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Lookstein Center Web Conferencing: Twenty-first Century Professional Development

by Chana German and Moshe Abelesz

The days immediately following 9/11 found educators in the United States scrambling for resources. Never before had so many schools been faced with coping with mass trauma affecting both their students and their staff. What could they do to support their traumatized students? How could schools create emergency response plans?

Halfway across the world, in the Lookstein Center based in Bar-Ilan University, Israel, educators were planning a ground-breaking program to aid affected Jewish schools. Utilizing Israel's unfortunate expertise in dealing with trauma, and the Lookstein Center's respected relationship with North American Jewish schools, we arranged for a world-renowned Israeli clinical psychologist to run a series of Internet-based workshops designed to help educators cope with the fear and grief that followed the terrorist attack. The web workshops consisted of a short lecture followed by Q&A and group exercises. (Some of the material that was presented can be found at the "Islands of Resiliency Mini-Site" - <http://www.lookstein.org/islands/index.htm>). Ten schools in the New York area were chosen to participate; the schools were represented by principals, guidance counselors, and key teachers. The feedback from the schools made us realize that not only was the actual conference essential and timely, but the medium also had the potential to transform the professional development model in schools.

In the seven years that the Lookstein Center has been conducting web conferences, the program has developed and grown into the staple professional development diet for hundreds of schools worldwide.

How It Works

The conferencing platform is surprisingly simple. The participants and instructor "meet" in cyberspace, by logging into a Lookstein Center website at a pre-determined day and time. As well as seeing and hearing the instructor, participants can view a PowerPoint or documents display, and use a virtual whiteboard. Participants can interact in a number of ways, choosing one or more methods with which they feel most comfortable: microphone and speakers, telephone, or instant messaging (chat).

We have been pleasantly surprised by how well educators have been able to adapt to the medium. Before each session, Lookstein Center specialists give short, one-on-one tutorials to each new participant. Since navigation is simple and intuitive, participants learn quickly and are able to focus on the content of the conference, as opposed to technical details.

Benefits

While schools do have resources allocated to professional development, they rarely have the time and money to send teachers to professional development courses. Furthermore, schools are also concerned about how an absent teacher can affect the day-to-day running of the school, as well as the disruption it causes students. Bringing in experts to the schools for one day also does not provide the continuity educators need if their professional development is to be effective. The Lookstein Center's Web Conferencing can alleviate many of these problems.

To begin with, the educator does not have to leave school grounds. All the educator needs to do is log in at the appropriate time. As each session lasts no longer than 60 minutes, schools face minimal disruption on a given day (a conference is made up of several 60 minute sessions). Additionally, the follow-up sessions and e-mail contact with the instructor provide the participants with opportunities to clarify information and relate the content to their own experiences, again with minimal disruption. Furthermore, should school be cancelled for whatever reason, the educator need not miss the training, as it is no problem to log in from home. Finally, in the event of a teacher being ill or asked to cover a colleague's absence, the teacher can still view a recording of the actual session at Lookstein's online archives.

Web conferencing is also more convenient for the participants themselves. As we all know, an educator's day does not end when s/he leaves the classroom: There is lesson planning, grading, and a whole host of other time-consuming tasks. It is difficult for teachers to fit coursework at a local university into such a demanding schedule. The online nature of web conferencing, however, allows educators to participate when they're in school. Conferences are generally scheduled around lunch break East Coast time and early morning West Coast time in order to minimize the amount of lost classroom time.

The low cost of the program is an additional bonus to schools. Since there are a number of schools participating in each conference, the Lookstein Center is able to bring leading experts at a minimal cost. Furthermore, the instructors' costs are also reduced by the elimination of travel outlays.

Innovative Educational Experience

Online distance education can occur asynchronously, synchronously, or through a mixture of the two. Today, the most popular form of online study is in asynchronous frameworks. Asynchronous courses are lauded mainly for their flexibility, that is, the ability of learners to log in at any time, at their convenience. However, this flexibility is associated with several negative aspects in online study: high drop-out rates, learner isolation, and delays in instructor feedback that diminish learner motivation.

Lookstein web conferencing synthesizes both methods. The real-time aspect of conferencing allows individuals from all over the globe to connect as a group with the common goals of learning and sharing. It fosters a feeling of connectedness and a sense of purpose, a feeling sought by many educators in small schools and small communities. In addition to learning from the instructor, they find themselves communicating with educators from all over the world, grappling with the same issues, learning from each other, and finding new solutions. The instantaneous feedback that is possible in real time also helps relieve anxiety and limit the feelings of isolation that come with learning online.

Lookstein web conferencing also utilizes synchronous components in the form of e-mail communication and archive access. E-mail communication with the instructor during and post-conference allows participants to take the time necessary to absorb and reflect on the content. Access to the archives 24 hours a day and 7 days a week allows learners to make up missed sessions and review material if necessary.

In conclusion, Lookstein Center web conferences offer schools an innovative medium to provide their teachers with on-going professional development at a low cost and with minimal disruption.

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To find out more about Lookstein Center web conferencing and other programs, go to
<http://www.lookstein.org>.

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