

# Using Online Learning to Enhance Teacher Professional Development and Graduate Certification Programs

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**Abstract:** This paper is a report on an innovative model of using online professional development content to develop professional development offerings and enhance graduate-level certification programs for library media specialists and other educators. Insights and strategies from a partnership to support a successful online certification program to enhance library media and teacher professional development programs are shared with a focus on addressing local teacher professional development and certification needs. Examples of high quality online workshops for K-12 teachers and administrators illustrate models for using modular content to build custom graduate-level professional development and/or certification programs. Key topics covered include combining appropriate modules of online content, marketing/facilitating customized online courses, and navigating the course approval process.

A 2006 study published by the Sloan Foundation of over 2500 colleges and universities documented continuous and substantial growth of online learning in higher education. Approximately twenty percent of all US higher education students, nearly 3.5 million, were taking an online course during the fall semester which was about 10% growth over the prior year. The number one reason these institutions cited for offering online courses and programs was to enable increased access to their courses, and many cited the specific opportunity to grow their continuing education and professional development programs with online learning (Allen & Seaman, 2007).

Montana State University, through its “Borderless Access to Training and Education” (BATE) program, was an early adopter of online learning with an innovative online certification program for library media specialists funded by a US Department of Education FIPSE grant. Through a partnership with Education Development Center’s EdTech Leaders Online (ETLO) program, which provides capacity building online professional development training for educational organizations, Montana State University established a sequence of online courses to expand the core courses in the program and allow access to these courses to in-service library media specialists seeking recertification credits.

## Montana State University BATE-LM Program: Online Courses for Library Media Specialists

The Borderless Access to Training and Education project (BATE-LM) was initially funded in late 2000 to use online learning to increase professional learning opportunities for library media specialists. In 2005 the BATE project received continued funding to expand the newly approved Montana State University online graduate K-12

Library Media certification program for teachers to acquire an endorsement to be a school library media specialist. In 2006 upon the end of the grant funds, BATE became successfully self-supporting. During the initial phase of the program, MSU developed and delivered a 21 credit graduate online library media certification program. The project wanted to offer an annual summer online graduate class for educators as a professional development opportunity. The goal was to have the course used by BATE-LM students for credit and also offer it to in-service educators who wanted recertification credits. Rather than incur the costs of developing new content annually, BATE established a relationship with EdTech Leaders Online (ETLO) at Education Development Center, a non-profit research and development educational organization, to enable the project to meet its needs by creating a custom graduate-level online course with ETLO's existing online professional development content.

For a three credit class offering, it was necessary to pair two complementary ELTO workshops, which are each equivalent to half-semester MSU "modules". For example, the initial graduate-level course, offered in 2004, was built using the following two workshops:

***Finding the Best Educational Resources on the Web*** The World Wide Web provides rich resources for educators, but they are only useful if educators know what resources are there and how to find them. Participants in this workshop explore the range of educational material available on the Internet and learn time-saving skills to effectively search the Web for useful curricular resources. Participants become familiar with popular search engines and subject directories and learn techniques to use each one appropriately and efficiently. The workshop also examines the importance of critical evaluation of Web resources and considers how to develop evaluation skills in the classroom.

***Approaches and Tools for Developing Web-Enhanced Lessons*** Educators know there are valuable educational materials on the Web, but they need time and support to incorporate these materials into their curricula. This workshop guides educators of all subjects and grade levels through an exploration of popular formats for developing Web-enhanced lessons such as WebQuests, Internet Scavenger Hunts, Web-Based Scrapbooks, and Hotlists. This workshop also explores popular Web-based tools such as TrackStar and Filamentality, which help teachers develop inquiry-based curricula using online resources. Participants use these tools as they begin preliminary designs of standards-based, web-enhanced lessons for their own classrooms.

A more recent BATE-LM course, offered in 2007, was created using the following two workshops:

***Learning and Teaching with Web 2.0 Tools*** This workshop enables educators to understand how new Web 2.0 tools, which are dramatically changing the Internet, can have significant impact on educational processes. These tools, characterized by open communication, freedom to share and re-use content and dynamic interactivity among users of varying technical abilities around the globe can allow people to organize and share their favorite bookmarks, write online documents collaboratively, and interact with others through social networking software including blogs and wikis.

***Safeguarding the Wired Schoolhouse*** This workshop enables library media specialists and other educators to understand their specific options for protecting children when they access the Internet over a school-based or statewide educational network. It also provides essential information to help school leaders and administrators understand the requirements of the Children's Internet Protection Act, a piece of legislation passed in December 2000 which mandates that schools and libraries receiving E-Rate discounts put Internet safety policies into effect that include filtering or blocking of online material considered harmful to minors.

With funding from the BATE-LM project, three individuals including the project director participated in the ETLO *Facilitating and Implementing Online Professional Development* training course, which prepared them to effectively facilitate their custom online courses as adjunct MSU instructors, and integrate them into the overall BATE-LM program.

