

# Monitoring the Effectiveness of Professional Development through Quality Assurance

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Presented at the  
Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association  
New York City, March 24-28, 2008



# Florida Online Reading Professional Development (FOR-PD)

- Florida's first large-scale statewide online professional development project (state funded).
- The 14-week FOR-PD course designed to enable preK-12 educators to keep up to date with best instructional practices, evolving standards, scientifically-based research, and ever-changing needs of increasingly diverse students.
- Four types of Enrollment:
  - District and Open Enrollment sections for school district participants at no charge.
  - University and Community College Enrollment sections for college students at charge.
- Participants to date since 2003: Over 36,000 preK-12 educators from all (67) Florida's school districts, 7 state universities, and 6 community college Educator Preparation Institutes across the state.



# Community Development in Distance Education

- Effective communication between facilitators and participants can foster a sense of online community (Dawson, 2006) in a web-based program.
- Students are able to profit from building the synergies of individuals sharing common interests as they work towards shared knowledge and skills for shared purposes (Kilpatrick, Barrett, & Jones, 2003).
- Community development aids in the attraction and retention of learners (Rovai, 2002) as it provides academic, emotional, and social support, particularly for students who may be introverted or socially isolated.
- With the large increase in the development of online methods of professional development, the need for ongoing and well-embedded effective evaluation strategies for these programs is crucial.

# Quality Assurance

- Keegan (1996) proposed a way of ensuring quality through the evaluation of distance education programs that focuses on four aspects: the *quantity, quality, status, and relative cost* of learning.
- A process of quality assurance checks, when well designed and implemented, can help
  - Monitor and track the progress of facilitators and participants and allow for customized assistance for both populations in order to maximize the quality of their experiences.
  - Reaffirm projects' goals, keep major roles and responsibilities intact, provide a mechanism for measuring student progress on a broad-to-narrow scale, and inform and involve major stakeholders in analyzing results and suggesting strategies for change (Zygouris-Coe, Swan, & Ireland, in press).
  - Provide an opportunity for online facilitators and participants, who may be spread across a vast distance and never meet face to face, with the valuable support, improved communications, and positive feedback.

# Purpose of Study

- To present the results of evaluating the effectiveness of the FOR-PD course through quality assurance checks (QACs) in the spring of 2007.
- Research Questions
  - Were facilitators successful in facilitating the FOR-PD course according to findings from the QACs?
  - To what extent did participants make progress according to the QACs?
  - Were the QACs performed rigorously in terms of reliability?

# Population and Sampling

- 118 sections were offered in spring 2007: 53 District Enrollment, 52 Open Enrollment, 7 Community College (CC), and 6 University sections.
- 99 facilitators facilitated those sections.
  - 27% were new, and 73% were returning facilitators from previous semesters.
  - 81% facilitated one section, and 19% facilitated two sections at maximum.
  - No new facilitator facilitated more than one section.
  - One CC section was facilitated by two facilitators (a new and a returning).
- Sampling Process:
  - Priority was given to sections facilitated by new facilitators and sections of concern identified from the previous semester.
  - Convenient random sampling was also done to include more sections to check due to time constraints.
  - University sections were excluded from QACs this semester but have been performed in subsequent semesters.
- QACs were performed twice during the semester.
  - 1st check done for 108 (92%) sections including 2,640 participants.
  - 2nd check done for 58 (49%) of the 108 sections including 1,480 participants.

# Procedure

- As the quality assurance check specialist, the fourth author performed QACs twice for both facilitators and participants.
  - 1st check in weeks 2-3 of the 14-week course.
  - 2nd check in weeks 8-9 of the course.
- This was her third semester performing and reporting on QACs.

# Procedure: Facilitator Check

- Checkpoints - Facilitators' Requirements:
  - Welcome message (1st check)
  - “Meet Me Here” message in lesson one (1st check)
  - Discussion postings (1st and 2nd checks)
  - Grading on a regular basis (1st and 2nd checks)
- Course calendar was dropped as a check this semester because the project staff took on this responsibility due to a recommendation from the previous semester. Too many facilitators had missed the important deadline in the previous semester.
- Scores were rated on a “yes-no” scale where acceptable rate cutoffs had been predetermined.

# Procedure: Participant Check

- Participant Classification:
  - Up-to-date (those who kept on schedule)
  - Lagging (those who were behind two or more lessons)
  - Non-starters
  - Dropped out of the course
- Non-starters were defined as those who never logged in and started the course in the 1st check and as those who had not completed anything beyond lesson one in the 2nd check.
- Facilitators maintained contact with participants and were responsible for the contact of those who were lagging or non-starters by phone or email.
- The project staff sent out a bi-weekly newsletter to help participants stay on track with the course schedule.

