

Role of E-learning in Professional Development: A Proposed Framework

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ABSTRACT

The professional development of teaching staff in tertiary education organizations (TEOs) and of those who support them has been identified as an essential element of future progress towards implementing and building capability in e-learning in tertiary education. This framework addresses this perceived need, but also suggests that many of the features of the professional development of teachers can and should be replicated at other levels. Departments and divisions within TEOs, the TEOs themselves, and the governmental organizations that support them, all need to undergo progressive development as learning organizations to properly understand and promote the development of teachers. Whether we regard this as the professional development of staff within these organizations, or as a development of the ethos of the organizations, development is needed.

1. Introduction

E-learning is the act of engaging in an educational course in an online setting. E-learning courses can exist in a variety of forms, using a range of technologies. Commonly used in organizations like schools and corporations, e-learning can help learners' complete education and training objectives with greater ease and flexibility than they can with traditional classroom-based learning. E-learning courses can use a variety of techniques, including audio and video recordings, presentations, quizzes, surveys, games, discussion groups, and more.

E-learning courses can be published online through a learning management system (LMS). An LMS allows for course creators to streamline e-learning content into one easy-to-access location. An LMS that is SCORM-compliant (shareable content object reference model) allows for easy integration of content and tools and extends the availability of courseware to include courses authored by third parties.

E-learning stems from the ongoing incorporation of technology—specifically computer systems and mobile devices—into learning and education environments. While the first e-learning systems were more focused on the delivery of content and information from teachers to students, as technology evolved, e-learning began to incorporate more interactive, multidirectional tools. Correspondence and collaboration became more efficient, and systems started to feel more natural and easier to navigate.

E-learning methods continue to expand. Learners now have access to an abundance of information and e-learning opportunities. While schools were the first to adopt e-learning technology e-masse, businesses have also recognized its advantages and rapidly adopted e-learning in order to train their employees. Workers of all experience levels are now able to capitalize on online training and resources to increase their professional knowledge and skills, resulting in more efficient business practices and higher employee engagement.

E-learning has the power to make learning more accessible for users around the world. In education, it brings

learning opportunities to previously disadvantaged groups. In business, it helps unite and train an increasingly global workforce. When learning materials are online, users can access content from anywhere and at any time.

A high-quality LMS allows users to participate in e-learning courses from desktop computers, mobile phones, and tablets. This flexibility means that users can learn any time of day, whenever it's most convenient for them—something classroom and in-office learning can't compete with. Learners can also start a session on one device (say a smartphone during a commute) and resume it on another (say a tablet at home in the evening), making it easier to fit learning into busy lives.

Learners aren't the only ones who benefit from e-learning and learning management systems. For course instructors, an effective LMS offers easy course authoring tools for quickly creating and updating content. For administrators and managers, e-learning is a more affordable and efficient way to conduct learning and training. E-learning saves time, money, materials, and resources by keeping everything online. And because it's easy to access, a larger number of students and employees can participate in learning or training initiatives. As technology continues to push e-learning forward, education, training, and professional development will reach wider audiences and impact more learners.

2. Underlying Principles:

This professional development framework reflects the five principles underlying the interim Tertiary E-learning Framework (Ministry of HRD, 2004, pp 9-11).

- It is *learner-centred* in that it acknowledges that decisions about professional development at each level within a context are best made by those directly involved at the appropriate level.
- It is informed by, and seeks *good practice*, by being based on research carried out internationally as well as within India into professional development for e-learning.

- It promotes *collaboration* because it acknowledges and recognises the interconnections between and amongst the different levels and participants of the tertiary sector.
- It is *innovative* because it supports the generation of a breadth of possibilities and new ideas for professional development for e-learning reflecting the emerging and immature nature of this area. It is not a 'one size fits all' model, but enables the different levels to design, develop, implement and evaluate professional development activities that are best suited to meet their own needs.
- It is *affordable and sustainable* because it promotes systemic and systematic professional development through an ongoing and iterative process of engagement and evaluation.

