

It's a Small World After All!

by Chip Donohue

This is the first of a two-part series on technology and effective strategies for teaching and learning online. In Part 1, the focus is on the role of technology, asking the hard questions, and preparing yourself to teach an online or web-enhanced course or training program. In Part 2, the focus is on effective strategies for teaching online and how to create a community of learners at a distance.

There are many ways to use technology as a tool to deliver training and continuing education, and you've probably experienced one or more of them as a teacher or student. In the past you may have participated in a video conference or been involved in a training program that was delivered via broadcast television or satellite. Or perhaps, more recently, you've used e-mail, belonged to a listserv, participated in a hosted discussion or real-time chat, listened to a web conference, or been in an online course. How did you feel about teaching and learning at a distance? Would

you try it again? Under what conditions?

Step 1: Know the Questions

The role of technology in the training and development of child care professionals has become a topic of great interest and heated debate. Advances in technology are making it easier and more cost effective to deliver training at a distance. Improvements have been made in distance education applications and methods, access to

information, and the ability to manage, disseminate, and exchange information. Learning at a distance has become more content rich and interactive with the advent of multimedia presentation and communication tools. Students can now take Internet-based courses from work or home, at a convenient time that fits the demands of their work and family lives.

However, there are a number of *givens* that teachers and instructional designers must address if our use of technology is to be effective. Early childhood practitioners vary widely in terms of the roles they play and the level of education and experience they have, and their levels of technological literacy and access to technology. Adult education practices must take into account the wide range of abilities, interests, and learning styles of the students and match the technology to the requirements of both the content and the learner.

As early childhood professionals we must continue to ask hard questions about the effectiveness and appropriateness of tech-

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nology and distance education as a delivery system for teaching about the *art and science* of caregiving and relational care. We need to be sure these technologies are effective in teaching what quality early childhood care and education is, how to provide it, and why it is important. Technology is here to stay, so the question is not if we should use it, but rather, what is, what can, and what should be, the role of technology in training, continuing education and professional development for child care professionals?

The answers to these questions require agreement on a set of assumptions from which we can frame the debate on the role of technology, and identify promising practices and effective strategies.

Identify basic assumptions:

- Technology is worth exploring.
- Technology must support training objectives.
- Efforts must be driven by the content, not the technology.
- Rapid advances in content, technology, delivery methods, and interactivity will continue.
- Technological literacy is necessary for child care professionals.

Ask the hard questions:

- What is appropriate training content for distance learning?
- Which teaching methods, instructional design, and technologies help promote active learning environments that engage and support learners?
- Which uses of technology foster interaction, resource sharing, and collaborative learning?
- How do we design instruction to meet diverse interests, abilities, learning styles, and backgrounds?
- What instructional strategies

empower learners to be self-directed, critical, and reflective thinkers?

- What assessment methods promote applied learning for real-world problem solving?
- How can we teach relational care using technology and distance education methods?
- How do we teach about what teaching is and about how to teach?

Find the answers:

- Get over our own fear of technology.
- Understand how adults learn and identify the specific learning needs and styles of child care professionals.
- Recognize the diversity in level of education, experience, and technology skills.
- Identify the essential ingredients of active learning environments for adults.
- Understand the interplay between learning, teaching, instructional design, and technology.
- View technology as another way to deliver training, not the only way!

Technology can be an exciting solution; and a case can be made for improvements in cost, availability, and convenience over traditional face-to-face delivery systems. But essential questions remain. What is the quality of teaching and learning at a distance? And, what are appropriate uses of technology for this content and this audience? As early childhood care and education professionals, we need to seek answers to these questions to assure that our use of technology and distance education methods are intentional, purposeful, and appropriate.

The bottom line is that technology is simply a tool, a means to an end. The goal is to make the technology as transparent as possible so that students can focus on the content, not worry about fighting the technology to access infor-

mation and communicate with one another. It's not about technology — it's about training teachers and administrators to provide high quality care to young children and to be responsive to parents and families. In the end, we need to create a community of learners whether we're teaching face-to-face or online. If we can't do that, our students will not be well prepared and our goals for young children, parents, families, and our profession will not be realized.

Step 2: Know Yourself

Based on my experience, I believe that distance education holds great promise as one tool in a comprehensive child care training and professional development delivery system. But then, we've only taken our first steps. We still need to learn how to walk before we can run. And the next step to becoming an effective online instructor is to reflect on who you are as a teacher and a learner.

Reflect on and articulate your philosophy and beliefs about teaching and learning. Your decisions about content and instructional design need to be intentional. Think about and define your goals, objectives, and learner outcomes. Identify your expectations of the learners and of yourself. Understand the roles you will play including: content expert, instructional designer, technology resource for students, liaison between the students and institution, instructor, participant in the learning community, and online program coordinator and administrator.