# Data Analysis

- Descriptive statistics to analyze data from the facilitator and participant checks.
- As background information, completion rates and class sizes are also described in an effort to increase an understanding of the present study.
  - Completion rates were calculated in two ways: one as a ratio of the number of those who completed the course to the number enrolled and the other as a ratio of completers to starters.
  - Starters were defined as those who completed lesson one and completed at least part of lesson two of the 14-lesson course.

# Results: Description of the Course

TABLE 1 *Enrollment, completion, and class size of the FOR-PD course, spring 2007*

| Enrollment Type   | Section Offered | Enrollment     |               | Completion           |                     | Class Size |     |     |
|-------------------|-----------------|----------------|---------------|----------------------|---------------------|------------|-----|-----|
|                   |                 | Enrolled       | Starters*     | Enrolled & Completed | Started & Completed | AVG        | MIN | MAX |
| District          | 53<br>44.9%     | 1361<br>47.4%  | 968<br>71.1%  |                      | 756<br>78.1%        | 18.3       | 6   | 31  |
| Open              | 52<br>44.1%     | 1207<br>42.1%  | 866<br>71.7%  |                      | 673<br>77.7%        | 16.7       | 10  | 22  |
| Community College | 7<br>5.9%       | 166<br>5.8%    | 153<br>92.2%  |                      | 130<br>85.0%        | 21.9       | 11  | 26  |
| University        | 6<br>5.1%       | 135<br>4.7%    | 103<br>76.3%  |                      | 92<br>89.3%         | 17.2       | 10  | 22  |
| Total             | 118<br>100.0%   | 2869<br>100.0% | 2090<br>72.8% |                      | 1651<br>79.0%       | 17.7       | 6   | 31  |

\* Starters were defined as those who completed lesson one and completed at least part of lesson two of the 14-lesson course.



# Results: Description of the Sections

- 1st check done for 108 sections: 52 District Enrollment, 50 Open Enrollment, and 6 Community College sections.
  - These sections were facilitated by 92 facilitators, with 17 facilitating two sections.
  - 28% were new facilitators, and 72% were returning facilitators.
- 2nd check done for 58 (54%) of the 108 sections: 44 DE, 9 OE, and 5 CC sections.
  - These sections were facilitated by 52 facilitators, with six facilitating two sections.
  - 29% were new facilitators, and 71% were returning facilitators.
- One CC section facilitated by two facilitators was also included in the 1st and 2nd checks.

# Results: Facilitator Check

TABLE 2 *Results of facilitator checks, spring 2007*

| Frequency | # Requirement Met | # Section | % Section |
|-----------|-------------------|-----------|-----------|
| 1st Check | Five              | 97        | 89.8%     |
|           | Four              | 8         | 7.4%      |
|           | Three             | 3         | 2.8%      |
|           | Two               | 0         | 0.0%      |
|           | One               | 0         | 0.0%      |
|           | Total             | 108       | 100.0%    |
| 2nd Check | Two               | 56        | 96.6%     |
|           | One               | 1         | 1.7%      |
|           | Zero              | 1         | 1.7%      |
|           | Total             | 58        | 100.0%    |

*Note.* The 1st check included course calendar requirement for a documentation purpose. The course calendar was no longer part of the check.



# Results: Facilitator Check (Cont'd)

- Of the 11 sections that met at least four requirements in the 1st check, two were facilitated by new facilitators. Six were DE sections, four were OE sections, and the other was a CC section.
- Of the two sections that met below two requirements in the 2nd check, one (DE) was facilitated by a new facilitator who failed to meet both requirements, while one (OE) was facilitated by a returning facilitator who met only one requirement. These two facilitators had met four requirements in the 1st check.



# Results: Facilitator Check (Cont'd)

TABLE 3 *Detailed results of facilitator checks, spring 2007*

| Frequency | Checkpoint      | # Section Met | # Section Not Met | % Section Met | % Section Not Met |
|-----------|-----------------|---------------|-------------------|---------------|-------------------|
| 1st Check | Course Calendar | 108           | 0                 | 100.0%        | 0.0%              |
|           | Welcome Message | 107           | 1                 | 99.1%         | 0.9%              |
|           | Meet Me Here    | 101           | 7                 | 93.5%         | 6.5%              |
|           | Discussions     | 104           | 4                 | 96.3%         | 3.7%              |
|           | Grading         | 106           | 2                 | 98.1%         | 1.9%              |
| 2nd Check | Discussions     | 56            | 2                 | 96.6%         | 3.4%              |
|           | Grading         | 57            | 1                 | 98.3%         | 1.7%              |

*Note.* The 1st and 2nd checks were performed for 108 and 58 sections, respectively. Course calendar was included for a documentation purpose. The course calendar was no longer part of the check.