3. Applications and Implications of the Framework

Our research has identified a range of conceptions, assumptions and experiences of e-learning and of professional development for e-learning. It is likely that these differences will influence how individuals and institutions will work with the framework. Some will approach the framework seeking specific skills and requiring specific incentives, others will approach the framework with research goals in mind and will expect no incentives other than opportunities for research. Some institutions will anticipate that all teachers will develop information technology skills,

while other institutions will focus on the development of teams to support the learning of their students. The framework is sufficiently flexible to allow all these possibilities. It takes account of the various starting points and pathways that individuals, institutions and the sector agencies may follow.

4. Description of the framework

This approach variously combines practitioner participation, leading the way, and provision of incentives (via reward and recognition) which can progressively yield a development spiral. Working at all levels our framework suggests an iterative sequence of analysis and activity. This always starts with an analysis of development needs, of incentives for development and of opportunities for development. This is continued through active engagement in learning or research and followed by an evaluative exploration of progress. There are five repeated stages as shown in Figure 1. This sequence of analysis and activity applies at all levels.

For example, individual teachers can ask themselves what they need, what their incentives are, what support is available for their professional development, how they will engage with e-learning activities and what impact this has on their ability to support student learning. The same sequence applies to departments, to institutions and to other parts of the tertiary education sector.

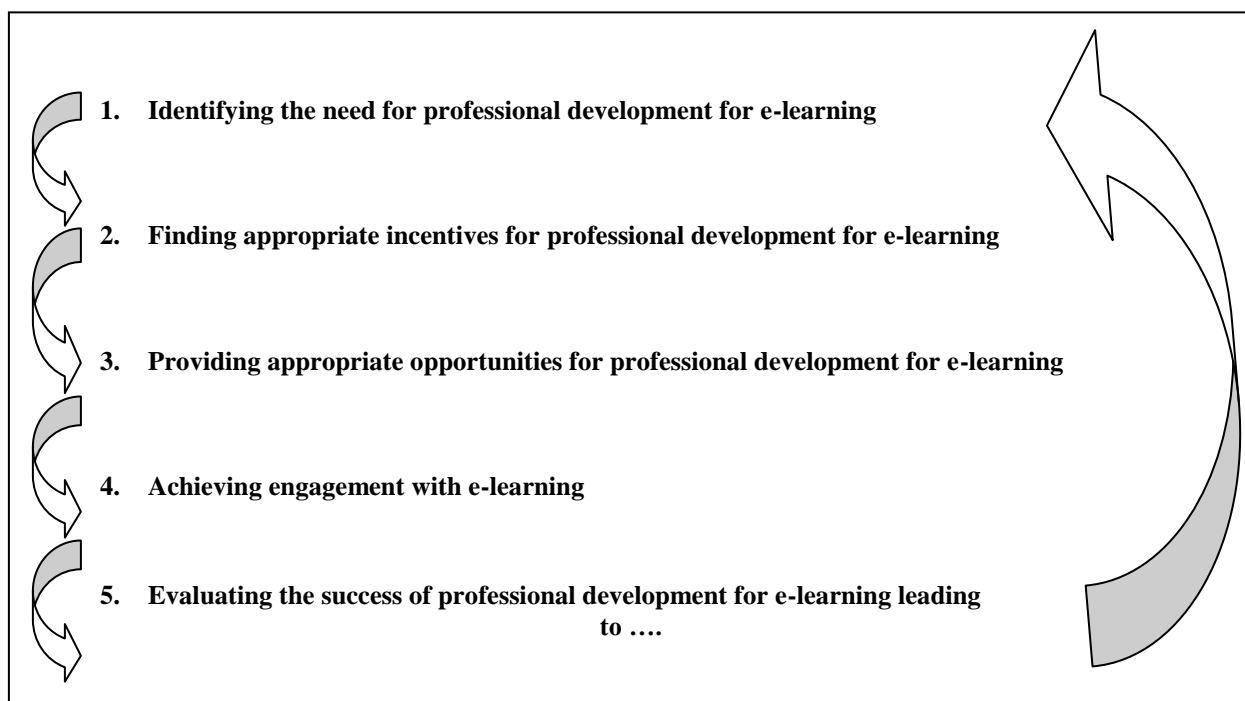


Figure 1: A Framework for Professional Development for E-learning

5. Application of the Framework

The following table provides guidance as to how the different stages of the framework can be applied at each level. It poses key questions which may be asked and addressed at any point in the continuing cycle/spiral of