One of the initial project challenges was navigating the university's multi-step course approval process. In order to meet the goal of including the courses in the graduate library media certification program and offering them as professional development for in-service teachers, the courses were submitted for approval under the continuing education avenue, Extended University. The process takes approximately nine months to complete and any delays impact time needed to advertise the course(s). Since the project's inception, a few key strategies have been

identified to ensure an efficient and effective course approval process.

- Include the name of the MSU faculty BATE-LM director as a team teacher with the ETLO-trained adjunct instructor to make it easier for approval committee members to view the course as legitimate.
- Make sure that the collective name for the course reflects the content of the two ETLO workshops selected for delivery. The syllabus and outline must be blended to support the name.
- Consider blending the two six-week ETLO workshops into a ten or eleven week course since the first week of each workshop is typically geared to learning the software and class member introductions. This change saved BATE-LM courses a week of time and made the courses more marketable to teachers. BATE-LM courses begin in approximately mid-May and end in July. Ending in July is important since many teachers return to their classrooms in mid-August and they need a break.

Since the program began, BATE-LM has delivered an online course annually each summer since 2004 and enrollments have been very strong. If it were not for regularly developed and updated ETLO workshop content, each graduate-level certification course would have had to be newly authored by local staff annually which would have been time-consuming and challenging in terms of finding qualified instructors. By using the ETLO workshops and BATE-LM ETLO trained facilitators, teachers in the BATE-LM certification program as well as in-service teachers from around the region have been assured of having a quality learning experience in addition to resources and strategies immediately applicable to the classroom.

## **EdTech Leaders Online (ETLO)**

The EdTech Leaders Online (ETLO) program (<http://www.edtechleaders.org>) at Education Development Center (EDC) is a capacity building online professional development for state departments of education, school districts and universities, particularly teacher education programs, to enable them to establish effective online professional development programs for educators. Established in 2000, ETLO has prepared over 2000 online specialists in more than 35 states to offer online courses to more than 30,000 educators across the country. The four components of the program are described below.

1. **Online Facilitator Training** ETLO offers a semester-long online training course which prepares teams of participants to facilitate online workshops and integrate online learning into ongoing educational programs. The ten-session course includes online readings, web-based activities, facilitated online discussions and a final project, where participants complete a plan for delivering an online workshop for teachers and/or administrators. Because this course is delivered online, participants are able to experience the online classroom as learners, gaining valuable hands-on experience in the online environment. Graduate credit is available for participants in this course.
2. **Online Workshops** ETLO includes a catalog of over 50 standards-based online professional development workshops focused on specific subject areas and grade levels that the trained online facilitators offer to teachers and/or administrators within their educational organizations. The organization chooses which workshops to offer, like Montana State University, based on locally specific needs and goals. Each workshop includes six sessions with web-based readings, resources, multi-media activities and online discussions, and a culminating classroom based final project.
3. **Professional Development Planning** Throughout the program, ETLO staff provides consultation to help the organization successfully implement their online learning program and address issues such as recruiting students/participants, providing incentives and/or graduate credit, scheduling and program management and evaluation.
4. **Ongoing Support and Forum** ETLO offers an online Forum for trained online facilitators where they can share questions, strategies, challenges, and resources with other trained online specialists and ETLO staff.

This robust online community provides important support for sustaining local programs and making connections with other online educators with similar goals.

### **Capacity-Building Approach**

ETLO's capacity-building approach was a crucial element of the partnership with Montana State University and the success of the online courses offered through BATE-LM. ETLO focuses on helping each organization develop a custom online learning program aligned to their specific needs and integrate it into their ongoing educational programs. Issues of sustainability are addressed from the start, as each organization learns how to facilitate, manage, implement and evaluate their online course program and best meet the needs of the educators it serves.

### **Learning Community Model**

ETLO course design and facilitator training focuses on a *learning community* model, where participants move through the online course as a cohort and engage in reflective online discussions each week. Each session, which typically lasts one week, includes a focused online discussion prompt aligned to key learning goals. Participants are expected to post their responses to the prompt and other participants' comments several times during the session on an online discussion board. This approach has been shown to be particularly effective in online courses for educators, important in generating deep learning and collaboration among the participants.

### **Align Online Courses to Standards of Effective Teaching and Learning**

Online courses must adhere to the general principles of good teaching and learning, and ETLO training focuses on enabling organizations to understand how to incorporate these standards in the online environment. Key principles that guide the design of the ETLO workshops include aligning courses to classroom practice, building educator collaboration and a culture of collegiality, extending learning over time, and focusing on the content and pedagogy as opposed to just the technology.

### **Online Learning Potential and New Technologies**

At Montana State University, program developers have seen that incorporating online courses offered important new opportunities to broaden the content of a key program like the Library Media Specialist certification and increase access for students, both in-service and those seeking advanced certifications. It also allowed the BATE-LM program to flexibly incorporate up-to-date offerings which address key ways new technologies are changing the field. Through a strategic partnership with EDC and a capacity building approach, Montana State's BATE-LM program has developed a self-sustaining online certificate that provides an important model for other universities considering adding an online component to their teacher education programs.

### **References**

Allen, E. & Seaman, J. (2007). *Online Nation: Five Years of Growth in Online Learning*. Wellesley, MA: The Sloan Consortium, Babson College.