Venture Pitch

The Pro-D Room: Personalizing Professional Development

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July 29th, 2012

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Introduction:

The field of educational technology is growing daily, with more and more options arising for classroom/learning management systems, discussions, quizzes, and networking. One area of education that seems to have been overlooked so far, however, is professional development. While most new educational technologies focus on simplifying or enhancing the classroom by working with students, the Pro-D Room does the same by working with the lifelong learners who do the teaching: educators.

The Pitch:

Teachers around the world participate in professional development on a variety of topics and ideas, each meant to enrich their teaching and help to keep instruction current and successful for students at all levels. For most teachers, however, professional development means attending workshops, simply because they are what is available at the time, regardless of that teacher's interest, the relevance of the topic to their teaching, or the expertise of the instructor. In all of these ways, the Pro-D Room meets the needs of individual educators and school districts while bringing the focus to personalizing professional development to keep teachers' lifelong learning practical, relevant, and accessible.

The Pro-D Room is a web site that offers webinars for professional development. The webinars take a variety of different forms, including the four models identified by Haddad and Draxler (2002), but each one is designed by an expert in the topic to be completed within a few hours, easily fitting within a designated professional development day. The courses are designed and taught by experts in their fields, coming from colleges, universities, museums, and school boards. Each instructor must first go through an intensive interview process with the Pro-D

Room team to ensure that they meet our high standards of knowledge and instruction. Once their course is reviewed and prepared it is added to the Pro-D Room's list of offerings. From that point on it is available for educators. Some courses are available anytime, as they rely on a lecture style format, whereas others that depend more on discussion and personal contact will have specific times and dates. If there is interest in attending a specific course at a set date and time that is not listed, the group of educators (for example, a school) can contact the Pro-D Room team and every effort will be made to organize the course to meet their schedule when possible.

For every course that an instructor teaches they will be given free access to another course of their choice, as well as a commission for every student who successfully completes the course. This is beneficial to students as well, given that their instructor's income is dependent upon good teaching – if the instructor does a poor job the students will not pass the assessment (see below for more info) and they will not receive payment.

Once a teacher completes a course at the Pro-D Room they are required to complete a simple assessment to ensure that they understood the content (and that they actually attended the session), after which a confirmation email will be sent. If there is a need for confirmation to be sent to a governing body like a school district or province the Pro-D Room will do so.

In all of these ways, the Pro-D Room provides professional development that is personalized to meet teachers' interests, classroom learning needs, and schedules. It ensures that teachers are engaging in meaningful learning, rather than simply completing a requirement.

The Market:

Demand for professional development for teachers is a constant, both for new teachers and for those with experience. Most teachers are required by contract to complete a certain number of hours of professional development, ensuring that there will always be a need for such programs. As technology is on the rise, with more technology being used in daily life and in the classroom, it makes sense that professional development would migrate to this medium as well. As Representative George Miller, the Chair of the House Education and Labor Committee (United States) suggests, "adopting more rigorous standards won't count for much if we don't ensure teachers have access to the training and mentoring they need to help students meet higher expectations"(2009). The Pro-D Room ensures that teachers around the world have access to experts from around the world, rather than only being able to learn from those who are local to them, making the professional development experience much more beneficial for all involved.

Although there are always some high level programs available to teachers for professional development, these programs are most often very small, distant, or expensive, making it very difficult for the majority of educators to access them (Hill, 2009). Bringing high quality professional development to more teachers expands the market, as experts become available at a lower cost through the Pro-D Room, with no need for travel expenses. In this way, the Pro-D Room's low cost courses can reach teachers with all variety of pro-d budgets, ensuring that it is accessible despite the level of funding that individuals have.

The main problems with current professional development offerings, as identified by Gabriel Diaz-Maggioli (2004), include a lack of teacher choice, inaccessibility, lack of practical classroom application, and too little awareness of teachers' own learning styles. By putting course selection in the hands of individual teachers, creating online courses, including a variety

of practical topics, and allowing for lecture, discussion and other approaches, the Pro-D Room addresses these issues and meets the needs of teachers and pro-d planners.

The Competition:

The online professional development market consists mostly of formal courses offered as part of larger certificate or degree programs, but there is very little that offers short term courses for educators. The main online competition for the Pro-D Room comes from My Learning Plan (www.mylearningplan), which has been helping organize professional development since 1999. Though successful, My Learning Plan focuses upon helping to organize professional development for schools and individuals and does not offer courses, meaning that the Pro-D Room could work with the site instead of in direct competition with it. Once established, there may even be potential to collaborate with the already successful site to advertise the Pro-D Room.

Given that there are not other sites that offer multiple courses for professional development, the Pro-D Room's main competition will come from already existing forms of pro-d, namely those that are already operating offline in school districts around the world. Given how many programs are shifting to online, it is reasonable to see professional development moving in the same direction. As well, if teachers are able to easily access relevant pro-d for the same or less cost than the offline options, school districts will see the benefits of making the switch to the Pro-D Room.

Future Outlook & Start-up Costs:

Over the next year the Pro-D Room is seeking investment in order to establish a working site and begin marketing, initially for instructors. Once a solid base of instructors and courses is

established this marketing will be expanded to attract students. The goal is to begin running courses within a year. For this phase marketing will be aimed at union publications, district websites, school boards, and colleges and universities that offer education programs. Initially the focus will be on North America and other English speaking instructors or students, though once again when this element of the venture is established it will be expanded to support more languages.

The Team:

The President and CEO, Meggan Crawford, has worked as a K-12 classroom teacher, with the majority of her time in secondary school. She has also worked in distance education for first year university courses. Her background in Educational Technology and her experience in running professional development courses for colleagues led her to create Pro-D Room to fill a need she saw on a daily basis. When professional development days came around, teachers were presented with workshops ranging from publisher's expos, to make your own chain maille, but their relevancy and teacher interest was never clear. As teachers were attending workshops simply to fill the day and gaining nothing as a result, the Pro-D Room was the ideal solution.

The rest of the leadership team at the Pro-D Room is made up of individuals with experience in teaching, running professional development workshops, web design, and technical support. Together, they make up a powerful group who are ready to tackle the exciting future of this venture!

Conclusions:

As technology becomes more and more prevalent in education it is only logical that teachers should benefit as well as students. With a global need for professional development the

Pro-D Room overcomes the main concerns with current programs and opens the doors to an entirely new vision of lifelong learning. Professional development should be a continuous process that does not stop when educators complete their teacher education (Turcsányi-Szabó, 2008) and with a more accessible approach, like the Pro-D Room, this becomes a more attainable goal. As the venture expands it will reach the needs of more and more individual teachers as the diversity of courses increases, while the course offerings can also adjust to address new educational theories, approaches, and topics. In other words, the Pro-D Room is well suited to current and future needs given its flexibility and the ease with which it can be expanded and focused on personal interests.

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