professional development for e-learning. The last column includes educational institutions along with a range of other bodies with interests and influence in the sector in the broader category of Tertiary Sector Organisations.

Stage of the Framework	Individuals	Institutions/Departments	Tertiary Sector Organisations
<i>Identifying the need for PD for e-learning</i>	<p>What does e-learning mean in my teaching context?</p> <p>Is there potential/value in e-learning for my teaching and for my students?</p> <p>Is e-learning relevant for my teaching?</p> <p>How might it have application in terms of</p> <p>a) improving teaching and learning outcomes?</p> <p>b) the teaching/ research nexus</p> <p>c) personal professional development and capability</p> <p>What would I like to be able to do in relation to e-learning?</p> <p>Who are my students, what do they want/desire in terms of e-learning?</p> <p>What ICT skills and access do they have?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do student capabilities and preferences mesh with my teaching and learning objectives? <p>Prioritisation of Professional Development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What sort of professional development activities do I need to engage in? • What sort of skills and knowledge might I need to develop in order to use e-learning effectively? (teaching, pedagogy, subject matter, technical capability) • How might I prioritise PD for e-learning within my work schedule? 	<p>What do we know about the potential and value of e-learning for meeting institutional teaching and learning priorities?</p> <p>Is there a need for goals and planning objectives concerning e-learning?</p> <p>What form might these take?</p> <p>How might these strategies be aligned and connected through the policy, structures and practices in the institution?</p> <p>How can we provide leadership and direction for managerial, support and teaching staff (e.g. exemplars, learning from colleagues' experience, facilitating communities of interest, and internal interactions)?</p> <p>What skills and knowledge are needed by staff at all levels of the organisation?</p> <p>What value is placed on innovative teaching?</p> <p>Are institutional expectations made clear at all organisational levels?</p> <p>Is there transparency and equity in access to resources for PD and e-learning (personal, funding, ICT capability)?</p> <p>What services does the institution need to provide to its students?</p>	<p>What kinds of teaching and learning should be made available in India?</p> <p>How is research and scholarship around the value of e-learning promulgated and shared amongst TEOs?</p> <p>What research and development initiatives can be employed in order to help TEOs with their strategic planning?</p> <p>What parts of the wider Tertiary community can provide leadership in this area?</p> <p>How might the sector value and recognise innovative teaching?</p>
<i>Finding appropriate incentives for PD for e-learning</i>	<p>Why should I learn new skills?</p> <p>What are the benefits to be gained from using e-learning for myself and my students?</p> <p>How will my efforts be recognised?</p>	<p>What sort of incentives might encourage staff to engage with e-learning, and to be involved in PD for e-learning?</p> <p>What encouragement and recognition is available for those who provide informal support for teachers engaged in e-learning?</p>	<p>What strategies and processes need to be in place to ensure the desired learning and teaching services are available?</p> <p>How does the sector recognise and value PD for e-learning?</p> <p>What networks of collaboration and information can be built to facilitate the development of ideas and exemplars and lead to engagement in e-learning?</p>
<i>Providing appropriate opportunities for PD for e-learning</i>	<p>What opportunities exist to develop new skills and knowledge?</p> <p>What forms of professional development can I access/engage in?</p> <p>What are my professional development preferences?</p> <p>Are current forms of PD meeting my needs (technical, social and pedagogical)?</p> <p>Do personal workload models and personal professional development goals reflect the time involved in e-learning and PD for e-learning?</p>	<p>What kinds of PD do staff prefer?</p> <p>How can a range of PD development activities and opportunities to meet the needs of a diverse range staff (both full and part time), at different stages in their e-learning journeys be provided?</p> <p>How are staff made aware of PD opportunities, both inside and outside institutions?</p> <p>How can informal professional development be facilitated and built upon?</p> <p>Can PD opportunities and assistance be provided on a 'just-in-time' basis?</p> <p>What resources – physical, financial, personnel and technical need to be provided?</p> <p>What training and career structures are available for those who support the development of teachers?</p> <p>Do workload models and appraisal processes</p>	<p>What processes, policies, resources, and strategies will need to be in place to support the sector in offering these opportunities for staff?</p>

