Teacher educators and school-based professional
development providers all over the world have
recognized the significant role digital technology
can play in facilitating teachers’ professional learning,
especially for educators living in remote areas
(Diamond & Powell 2011). In schools and at home,
software, digital devices, media, and the Internet offer
teachers access to a wealth of pedagogical and content
resources. Technology also provides an opportunity for
teachers to participate in virtual professional learning
communities, enabling valuable sharing of ideas and
practices. Online learning technologies, therefore, can
be used as a platform to support teachers’ collaboration
and professional learning.

Strengthening Early Literacy
Through Online Collaboration
and Mentoring

Allison Swan Dagen and Aimee Morewood
Ongoing professional learning is a critical aspect of the teaching profession. Research on professional development suggests that high-quality initiatives include elements such as strong content, coherence across the curriculum, effective duration, and opportunities for active participation (Desimone 2009; Bean & Morewood 2011; Swan Dagen & Bean 2014). Further, professional development must include a delicate balance of pressure (e.g., accountability) and support (e.g., guidance and resources) to be effective (Fullan 1991; Bean & Swan Dagen 2012). Until recently, most continuing education or in-service professional development has been planned and implemented by individual school districts. Newer to professional learning and development are providers who are outside of the school districts, including professional organizations (e.g., International Literacy Association), education-based corporations (e.g., PBS), for-profit companies (e.g., Scholastic), and institutions of higher education partnered with individual schools and districts. In some cases, professional development offered to teachers—whether facilitated internally or externally—is high-quality, appropriately funded, strategically implemented, and based on the needs of the teachers and learners in the school. Unfortunately, in many schools, professional development is not systematic or may fall short of meeting the criteria for a high-quality program, instead reflecting more of a “sit and get” approach for teachers.

The LLNBC project

The Literacy Leadership Through National Board Certification (LLNBC) project was born out of West Virginia University’s (WVU) efforts to support and contribute to (1) the state’s involvement with early literacy initiatives (e.g., the national Campaign for Grade-Level Reading [www.gradelevelreading.net], which calls for reading proficiency by third grade, and the Transformative System of Support for Early Literacy [https://wvde.state.wv.us/leaders-of-literacy/static/doc/policy-2512.pdf], our state policy) and (2) West Virginia’s policies to improve the quality of early childhood education (e.g., the adoption of universal pre-K and financial incentives for teachers seeking National Board Certification). This multiyear professional development experience, funded by the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation, was designed specifically to aid prekindergarten teachers in early literacy instruction. In addition to the focus on early literacy, another outcome of the LLNBC project is preparation for National Board Certification. Using the National Board Certification in Literacy: Reading–Language Arts standards allowed us to explicitly focus on effective literacy content and pedagogical knowledge within and across grade levels. To accommodate the 77 prekindergarten teachers who signed up to participate, from across the state’s 24,000 square miles, the project was conducted exclusively online through a combination of live collaborative sessions and independent work and reflection.

Core content of the LLNBC project covered early literacy content knowledge, early literacy pedagogical knowledge, National Board Certification in Literacy: Reading–Language Arts, and literacy leadership in schools. The literacy content was anchored in West Virginia’s Early Learning Standards (https://wvde.state.wv.us/apps/tree/static/doc/grade/elsf-guidebook.pdf) and curriculum. Teachers actively participated in an online community, completed six hours of graduate coursework in early literacy, and worked closely with university faculty (the authors) and an LLNBC mentor. All mentors were graduates of our college—College of Education and Human Services at West Virginia University—who had successfully earned National Board Certification and were working in a school setting in the state. We (authors) designed all content and process elements of the multiyear initiative; served as leads for the early literacy content (e.g., course co-instructors); and assumed a support role, assisting the mentors with the prekindergarten teachers’ National Board Certification work.

Another crucial component of the LLNBC project was high-quality professional development—it was multiyear in duration, had a strong content focus, was compliant with appropriate curriculum, and included systematic structure for active participation and collaborative learning. The online platform offered participants from across the state ways to communicate with peers and faculty and provided a space to develop mentoring relationships.

Professional learning through online collaboration

To facilitate online communication among the faculty, mentors, and participants, we chose Google+ as the
project’s platform. In addition to the fact that it was already conveniently included among the university’s password-protected suite of technological resources, Google+ provided participants with a variety of communication tools within one social network. (See “Google+ Collaborative Tools Used by Participants” for a detailed description of the tools.) Furthermore, the communication tools offered both synchronous and asynchronous options for engagement. Synchronous activities require participants to be simultaneously engaged together in real time, while asynchronous learning tasks are completed independently.