Do your homework! Explore the many resources on teaching and learning at a distance that are available in print and online. Take a look at existing online courses in your field. Think about what you like and don't like. Identify your strengths and best practices as a face-to-face instructor. Talk to other instructors

and colleagues who have offered successful distance learning programs. Find out what has worked and what hasn't. Ask students who have taken an online class about their experiences as a learner and what they found most challenging or frustrating.

Assess your own level of technology skills and determine the level of technological literacy your students will need to succeed. Identify technology and instructional design resources you will need and determine where to find them on your campus or in your organization. Consider the resources and support the students will need. You can't teach the course and be the 24/7 "Help Desk" for students, so determine who will provide those services for your students.

Expect to spend much more time teaching online than face-to-face, both for course development and delivery.

Your preparation begins by selecting content that is appropriate for online delivery. Then you need to understand the process of content conversion and consider what you will need to do to convert your face-to-face content into an effective online format. And, consider how your instructional design choices will be impacted by what the content is, who your learners are, what their access to technology is, and what level of technology skills they have.

Step 3:

Know Your Learners

There are a number of challenges and barriers that child care professionals face as potential online learners. These issues create challenges for you as an instructional designer and online teacher. Knowing who your learners are and what they need to be successful online is essential to the success of your online course or training program. Here are some suggestions.

Reflect on the specific needs and preferences that child care professionals have as adult learners. Acknowledge the wide range of education, experience, and learning styles. Create a learning environment that emphasizes visual learning, hands-on activities, individual reflection, and group activities and collaborative learning.

Acknowledge learner preference for face-to-face training and the value of getting together. Getting out of the center and being together, and fighting the isolation the family child care providers often feel, are important reasons for participating in training. Students (and instructors) who prefer face-to-face training often see distance learning as high tech/no touch, and are skeptical about its value as an educational and social experience. Create a supportive and interactive learning community online.

Provide basic technology training. The child care profession tends to be a low tech/high touch field, and child care practitioners often have limited experience with technology and lack basic skills and technological literacy. When they have access to technology it tends to be old tech/slow tech — the computer that was donated by a parent five years ago when it was already obsolete. Create opportunities for hands-on technology experiences and skill development before going online.

Address the "digital divide" in terms of access and affordability issues. Individual access to technology is impacted by many factors including socioeconomic status and educational level. Recognize that child care as an occupation has less access to technology and child care practitioners are less likely to use technology as a tool for learning and communication than other teachers and professionals. Create opportunities for child care cen-

ters and family child care homes to own technology through partnerships with employers and technology companies that provide grants, loans, and donations of computers, software, and Internet access.

Remove barriers to access and participation. Technology can address traditional barriers to participation like distance, time, and location. Technology-based training can also create new barriers based on access, affordability, technology skills, and literacy levels. In a read/write learning environment, students with limited literacy skills or for whom English is a second language may have difficulty participating successfully. If a student doesn't read well, understanding the course content will be very difficult. If a student doesn't write well, concerns about posting comments in class discussions may limit participation and contributions to the learning community. The risk is that we create a training delivery system that is only available to a small portion of the child care professionals who could benefit from it. Create barrier free learning environments by addressing the need for basic skills and by making it easy to participate.

Emphasize the advantages. Take advantage of what the technology can do rather than focus on what it can't. Acknowledge the differences with face-to-face classes and training sessions. The goal is not to use technology to duplicate what happens in the classroom, but to create learning environments that have unique features and advantages for learners who choose to participate at a distance. Technology is a powerful tool. Create opportunities for online students to gain valuable technology skills and learn new skills and gain knowledge from the course or training content.

Step 4: Know the Technology

Your online students will assume you are a technology expert (so we'll keep your techno-terror our little secret).

They will turn to you for advice about hardware, software, connections to the Internet, what computer to buy, how to attach a file to an e-mail, how to log in to the course, and where to find things in the online learning environment. While few of us are experts with technology, it is important to become familiar and comfortable with the courseware and tools you will use to design, develop, and deliver your online course or training program. And that takes time — lots of time!

Allow adequate time for content conversion, instructional design, and course building. Despite what you've heard or administrators at your institute believe, building an online course is like writing a textbook. Everything you say in class needs to be translated into text and graphics for presentation on-line. Activities that work in the classroom need to be adapted for online use. And presentations and group discussions become individual activities, meaning that you have to respond to thousands of e-mails, discussion postings, and written assignments. From my experience, teaching online takes three to four times the amount of time needed to teach the same course face-to-face. Be realistic about the time it will take to become comfortable with the technology and convert your content.