Stage of the Framework	Individuals	Institutions/Departments	Tertiary Sector Organisations
		reflect the time involved in e-learning and PD for e-learning? How might teaching and technology be linked within the structure and operation of the institution about the practice of teaching?	
<i>Achieving engagement with e-learning</i>	What will I do?	How is staff engagement monitored and their development recognised?	How is institutional engagement and development monitored and recognised?
<i>Evaluating the success of PD for e-learning</i>	Was it worth the effort for me and my students? How do I know? What have I achieved? Where do I go next?	Was it evaluated and what are the outcomes of the evaluation? How was the uptake and effectiveness of e-learning and PD for e-learning assessed? Was reflective practice on the part of staff encouraged? Was a sustainable culture of continual innovation and development built? How are the experiences of e-learning as an on-going stimulus to change shared and promoted? How are e-learning leaders/innovators recognised and valued? Where to next?	What are the lessons learned? What improvements may be made for the future? How are the experiences of e-learning as an on-going stimulus to change shared and promoted? How are e-learning leaders/innovators recognised and valued? Where to next?

6. Evaluating the impact of this framework

Audits of e-learning development in tertiary education often emphasise barriers to uptake of e-learning tools and resources and tend to describe slow rates of change across the sector. Meanwhile, the use of email to support communication in and between our TEOs has become almost ubiquitous, students and teachers use word processors and spreadsheets as a matter of choice, use of online learning management systems is spreading rapidly and a wide range of multimedia is used routinely to support teaching, and learning. The e-learning professional development framework described in this document accepts that each part of the tertiary education sector is making progress in adopting, implementing and evaluating e-learning as part of a broad and ongoing exploration of education. However, the processes involved cannot be successful if only applied to the development of teachers and to the work of academic staff developers Institutions and the sector must identify needs, incentives and opportunities for professional development. Each part of the whole must engage in e-learning development and in evaluation of what is working and what is not.

The e-learning professional development framework itself does seek change and its impact also needs to be evaluated. As each element of the sector adopts the framework and progressively moves forward from its own baseline and evaluates its progress, the sector as a whole will change. An analysis based on targets and performance indicators may not be the best way to monitor this change, which may be slow and variable and will always be difficult

to separate from more general developments in education. Oversight from an organisation which is both part of and distinct from the sector is likely to be valuable in assessing the development of the sector and of the e-learning framework.

7. Conclusion

This framework outlines levels of analysis and activities concerning the development of teachers engaged in e-learning and those who support them at all levels in the tertiary sector.

‘Levels’ refers to the individual, the department/institution, and the agencies that make up the tertiary sector. The purpose of the framework is to provide a set of principles/guidelines for TEOs and their staff and all other groups in the sector to consider when developing and implementing strategies for professional development for e-learning with the aim of continual improvement in professional capability. It is intended to complement the wide range of tools already available to the sector that promote e-learning by focusing on professional development for e-learning and by posing specific questions about the context within which professional development occurs.

Using information and communications technologies (ICTs) in tertiary education to enhance learning and teaching depends on an institutional approach to planning, monitoring and evaluation. It also involves seeking effective use of ICTs to support learning and teaching and the development and enhancement of capabilities across all levels of a TEO.

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