Why a Massive Online Open Course for Educators (MOOC-Ed) on the Digital Learning Transition?

We have long been engaged in providing professional learning opportunities for educators, including K-12 teachers, school and district leaders, college of education faculty, and state department of education staff. Our work over two decades has led us to continuously explore variations of face-to-face, online and blended professional learning experiences as both the available technologies and the expertise of our audiences advanced. The advent of MOOCs led us to explore their potential to help education professionals advance their expertise and improve their professional practices by participating in what we are calling MOOC-Eds – Massive Open Online Courses for Educators.

Why a MOOC-Ed?

If your district or school is like most others, the need for large-scale, widely accessible, cost-effective professional development opportunities for educators is very clear. K-12 education is undergoing rapid changes driven by new curriculum standards and student assessments; increased recognition of the importance of digital literacies, the 4C's, and deeper learning in preparing students to be college, career and citizenship ready; increased use of data systems to inform instructional decisions; new teacher evaluation systems that use student learning gains to assess the *value added* by each teacher; and new technologies to enhance teaching, learning, assessment, communications and school management. In addition, schools need to address the increased diversity of student populations and the economic constraints leading to larger class sizes, fewer resources, and the need to make education more productive and cost-effective.

To address these changes, teachers and administrators require opportunities to update their own knowledge, skills, and practices through professional development (PD). Nationally, there is a very large education workforce that needs to be addressed. The National Center for Educational Statistics reports that there were 3.7 million full-time-equivalent K-12 schoolteachers in fall 2011 across almost 100,000 schools in almost 18,000 districts, with more than 200,000 administrators. Reaching this many educators with effective PD that addresses their individual needs requires a different approach.

Principles of Effective Professional Development for Educators

Traditionally, K-12 professional development has been comprised of a few days per year when educators are released from their teaching or administrative responsibilities to attend "sit and listen" workshops. While these sessions may increase awareness of changing expectations, they rarely lead to changes in educational practices or improvements in student achievement. The National Staff Development Council/Learning Forward (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Richardson & Orphanos, 2009) reports "nearly half of all U.S. teachers are dissatisfied with their opportunities for professional development." A significant body of research (summarized by Wei, Darling-Hammond & Adamson, 2010) has established that professional development for educators is most effective in improving teaching practices and student achievement when it:

- Fosters a deepening of subject-matter knowledge, a greater understanding of learning, and a greater appreciation of students' needs;
- Centers around the critical activities of teaching and learning—planning lessons, evaluating student work, developing curriculum, improving classroom practices and increasing student learning;
- Builds on investigations of practice through cases that involve specific problems of practice, questions, analysis, reflection, and substantial professional discourse;
- Values and cultivates a culture of collegiality, involving knowledge and experience sharing among educators;
- Aligns with school improvement goals and plans; and,

- Is sustained, intensive, and continuously woven into the everyday fabric of the profession through modeling, coaching, and collaborations.

While the need for large scale educator PD is clear and the principles of effective programs well established, the resources available to meet this critical need are limited and have been declining in many states and districts. Using traditional professional development approaches is far too costly, cannot provide the learning opportunities educators need when and where they are needed, and are of limited effectiveness even for those educators they can reach. New approaches are required, approaches that embody the principles of effective professional development and are scalable, accessible, and flexible to meet the needs of different educators.

Planning for the Digital Learning Transition

If you are in an early stage of planning or implementing a digital learning transition in a K-12 school or district, this course will help you understand the potential of digital and blended learning, assess progress and set future goals, and begin planning to achieve those goals. It provides strong models from successful schools and districts, the Project 24 Framework to guide planning, access to experts who have implemented digital learning effectively, information about research and best practices, and opportunities to collaborate with colleagues from throughout the U.S. and around the world. Past participants found that the course provided valuable information they could share with colleagues, helped them understand the multiple aspects that must be addressed for a digital learning initiative to be successful, and enabled them to connect with other educators who are facing the same challenges.

We encourage school or district teams to participate together and we provide a district or school readiness self-assessment and other tools to help participants move forward with their local digital learning initiatives.

MOOC-Ed Design Guidelines

MOOC-Eds differ from other MOOCs in that they are designed to address the needs of educators while incorporating effective PD practices within online learning environments. Our core design principles include:

Self-Directed Learning, so that participants can personalize their own goals, select among a rich array of resources, and decide whether, when and how to engage in discussions and activities to further their own learning, in an anytime, anyplace learning environment they can access by computer, tablet or smartphone.

"The resources were amazing and really helped me to refine my goals and take a step back and reflect on where my school is and where and how I can help it to move forward." –DLT MOOC-Ed Participant, Fall 2013

"I learned where our district is compared to other districts in the country and worldwide. It was beneficial to see the different levels of implementation." – DLT MOOC-Ed Participant, Fall 2013

"It is all about discovering self learning. The more you explore and learn, more you feel that it is only the tip of an iceberg. There is so much you have to learn and discover. I loved the "changing the culture of teaching and learning" unit." – DLT MOOC-Ed Participant, Fall 2013

Peer Supported Learning, so that educators support each other through engagement in online discussions, peer reviews of projects, ratings of posted ideas, and crowdsourcing of lessons learned; while those working in local teams also support each other by working on the MOOC-Ed activities in collaboration with local colleagues.

"The discussion forum was most reflective and helpful as I learned about the barriers and its solutions to promote digital learning in my schools." – DLT MOOC-Ed Participant, Fall 2013

"We are well into our second phase of 1:1 digital transformation at our High School, and in our first phase at our Middle School. This MOOC has helped me to stay connected with experts and leaders from every level at school districts that are in similar phases, just beginning, and those who have gone before us to

provide a pathway. The level of personalized professional learning in this MOOC can't be matched by any other experience I've encountered– DLT MOOC-Ed Participant, Fall 2013

Case Study and Project Based Approaches to build upon examples of best practices while centering participants' work on critical problems of practice and data-informed decision making in their own classrooms, schools or districts.

"Creating the plan after seeing how others had done it was great inspiration and I loved the professional development piece. It helped me wrap my brain around how to better implement and design PD." – DLT MOOC-Ed Participant, Fall 2013.

Blended Learning to integrate MOOC-Eds with local face-to-face activities, such as school or district professional learning communities, onsite coaching, University courses, school improvement planning or other professional development activities.

"The most beneficial aspect of this course was actually the F2F conversations informed and occasioned by the MOOC with the other members of my school team." – DLT MOOC-Ed Participant, Fall 2013

To register for the next Digital Learning Transition MOOC-Ed, which begins on January 20, 2014, please go to: https://courses.mooc-ed.org/dlt3.