# Results: Participant Check

TABLE 4 *Results of participant checks, spring 2007*

| Checkpoint  | 1st Check |         | 2nd Check |         |
|-------------|-----------|---------|-----------|---------|
|             | Number    | Percent | Number    | Percent |
| Up-to-date  | 1675      | 63.4%   | 688       | 46.5%   |
| Lagging     | 294       | 11.1%   | 296       | 20.0%   |
| Non-starter | 415       | 15.7%   | 253       | 17.1%   |
| Dropped out | 256       | 9.7%    | 242       | 16.4%   |
| Total       | 2640      | 100.0%  | 1479      | 100.0%  |

*Note.* The 1st and 2nd checks were performed for 108 and 58 sections, respectively.

Those who kept on schedule decreased as the course progressed. This decrease might be in part due to the project policy, *Seven-Lesson Rule* where those who are behind seven or more lessons are automatically removed from the course.



# Results: Participant Check (Cont'd)

TABLE 5 Comparison of the 1st participant check by enrollment type, spring 2007

| Checkpoint  | District      | Open          | Community College | Total         |
|-------------|---------------|---------------|-------------------|---------------|
| Up-to-date  | 896<br>33.9%  | 674<br>25.5%  | 105<br>4.0%       | 1675<br>63.4% |
| Lagging     | 116<br>4.4%   | 169<br>6.4%   | 9<br>0.3%         | 294<br>11.1%  |
| Non-starter | 221<br>8.4%   | 185<br>7.0%   | 9<br>0.3%         | 415<br>15.7%  |
| Dropped out | 125<br>4.7%   | 130<br>4.9%   | 1<br>0.04%        | 256<br>9.7%   |
| Total       | 1358<br>51.4% | 1158<br>43.9% | 124<br>4.7%       | 2640<br>100%  |

*Note.* To calculate percentages each number was divided by the total number (n=2,640).

Because each DE section consisted of those who came from the same district, there was a possibility that DE sections were able to have much more professional support to make a strong sense of learning community than OE sections.

# Discussion

- Were facilitators successful in facilitating the FOR-PD course according to the QACs?
  - Success rates: 90% in the 1st check and 97% in the 2nd check.
  - Those who performed well in the 1st check were likely to perform well in the 2nd check.
  - Most facilitators were very active with participating in the course discussions and providing participants with frequent feedback throughout the course. They performed better in the discussions as the course progressed.
  - Most facilitators were able to maintain updated grading policies correctly and timely throughout the course.
  - New facilitators appeared to outperform returning facilitators in the 1st check. Because of a recently completed facilitator training, new facilitators would be much more aware of the FOR-PD requirements. However, almost all (regardless being new or returning) performed well in the 2nd check.



# Discussion (Cont'd)

- To what extent did participants make progress according to the QACs?
  - Keeping on schedule: 63% in the 1st check and 47% in the 2nd check.
  - An increase in those who were lagging, non-starters, or dropped as the course progressed.
  - The project staff and facilitators appeared to do their best to help participants keep on schedule. However, student attrition still remains a concern for the project.
  - When participants dropped or lagged behind, it was often due to personal reasons, for example, conflicts, time management, or some uncontrolled factors such as a death in the family or illness (Swan, Huh, Ramos, & Barbato, 2007).

# Discussion (Cont'd)

- Were the QACs performed rigorously in terms of reliability?
  - The procedures for the QACs were found to be well structured, documented, and updated, reflecting the changes in the project policies, the process, and the timing of when sections were opened.
  - The process was found to be well planned and performed consistently.
  - Time constraints still remain a concern, causing workload when there was a large volume of sections to check in a short period of time. Most of the sections opened and ended in a variety of time schedules.
  - The 2nd discussion check still remains a concern because there was no minimum requirement to check for the facilitator discussions. So, it was up to the QAC specialist to determine the number of the discussion postings to check. Further research is being undertaken to seek for optimal discussion check.



# Conclusions

- Quality assurance checks can be important to the success of an online professional development as they generate ongoing support for improvement.
- Procedures and process of QACs should be kept up to date in order to ensure that they reflect updates in project policies.
- Concerns still remain regarding the procedure for evaluating the quality of facilitator online discussions and the consistency of timing of the discussion check. It also caused some consideration into the reasoning and whether it was necessary to look at all sections, as opposed to a sample, for each of the checks. An action on these concerns may prove to strengthen the reliability of QACs.

# Conclusions (Cont'd)

- Further study is needed to
  - Improve the process of quality assurance checks.
  - Determine if the current process can be applicable for evaluating other online professional development courses in similar contexts.
  - Examine whether QACs can affect (or predict) participant completion rates, facilitators' participation in the QAC process, and participants' lasting progress in the course.

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- This research was sponsored in part by a grant from the Florida Department of Education (FLDOE) through the FLDOE *Just Read Florida!* Initiative. It was conducted at the University of Central Florida, Orlando. The funded project, FOR-PD, is directed by Dr. Vicky Zygouris-Coe, Principal Investigator. Dr. Bonnie Swan is the outside and lead evaluator on the project. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this research are those of the authors, and do not necessarily represent the official views or policies of FLDOE or UCF.