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# A Typology of Tools and Resources that Support Teachers' Learning Online

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February 2005 "Guest Expert" column:

A Typology of Tools & Resources that Support Teachers' Learning Online  
By Judi Harris

More than one in every four public schools and two-thirds of all universities in the U.S. offer some sort of distance learning for teachers (Market Data Retrieval, 2004, p. 69). The most frequently cited type of online professional development is the *online course*, which is provided by schools, districts, regional centers, national organizations, universities, and independent consultants. Classroom Connect's *Connected University* offerings for teachers are examples of this popular type of professional learning experience.

Yet there are at least ten different kinds of freely available tools and resources that can support and enrich teachers' professional learning online, of which the online course is but one. In this article, I will share a typology of these different kinds of virtual professional development, with hopes that their variety and ingenuity will further enrich and inspire your professional development efforts.

### **Indexes: For Accessing Curriculum and Pedagogical Content**

When most teachers consider using the Internet to assist their professional learning, they think of finding information online: either curriculum content or pedagogical practice information. According to the most recent NetDay (2004) survey of technology-using teachers in the U.S., finding information online is second in frequency only to teachers' use of electronic mail to communicate with colleagues. *Blue Web'n* and *Marco Polo's Teacher Resources* are two good examples of extensive Web sites that offer well-organized curriculum content resources. The *Educator's Reference Desk* is an example of a very large and comprehensive pedagogical information index, while the popular *Kathy Schrock's Guide for Educators* combines carefully-selected content and pedagogical online resources for educators. (The Web locations for all sites mentioned can be found in the Tools and Resources list at the end of this article.)

### **Virtual Spaces: For Communicating and Collaborating**

At the same time, increasing numbers of K-12 teachers are experiencing the power of communicating and collaborating with colleagues in specially designed online spaces. Among the most popular are SRI's *Tapped In*, an online workplace and meeting space for many different educators' communities communicating both asynchronously and in realtime, and the *Knowledge Loom*, a virtual collaboration space organized around sharing and building upon research-based best practices in education. Curriculum and lesson

design happen interactively and with assistance from interested colleagues online in Harvard University's *Education with New Technologies' Networked Learning Community*, which uses the popular Teaching for Understanding framework to structure the design work in which participating teachers engage. Indiana University's *Inquiry Learning Forum* is a virtual place in which teachers can "visit" each other's classrooms via video clips of learning activities created and contributed by participants, reflecting together upon these pedagogical examples using discussion spaces online.

### **Services: For Personalized Assistance**

Still other types of online resources offer specialized and individualized professional development services for teachers. Online mentoring, especially for new teachers, is being tried in a number of districts and states. One example of such a telementoring service for teachers is sponsored by the University of Texas-Austin. Called WINGS Online, it provides protégé-driven one-to-one and small-group mentoring online by volunteer experienced teachers throughout the state. It also provides a unique "information-on-demand" service that allows UT-Austin preservice teachers and alumnae to submit curriculum or pedagogical questions that are answered by project staff and added to an ever-growing, distributed, searchable database of education-related queries with quality-controlled responses. The University of Virginia's Curry School of Education offers an open source professional portfolio tool for educators that incorporates portfolio owner-controlled online reflection focused around specific portfolio artifacts. Teachers using this portfolio tool engage in private but collaborative reflection with invited supervisors, professors, cooperating teachers, and peers that can greatly assist professional learning in personalized ways.

### **Public Venues: For Knowledge Construction**

Web logs ("blogs") and wikis -- "quick" Web sites that are collaboratively built "on the fly" by any/all wishing to participate -- have been online for almost a decade, but are now just starting to be appropriated for teachers' professional learning. Many keep and/or read teachers' blogs, such as *From Behind the Teacher's Desk*, put online by a self-described "young high school science teacher." Blogs are easy to create with free online software, and most allow for readers to comment upon their dated entries. Wikis -- less well-known among K-12 educators -- such as *The Teacher's Lounge* provide easy opportunities to collectively build Web sites that offer resources and discussion without having to use HTML commands or even Web authoring software. Still another kind of public knowledge construction for teachers within particular schools or districts is facilitated with *Profiler*, a specialized online survey tool that helps educators identify and locate colleagues with particular areas of expertise to share. At the

same time, *Profiler* helps schools and districts self-assess areas for needed professional development.

### **Online PD Best Practices**

In her May 2004 report in Technology & Learning magazine, Kim Carter describes current thinking about best practices in online professional development for teachers, saying:

There is no question that, despite its fairly meteoric rise in the education community over the past few years, online professional development is still a growing child. The current best practices point to a combination of the human element, top-notch tech support, a diversity of technologies, a high level of interactivity, and need-to-know topics as essential elements. (p. 3)

The combination of characteristics that Ms. Carter describes can best be supported by combined use of diverse tools and resources – of the types described above -- in service to teachers' professional learning.

### **Tools & Resources Cited**

Blue Web'n:

<http://www.kn.pacbell.com/wired/bluewebn/>

Education with New Technologies-Networked Learning Community:

<http://learnweb.harvard.edu/ent/home/index.cfm>

Educator's Reference Desk:

<http://www.eduref.org/>

From Behind the Teacher's Desk Blog:

<http://behindthedesk.blogspot.com/>

Inquiry Learning Forum:

<http://ilf.crlt.indiana.edu/>

Kathy Schrock's Guide for Educators:

<http://school.discovery.com/schrockguide/assess.html>

Knowledge Loom:

<http://knowledgeloom.org/index.jsp>

Marco Polo Teacher Resources:

[http://www.marcopolo-education.org/teacher/content\\_index.aspx](http://www.marcopolo-education.org/teacher/content_index.aspx)

Open Portfolio:

<http://curry.edschool.virginia.edu/teachered/projects/openportfolio/password.php>

Profiler:

<http://profiler.hprtec.org/>

Tapped In 2:

<http://ti2.sri.com/tappedin/>

The Teachers' Lounge Wiki:

<http://teacherslounge.editme.com/>

Weblogg-ed:

<http://www.weblogg-ed.com/>

WINGS Online Information-on-Demand:

<http://wings.utexas.org/>

WINGS Online Telementoring:

<http://wings.utexas.org/>

## References

Carter, K. (2004, May). Online training: What's really working? *Technology & Learning*, 24 (10). Available:

<http://www.techlearning.com/story/showArticle.jhtml?articleID=20300252>

Market Data Retrieval (2004). *Technology in education 2004: A comprehensive report on the state of technology in the K-12 market*. Available:

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[http://www.netday.org/sud4teachers\\_2004\\_report.htm](http://www.netday.org/sud4teachers_2004_report.htm) .

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