When it came to facilitating online learning, after much discussion about how best to support the participants, we (authors) designed this project using the Community of Inquiry (CoI) model (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer 2000). This model is made up of three core elements: cognitive presence (participant interaction with the content), teaching presence (participant interaction with the instructors), and social presence (participant interaction with one another) (Swan 2001). Given its alignment with the characteristics of effective professional development, the CoI model was applied to all of the online undertakings (Morewood, Ankrum, & Swan Dagen, in press).

Integrating the CoI model with the Google+ platform was key to providing effective professional development. The following sections demonstrate how Google+ tools helped to support the three core elements of cognitive, social, and teaching presence.

**Cognitive presence: Interaction with content**

Throughout the project, participants read about, discussed, implemented, and reflected on best practices in early literacy. They used the course text *The Building Blocks of Preschool Success* (Beauchat, Blamey, & Walpole 2010) to guide their learning and discussion. Early literacy topics included oral language, phonological awareness, print awareness, phonics/word study, comprehension, vocabulary, writing, and print environment. In particular, the course content bolstered teacher practices in three critical areas: read-alouds, emergent writing, and word study. By engaging with the early literacy content and practices through discussion boards, live chats, and personal connections, the teachers were able to reflect and, with support, apply the information and implement their newfound knowledge and practices in their classrooms.

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**Google+ Collaborative Tools Used by Participants**

- **Google+ profile.** Using secure login with university credentials, participants set up accounts that included their photo, a short profile, and contact information.
- **Google email.** Each participant was assigned a university system Gmail address. All email communication used this one email system.
- **Google+ Communities.** Participants used an invitation-only, private board for asynchronous work related to both content (e.g., posting videos) and process (e.g., signing up for chats).
- **Google Hangouts.** Participants used live video feeds for synchronous meetings to discuss early literacy content and National Board Certification content and to meet with faculty during office hours.
- **Google Drive.** Each participant set up a folder and shared content files with their mentor and university instructors.
- **Google+ Messenger.** Participants, mentors, and instructors used this tool to connect to those actively online and were able to immediately engage in text-based synchronous conversations.

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The program’s content focuses on emergent writing.

Using Google+ tools, participants worked collectively and individually with peers, the instructor, and their mentor. Participants’ use of both simultaneous synchronous communication (e.g., live video chats at specific times) and independent asynchronous correspondence (e.g., discussion board postings)
contributed to the breadth and depth of their learning. Early literacy experts and practicing teachers from the regional area—including the WVU community—who were not participating in the LLNBC project also collaborated with the participants. For example, during the interactive writing unit, we invited a teacher from our college’s child development laboratory school to join the project’s Communities page and use Hangouts to share her school’s interpretation of emergent writing (Bodrova & Leong 1998), called Play Plans. This Vygotsky based strategy is used to represent authentic writing and goal setting for the children’s scheduled free-choice, center exploration time. After completing the unit, many of the teachers implemented Play Plans in their classrooms, which they found created meaningful writing opportunities.

Social presence: Interaction with peers

Learning occurs through social interactions (Vygotsky [1934] 1986) as learners feel that they are supported in their efforts and goals. To provide this support in our project, we used the Google+ tools Communities, Hangouts, and Messenger. The project’s Communities page provided a space for participants to engage with their peers in a meaningful and supportive way, without having to schedule a specific day and time to interact simultaneously online with others. At the beginning of each content unit, the participants wrote a post describing how they currently applied the content in their classrooms. For example, when beginning a discussion about how to create a print-rich environment, teachers posted descriptions of actions typical of best practices, such as labeling objects, using a variety of authentic literacy materials (e.g., restaurant menus, cereal boxes), and connecting children’s names to letters of the alphabet. Teachers responded by providing a comment or by acknowledging agreement. One participant’s electronic communication said,

It seems as if all of us are doing the same things in our pre-K classrooms, which helps us to see that we seem to be on track with our colleagues. I’m sure I’m not alone when I say I benefit from this aspect of our class.

After writing their initial posts, the teachers used the Hangouts tool to participate in live synchronous conversations—typically in the early evening on alternating Wednesdays—about the unit’s content. These conversations gave the teachers opportunities to talk about implementing the material in their own classrooms and to ask instructors for clarifications. The Hangouts sessions also included streaming video. Participants could see and hear one another, which supported building a community of learners.

