuals that expand upon the concepts presented in the text. Each week of the course includes a reading related to the module.

Participants are required to dedicate a total of 14-18 hours to the course. This equates to being online about 3-4 hours a week, depending upon the participant’s level of experience. All assignments must be completed weekly and posted on a class “bulletin board” for the instructor and other participants to review. This interactive process allows participants to benefit from more than just the instructor’s expertise, thus building on the rich experiences of all those in the course. Participants take part in one “chat room” experience, scheduled in advance, that allows for real-time interaction between the instructor and the class.

Online course instructors are selected on the basis of academic credentials, teaching experience, and background knowledge of the course topic. The instructor

responds to assignments within 24 hours, and also is available via e-mail to answer questions and allay any anxieties.

## Online Training Benefits

Online training offers many benefits not available in conventional staff development. The first feature that stands out is **flexibility**. A course can be accessed on any computer with an Internet connection. With reduced costs for computer systems and faster Internet speeds, more and more educators now have access to a computer at school, at home, or even both. The idea of not having to appear physically in a given environment translates into flexibility of location, attire, state of mind, and readiness to learn. The ability to “attend” any time, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, is particularly appealing to educators who have to juggle career and family responsibilities.

Not only can course participants access a course at any time and in any place, but participants also can **work at their own pace**. Participants can digest the content and complete the weekly assignments at their own speed.

Another exciting benefit of online training is the **extensive interaction** between the instructor and participants. Participants receive almost daily feedback from the instructor—feedback from which all course participants can learn. The instructor also can respond via e-mail to private questions participants don’t want to post in the class bulletin board area. In addition, participants can respond to and learn from each other. They share lesson ideas, teaching strategies, and problems they have encountered. The bulletin board is transformed into an interactive discussion center!

Another feature of online staff development is the **immediate application of new learning**. Participants are involved in the instruction over a four-week period, giving them time to learn new concepts and apply them in the classroom. Course content is specially designed so that participants have meaningful assignments that involve the specific needs of their students. For example, one week’s assignment might be to develop a lesson plan on a theme or topic currently being covered in class. The participant would write the plan, submit it to the instructor, and receive feedback. The next week’s assignment might ask participants to teach the lesson to their students, and then reflect on

the experience—what worked and what didn’t work. This process of learning and applying new material enhances the training experience.

Online training also is more **cost effective** than traditional staff development. Substitutes aren’t needed because teachers can participate in the course after school and on the weekends. A physical meeting place isn’t necessary because participants work at computers in the school or at home. Since the course content is available through the Internet (and can be printed out for future reference), access is a local telephone call away! No special software is needed.

In addition to learning the course content, online participants

### Reflections of an Online Instructor

by Constance O. Williams, Ed.D.

*“I cannot wait to get online to see if anyone has responded to this week’s assignment. Here it is, midnight, and I am just so anxious to read the reactions to this week’s assignment that I cannot sleep.”*



This is one of the thoughts I faithfully entered in my personal journal—a journal in which I shared the joys and pains of teaching my first online course. I was teaching a course designed for school administrators interested in learning more about English language development and sheltered instruction. I had been conducting face-to-face professional development seminars on this topic for years, so I didn’t know what to expect when I embarked on my first assignment as an online course instructor.

At first I was baffled by the fact that I was not going to be a “real live” instructor standing in front of a group of teachers. My teaching style is very active and interactive and includes a lot of practical, hands-on activities and demonstrations. I could not imagine teaching a course for delivery on a computer where I could not exhibit my animation and enthusiasm for my subject matter. However, to my surprise, my teaching style translated quite well into the online format.

*“I am getting such good feedback. I love this process. It is amazing to me how grateful many seem to feel about this new information, and they are using it.”*

My responses to participants’ assignments became more and more personalized, and I learned things about them as individuals that went far beyond academics. Their willingness to share things about themselves was astonishing. Every aspect of participants’ personalities—from wit and humor to emotions, fears, and anxieties—becomes evident in the ongoing dialogue that takes place over a four-week period.

*“They are getting it! I was a bit nervous about this section on reading the vignettes and critiquing the good and the bad of the lesson. They are really giving the other teachers powerful words for thought to improve lessons.”*

Throughout the course, I observed the development of deeper understandings, new insights, and refined skills. It became very clear that participants’ interactions with me through the bulletin board, e-mail, and the chat room demonstrated exactly what I feared would be lost—real human beings learning and working together. In fact, it was in our virtual classroom that this became more evident than ever before.

also enhance their **technology skills** over the four-week period. Through their work with e-mail, the class bulletin board, the “chat room” and the Internet, participants become familiar with technology they can use for further professional development. They also leave the course with new ideas about how to integrate technology into their own classrooms!