Match the use of technology and distance learning methods to the content and the learners. Instructional design must be driven by what you are trying to teach and who your learners are, not the other way around. You have choices about how to present your content, what tools and techniques to use, and

what technologies students need to use to participate and contribute. Be intentional in your choices so that students can focus on the content not just the technology, and so that the content is not overwhelmed by the technology.

Take advantage of the capabilities of the courseware and distance learning technologies. One note of caution. Just because we can do something, doesn't mean we should. The capabilities of existing and emerging distance learning technologies far exceeds the ability of the learners to access and use them. Be intentional about the *production values* you put into your course — you don't have to be Steven Spielberg, but attention to detail and careful instructional design will improve the online learning experience for you and your students.

- Design the look, feel, and format to be easy to access and navigate — use a consistent look and logical organization so that materials and activities are easy to find and use.
- Make your course site user-friendly and intuitive — think of web sites you like to visit and use often.
- Make it easy for students to get help online and off-line — 24/7 help has to be one click or phone call away.
- Include *bells and whistles* only when motivated by the content — not to show off the technology or your technology skills.
- Don't slow down (or stop) students' progress with too many graphics, audio or video streaming, presentations, long documents, etc. It is very frustrating for a student to try to download a video clip on an old computer with a slow processor and slow transmission rate.
- Make the technology transparent — the emphasis should be on the content.
- Acknowledge that students will learn the content AND technology skills — both are important, and

gaining technology skills is an added bonus of learning online.

- Use asynchronous and synchronous methods to encourage interaction and information exchange — address the isolation of distance learning by creating opportunities to participate in and contribute to the learning community.

Step 5: Know What You Know

You bring more to the task of teaching and learning online than you may realize. Consider the following as you take your first steps into technology-based training and online courses:

- Begin with your content expertise and build from there.
- Factor in your knowledge of the learners.
- Build upon your technology skills and experiences.
- Use technology as a tool.
- See yourself as a teacher and a learner.
- Recognize the value of students gaining technology skills and course competencies.
- Stay connected with others who are teaching online.
- Understand that the technology will fail occasionally.
- Expect the unexpected.
- Reflect.

Teaching and learning online can be challenging, frustrating, infuriating, exciting, and rewarding — all within a few minutes. The challenges of teaching online include the time commitment, learning to use the technology, converting content and activities, trying to help low tech/no tech students use a high tech learning system, dealing with server downtimes and technology meltdowns, and trying to have an off-line life while keeping up with your online class.

So why do I enjoy teaching online? These comments from my on-line students should make it clear.

“For me the best part of taking this course was not being scared to participate. A shy person like myself finds it difficult at times in a big group to speak up. In this class I could comment on everything. . . . This class forces you to participate, and for someone like me I think it has taught me a little about speaking up (or typing out) my thoughts and feelings, or even to say that I don’t get it.”

“I’ve learned a tremendous amount of information from others and talking to them through the threaded discussions. It was a great opportunity to see how other centers work and handle such situations. I believe the best thing that this course allowed us as teachers and administrators was to actually speak our mind and reflect.”

“Because the students in the class are from a larger area, we hear about small town centers as well as big city centers and rural family child care homes. It is surprising to me how many times that we all agreed on the issues and solved our problems in the same ways.”

“I feel that the on-line courses are easier to

create a sense of community than traditional classroom settings. With on-line, we aren’t allowed to be biased, judgmental, or critical of appearances. We are all here to further our commitment to our professionalism, which gives us a great sense of camaraderie.”

I have enjoyed the process of teaching and learning online and despite the challenges and givens that create barriers to our success, I believe it is worth the time and effort for teachers and learners. When you create a sense of community online you realize it really is “A small world after all.”

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Distance Learning Web Sites and Internet Resources

- American Association for Higher Education — www.aahe.org/technology/ehrmann.htm
- American Association of School Librarians, Technology — www.ala.org/aasl/tech_menu.html
- American Center for the Study of Distance Education — www.ed.psu.edu/acsde/
- Bakersfield College Child Development Distance Learning — www2.bc.cc.ca.us/cddl/resources.html#theory
- College of DuPage Online — www.cod.edu/Online/index.htm
- Distance Education Online Symposium, DEOS-L — www.ed.psu.edu/acsde/deos-l/deosl.asp
- Distance Learning Links — www.nefec.org/isrdnet/pages/dlsitelink.htm#Training%20Sites
- Florida Gulf Coast University “Design Principles for On-Line Instruction” — www.fgcu.edu/onlinedesign
- Illinois Online Network — www.ion.illinois.edu/
- net.Tutor — The Ohio State University Libraries — <http://gateway.lib.ohio-state.edu/tutor/>
- Penn State's World Campus 101 — www.worldcampus.psu.edu/wc101/
- Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education — www.wiche.edu/telecom/Projects/balancing/principles.htm

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