As a required assignment, within a few days of the live Hangouts chat, participants were asked to implement a newly learned practice, routine, or strategy—from text, articles, or live conversations—and post descriptions of their experience on the Communities page within one week of implementation. Peers and instructors would then provide feedback to the teachers on their new practices. Again, this tool helped the teachers to support one another throughout the process of implementing new practices.

The social presence component of the CoI framework enabled participants to create a community of learners to support their focus on early literacy content and pedagogical knowledge throughout the National Board Certification process. As the participants became more familiar and comfortable with the Communities page, it transformed from a location for posting required assignments to an organic place for teachers to initiate their own threads and start dialogues on topics they wanted to discuss. At times these posts related specifically to the National Board Certification process, and at times they focused on early literacy content.

As the year progressed, participants not only reported on what they implemented but also provided teaching evidence by posting short video clips from their classrooms. The teachers videotaped their teaching and posted the edited clips to their Communities page. This gave them an opportunity to become critical
friends, encouraging and supporting one another’s teaching in this learning process. The experience of posting videos and providing and receiving feedback on their teaching practices became even more valuable as they used these skills to complete their NBC component work. Further, the use of the Communities page allowed for yet another statewide collaborative experience.

**Teaching presence: Interaction with instructors**

Every other week instructors used Hangouts to facilitate live, synchronous, scheduled time chats to discuss a study topic. To keep the groups manageable and to allow each participant an opportunity to contribute to the discussion, the sessions were limited to eight participants plus two faculty members. These interactive discussions focused on assigned readings and prepared PowerPoint presentations for the specific unit of study while allowing participants to share their own knowledge. For example, during one live meeting, participants discussed the variety of ways each county system in the state uses the data collected from their Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer 2004). It was often these conversations that prompted the participants to “stay after” so that they could ask questions or just talk about their concerns.

**Professional learning through collaborative mentorship**

Research on professional development is quite clear: ongoing support is a vital component and mentoring does support teachers’ application of new knowledge in practice (Joyce & Showers 2002; Neuman & Wright 2010). To incorporate this knowledge, the LLNBC project was grounded in collaborative mentorship. Mentors supported the participants in all four aspects of the initiative—content, pedagogy, certification, and leadership—for the entire length of the project.

Mentors were recruited through our collaborative relationship with the state’s National Board Professional Teaching Standard (NBPTS) Resource Center coordinator and our college’s alumni office. Groups of four participants were partnered with a mentor, which created several working groups within the larger community. Further, throughout the multiyear timeframe, mentors were supported through opportunities to learn about and reflect on strategies and traits of effective mentoring. For example, in the fall semester, the mentors agreed to read an article on cognitive coaching and then participate in a small group discussion using Google Hangouts as a meeting place. The mentors also used Hangouts to collaborate with one another and with their mentees on the project’s content and process. As the teacher’s comment that follows demonstrates, mentors played an important role, particularly for helping participants navigate the rigorous path to National Board Certification:

> Working with a mentor provided the security of knowing that the NBC Component 2 was on track. I think of it as a GPS in an unknown territory.
Conclusion

The LLNBC project supported our state’s improvement initiatives by bolstering teacher quality through online learning and sustained mentoring with a focus on literacy leadership through National Board Certification. Positive outcomes reported by participants included increased content knowledge, improvements in instructional practices, and successful NBC component submission. One participant said, “I am a better teacher because of this course. I have seen constant and tangible improvements in my teaching as well as in [my] students’ achievement throughout the course.” Another said,

I felt that the entire course benefited me not only as an NBC candidate but as a preschool classroom teacher. The discussion board posts provided a wealth of useful information and activities that I found very helpful in my own classroom. What made posts even better was knowing that they worked in real live classrooms, with real live teachers and students!

Online tools were crucial in connecting teachers from all across the state, and we learned that technology support was critical to the project’s success. The teachers in this study had access to a variety of university resources (e.g., university technology help desk, graduate assistants) as well as IT support at their schools. While professional learning was a fundamental aspect of this project, we learned that the teachers in this initiative were excited to become part of a broader learning community and they benefited from those relationships. Finally, the role of mentorship in this project was essential for providing both the accountability and the support the participants needed to continue in their professional learning journeys.

References


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