

Webinars: A Healthy Ingredient in Your Program's Professional Development Diet

by Fran Simon

Change comes slowly to early education. In some ways, this slow evolution has helped the field retain some of the best approaches, but in other ways it has been an impediment. However, the age of the internet has kicked off one change that has revolutionized the options for consuming information: delivery of professional development online. In fact, webinars, which are only one type of online delivery method, have become ubiquitous. A slew of colleges, companies, and organizations offer an irresistible feast of information specifically for our field! Increasingly, webinars are becoming part of life for early education, just like they have risen to prominence in other industries. It is exciting and captivating to have so many easy-to-access options for learning. This trend, like all other advancements, is also controversial.



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I have a difficult admission to share: Just between you and me, I have serious concerns about webinars for professional development in early care and education. Even though I am obviously a major proponent of the medium, in my opinion, nothing should ever totally replace ongoing, live experiences offered in person. However, webinars can be incredibly powerful if used with careful planning as a part of what I call a healthy professional development diet.

Admitting there is anything less than wonderful about webinars is almost shameful for me because, for the past eight years, I have produced and hosted a series of webinars specifically for early educators presented by some of the most accomplished experts in early education. And, despite my concerns about webinars, I will continue to offer the webinars for as long as I can. In fact, the webinars are my passion. Literally *nothing* gives me greater joy because the webinars enable me to connect experts with learners so they can share knowledge with the hard-working professionals who directly work with children and families all over the world. Without this powerful medium, hundreds of thousands of early educators would be deprived of the opportunity to encounter the insight and inspiration offered by leaders and experts who

would otherwise be inaccessible. To me, webinars are about expanding access and doing my part to build capacity.

What Is a Webinar, Anyway?

Just to be clear: Webinars are live presentations presented through the internet and accessed by computers and mobile devices. They are often recorded so participants can watch when it is convenient. Webinars offer great promise because they are so accessible, are relatively affordable, and allow presenters to collect a lot of data about learners' level of engagement. The systems used to deliver webinars offer excellent functionality to engage learners and replicate live, in-person learning experiences. Webinars are like very large conference presentations because presenters do most of the talking and participants have some (limited) opportunities to communicate with each other and/or the presenter. Often, in a conference presentation and in webinars, the presenter shares slides, websites, videos, and speaks with participants.

Be Intentional about Using Webinars

To be successful using webinars as part of the overall professional develop-

ment plan, you, as a supervisor and/or the learner, must be intentional about how they are used. Let's take a deeper look into what you can do to mitigate the pitfalls and take advantage of the benefits.

First and foremost, without planning and intention you will not derive as much benefit from webinars as other types of professional development. Many webinars, especially those offered by third-party providers, might be used as 'drive-by training' that's offered once, out of context of scaffolded learning experience. Your role is to use framing, reflection, assessment, coaching, and mentoring to ensure the webinar experience is meaningful.

Drive-by training is *dreadful*, so this is my number one pet peeve about my series. However, I believe that offering thousands of early educators access to concepts, theories, and actionable ideas presented by experts who typically can only be seen and heard at conferences or in college classrooms is an important method of building capacity. So, I forge ahead and consider my webinar series 'appetizers' in the healthy professional development diet. The way I see it, webinars — whether offered by third-party entities or by your own organization — can be the foretastes of content that tease participants' appetites and set the table for deeper learning. The important part is that participants can learn from experts who might otherwise not be accessible — no matter where they are located.

Incorporating Webinars: The Healthy Professional Development Diet

The purpose of this article is to provide you with a new lens through which to intentionally plan professional development and sort out strategies to incorporate webinars. The main idea is to offer

professional development that is intentionally balanced by delivery, method, content, the staff's needs as a whole, and the individual needs of each of the staff members. While it is common to think about content for professional development (PD), supervisors and administrators don't often consider balancing professional development by method of delivery. A balanced professional development diet includes continuing education that includes formal training, on-the-job experiences, coaching, mentoring, readings, reflections, self-assessments, or other extensions, conferences, networking, peer-to-peer experiences, and online learning. In an ideal healthy professional development diet, all of the delivery mediums, whether online or in person, should be blended to meet the needs of learners and the budget of the program or the learner.