## Potential Drawbacks

As with any innovation, there are potential drawbacks to online training. For one, this new mode of instruction challenges conventional wisdom that learning takes place in a classroom with four walls and a visible teacher who is delivering a lesson to students listening attentively. Others may feel that the lack of communicative body language in the online environment could limit comprehension or result in misunderstanding.

Another potential problem with online training has to do with the current level of computer competence among teachers. According to *Education Week's* “1999 National Survey of Teachers’ Use of Digital Content,” nearly all of the teachers surveyed had access to a computer at home or at school. However, not all of these teachers made use of the available technology. Only 53% integrated software into their instruction and 61% used the Internet as a tool for instruction. The report cited a lack of training, time, and resources as reasons why teachers didn’t use technology in their classrooms. This could mean that the novelty of using computers and the Internet might deter some teachers who might otherwise be enticed by this type of staff development.

Of less significance, but perhaps perceived as a disadvantage, might be the pressure for participants to complete the four weekly modules on a timely basis. Falling behind

# Speaking Out...

*How did your online training experience compare with traditional staff development?*

## Judy Brown

*Principal, Spruce Elementary School  
South San Francisco USD  
San Francisco, California*

I have become a fan of online training. I had the convenience of scheduling when I did my coursework—anytime, anywhere I could take a few moments to read and respond. After putting my little girl to bed in the evening, I could go online. I could print out the next reading assignment if I wanted to curl up on the sofa and read it. Unlike the old TV courses and those at the university, there was almost always feedback from the instructor within a day, if not hours. The instructor’s feedback was so detailed and positive. I wouldn’t hesitate to go into an online classroom again.



## Robert Forker

*English, Acting Chair  
Eastwood Academy  
Houston Independent School  
District  
Houston, Texas*

The “class” existed only online. Relying on e-mail, bulletin boards, and chats presented a communication alternative that offered a certain novelty and a means to contribute and share. As a scholar interested in the discovery and exploration of education issues, I was pleasantly surprised by the degree of focus I was able to attain regarding the content. This online venue allowed me to think about the lessons without too many distractions, especially of a personal or political kind. This is an advantage, I believe, when dealing with education problems. ■

interferes with the assignments and the feedback the instructor is providing. Also, since the courses involve collaboration among participants, falling behind also could negatively impact one’s classmates.

## Conclusion

Online training is the model of the new millennium—an era when time is critical, when individuals determine their direction and pace for learning, and when collaboration is more important than ever before. Online training may not ever completely replace conventional staff development. However, it surely will augment it. Given the significance of the computer and

the explosion of information in our high-tech society, it is just a matter of time until all educators head to the keyboard for their professional development needs. ■

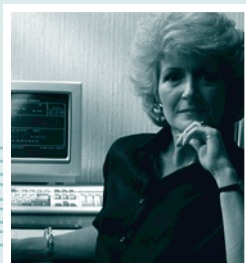
*Constance (Connie) Olivia Casagrande Williams, Ed.D., conducts staff development in California and throughout the United States in the areas of bilingual education, sheltered instruction (SDAIE), and English language development (ELD). She currently serves as an independent consultant for the Alameda County Office of Education, preparing teachers for the Bilingual and Language Development Specialist Certifications (CLAD and BCLAD). She also is an online course author and instructor, and a writer of curriculum for English language learners (ELD) and educators.*

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## Congratulations

Cheers to **Carlos Carrillo** of Hatch, NM, on his new position as bilingual director of the Hatch Valley School District.

**Mary Helen Garcia**, principal of Booker T. Washington Elementary School in Las Cruces, NM, was honored for 30 years of service to education. Congratulations!

Hats off to **Jean Hernandez**, the new director of categorical programs at Chino Unified School District in Chino, CA.

**Adela Holder** was appointed the new bilingual director of the Grants-Cibola County School District in Grants, NM. Well done!

We applaud **Mary Jean Habernann Lopez** of Santa Fe, NM, who recently retired from her position as the director of bilingual education for the NM State Department of Education.

Congratulations to **John Mockler**, recently appointed the interim secretary of education for the state of California by Governor Gray Davis.

We salute **Sonia Raftery**, recently named the superintendent of the Vaughn Municipal Schools in Vaughn, NM.

Kudos to the following teachers who received the Golden Apple Award for being the top five "Teachers of the Year" in Orange County, CA: **Lynda Holman** of Oak View Elementary in Ocean View School District; **Mary-Carol Stearns** of University High School in Irvine Unified School District; **Scott Malloy** of Brea-Olinda High School in Brea-Olinda Unified School District; **Dalynn Malek** of Laguna Hills High School in Saddleback Valley Unified School District; and **Steven Goetz** of Orange Coast College. ■

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