E-learning : The Ins and Outs
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The current advancement of technologically - supported learning is a key area of focus for all sectors of the educational system from kindergarten to post-secondary levels. Exponential advances in computers and technology - based educational applications have influenced education in both subtle and sweeping ways (Peters, 2002). These changes necessitate the involvement of educators in becoming cognizant of teaching and learning in new ways. If educators are to make informed decisions about the use of technology in the classroom, professional development initiatives are necessary (Bates, 2000).

Educators need information about the issues and advantages of using technology in the classroom. They need sources of accessible professional development to learn to work with various aspects of technology and to apply them successfully. The need for change can be a source of anxiety and frustration, especially if resources are not available. Both knowledge and practice are needed to begin to change and adapt teaching to an online environment. Practitioners need time to learn technology - related teaching skills, to learn how to use technology, to experiment with it and how to integrate it into the school curriculum. "Critical areas of agreement include a need for relevant, applicable professional development that reaches the widest possible range of groups and uses learning technologies as a delivery method." (Roberts & Associates, 1999, p. xxii).

Educator training needs are extensive, including how to set up lesson plans, find resources and develop class activities using technologies. Sherry and Morse (1995) suggested that educators learn how to develop student bulletin boards and forums, how to utilize e-mail in course work and how to apply multimedia fundamentals into classroom work. As well, learning how to create presentation graphics and animation and how to design templates for lesson modules helps educators learn how to use technology in inventive and multisensory ways.

Current educational programs for new educators are beginning to incorporate technology - focused learning within the curriculum. However, practicing educators still need professional development opportunities since technology was not extensively taught during their teacher preparation. Web-based learning did not exist before the mid 1990s, meaning that most educators have not been exposed to the theory, practice or dynamics of using technology in the classroom, particularly using the world wide web for course delivery.

The Information Highway Advisory Council's Learning and Training Working Group recommended "that, as a condition of graduation, new entrants to the learning and allied professions (teachers, trainers, librarians, and school administrators) be required to become proficient in the use of technologies for delivering learning and training services" (1995, p. 31). It seems important that educators recognize technology as a teaching and learning tool. However, the process of incorporating technology into teaching requires a paradigm shift in the way teaching and learning occurs. Attitudinal and behavioural changes are important coupled with resources and accessibility. Access to technology - hardware, software and connectivity is an issue that schools grapple with (Bates, 2000).

Lack of professional development time is another key issue. It takes time and motivation to develop and integrate learning technologies into the classroom. Another key issue is to make learning technologies relevant to educators. Teachers need help to learn how to use the Internet in the classroom, how to develop high quality web pages for classroom use and how to incorporate interactive applications such as forums and chat rooms into the learning milieu. "To be successful, the professional development experience has to be real, relevant, connected and applicable" (Roberts & Associates, 1999, p. 32). Teachers require both practical and theoretical knowledge to actively incorporate learning technologies into the classroom.

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