The adjacent chart illustrates an example of what a balanced diet might look like for the staff as a whole or to an individual staff member. Bear in mind that no two plans would be the same due to time, funding, and resources, but the chart is a visual for your consideration.

As you can see, this intentional approach to planning professional development emphasizes on-the-job experiences, coaching, and 'face-to-face' onsite or offsite formal training experiences, but also incorporates both webinars or synchronous (at the same time) and asynchronous (self-paced) e-learning. In the fictitious example above, almost 20 percent of the plan is online learning. While that is a lot of online learning, it is a reality that online learning is often more affordable and accessible than other types of professional development, so administrators might plan to use a lot of online learning experiences due to budgetary restraints.

But, caution! What you cannot see on this chart is the context in which any of these strategies are being used. For

example, every type of professional development experience should include some type of 'framing' experience before the training to provide context, and some form of accountability and oversight after the experience. This might mean staff members would complete reflections forms, learning assessments, implementation plans, and/or participate in follow-up debriefing sessions in which they share what they have learned with other staff members. It is not enough to just attend or send staff to any formal training experience because they must have a specific number of hours without providing some context for why they should attend, the intended expectations, and a plan for the outcome. Just like children, adult learners retain and apply information from formal training when they have opportunities to reflect on and test their knowledge. Certificates are not enough to ensure participants learned anything. While certificates are important for ongoing workforce development and career lattices, they only prove attendance, not participation or retention, unless required before the certificate is issued. This is where supervisors' expectations and oversight come into the equation. The big idea here is to look carefully at the needs of the staff in your program as a group and individually to determine what ideal means in your context.

Let's look at an example of how one administrator applied the Healthy Professional Development Diet approach to using webinars in his program (see sidebar).

Use Your Media Literacy Skills to Pick Credible Webinars

Not all webinars are created equal in terms of intention, content quality, presenter qualifications, and context. Webinars are so ubiquitous that they sometimes are hosted and presented

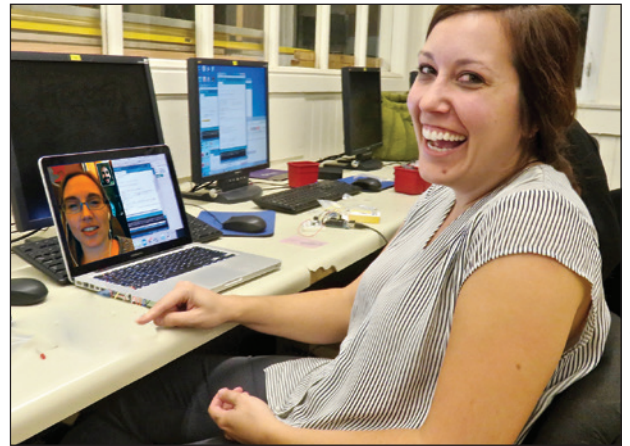
by companies with hidden agendas and presenters who are not qualified. Without careful vetting, participants might think they are learning from experts, but in fact the webinar might be a cleverly designed product pitch delivered by a presenter who is not really an expert on the subject. It is important to research the source of the webinar and the presenters' qualifications.

There are also reasons to worry about the participants' level of engagement in webinars. While it is easy and possible to offer engaging experiences on webinars if the hosts and presenters know how to use the software well, unfortunately, many webinar producers don't use the powerful tools for creating engaging webinars. The results are often boring, uninspiring, and irrelevant experiences. Look for webinars that include open-ended questions to participants, polling questions, video vignettes, web cams, and opportunities to ask questions of the presenters. Require staff members to complete a Reflections Form and share their newly acquired knowledge with others in your organization. Help them plan to use what they have learned or follow up with more resources.

We know that the best learning experiences include as much interactivity between the learners and the presenter as possible, including breakout discussions and hands-on learning. While these activities can be replicated in smaller webinars, they are difficult to offer in very large webinars.

Summing It Up

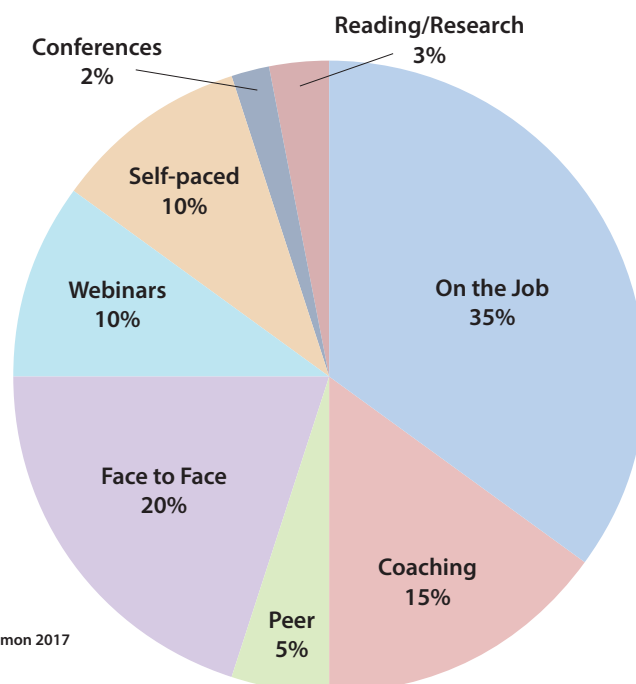
Embracing the concept of a healthy professional development diet helps educators work around the pitfalls and take advantage of the primary benefit of webinars: spanning time and distance affordably and efficiently. Using the same level of intention you use with children in your program, you can take advantage of the power of webinars for continuous quality improvement.



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Example: Healthy Professional Media Diet



Sam is the director of a multi-site child care program that serves children ages two through five in an underserved community in Boston. Through observation, he noticed that the teachers were spending, on average, less than ten minutes per week on experiences designed to facilitate learning in math. He determined the teachers needed inspiration and formal training to bolster their ability to help children learn mathematical concepts. He researched training opportunities and identified a webinar on basic strategies for early education math experiences being presented by a national expert. The description indicated the webinar would provide actionable practices teachers could implement immediately to improve math exploration in their classrooms. He planned objectives for a new six-month long initiative to improve the staff members' understanding of math concepts called the "Path to Math" campaign. The plan included:

- a program-wide Path to Math Kick-off Rally (meeting) in which he announced the initiative, laid out objectives and expectations, and assigned a Path to Math self-assessment and simple readings to be completed prior to the webinar.
- a required Reflections Form to be completed after the webinar.
- three math learning lab sessions in which staff worked together to set up and practice the concepts and activities described in the webinar, brainstormed their own ideas, and planned individual "projects" that required they implement some of their ideas, observe and record the outcomes, and share the results in the final lab.
- small group coaching sessions with Sam and a math expert.
- a Path to Math Family Celebration for families to attend and participate in activities with their children.

Once the plan was laid out, staff members were all required to participate in the webinar. Some attended the live session in a group watching in the conference room along with Sam, and some watched the recorded webinar, so it was possible to cover all the classrooms without a substitute.

By the end of the six-month campaign, the teachers in Sam's programs were excited about facilitating math experiences and balancing their comprehensive program with all content areas. The teachers who participated in the program mentored new teachers as they refined their ability to integrate math in their classrooms, and the learning experience was sustained for years.

Sam used a similar approach for other topics. He took care to ensure that online professional development experiences were balanced with more traditional approaches and that teachers always had objectives and follow-up for every webinar, live formal training, video, or e-learning experience.