



# Online Professional Learning Quality Checklist

---

November 2014

## Purpose of This Tool

Quality online professional learning is sometimes tough to recognize, yet most district leaders find themselves tasked with making decisions about which potentially costly and resource-intensive learning options are worth investing in.

The primary purpose of this quality checklist is to help busy district leaders, including central office staff, building administrators, and teacher leaders, identify effective online learning options to recommend for their educators. The checklist provides an efficient way to evaluate discrete activities based on their content, characteristics, and format. When completed, the checklist shows decision makers at a glance which online activities will likely help educators further their district's student learning and improvement goals and which ones are of high enough quality to count as part of the formal learning options considered for professional learning credit. It will also guide district leaders in selecting ongoing learning options in which to invest time and staff resources.

Secondarily, this quality checklist could be used by individual educators to select learning experiences in which to participate or by those who are creating or developing online learning experiences as a way of assuring that best practice is adhered to at the design level.

This checklist is part of the *Future Ready Schools: Empowering Educators through Professional Learning* toolkit and can be found at [tech.ed.gov/FutureReady/Professional-Learning](http://tech.ed.gov/FutureReady/Professional-Learning).<sup>1</sup>

## General Principles of Effective Practice in Online Professional Learning

Online learning that follows certain basic principles (as outlined in the following list) typically provides a solid learning experience. The following statements will help not only to assess the potential value of an online learning experience but also to provide a foundation for understanding effective practice for online learning as part of a larger professional learning context. These principles and characteristics are substantiated by the References listed at the end of this tool, and they align with the research and standards base illustrated in the *Professional Learning Strategies Self-Assessment Tool* and *The Future Ready District Brief*.

---

<sup>1</sup>This publication also contains URLs for information created and maintained by private organizations. This information is provided for the reader's convenience. The U.S. Department of Education is not responsible for controlling or guaranteeing the accuracy, relevance, timeliness, or completeness of this information. Further, the inclusion of information or URL does not reflect the importance of the organization, nor is it intended to endorse any views expressed or products or services offered.

Informal and formal online professional learning should accomplish all of the following:

- Align with district or school student learning and improvement goals
- Embed technology in the learning experience to build capacity to advance student learning, creativity, and innovation in ways that can be generalized to both face-to-face and virtual learning environments
- Support educators in achieving mastery around subject matter knowledge and/or pedagogical skills
- Increase educators' abilities to pose questions and solve problems collaboratively by increasing their digital literacy
- Promote opportunities for self-actualization and growth of the individual
- Promote opportunities for collective growth of a group learning as a team
- Facilitate opportunities to make connections with people that could result in new innovations or initiatives
- Allow for opportunities for co-construction of knowledge and negotiation of meaning
- Promote reflection through the use of collaborative online tools
- Result in a process or product that could be immediately implemented in practice
- Include content that is both of quality and validated by research
- Support change in practice through follow-up, sharing, and documenting the change beyond the initial knowledge development

Online learning experiences share some characteristics of effectiveness. These common characteristics play out differently in specific types of online learning experiences. The criteria in this quality checklist represent the unique characteristics of several common online learning activity types: webinars, hashtag Twitter chats, online conferences, massive open online courses (MOOCs), online courses more generally, and online communities of practice. Each of these formats is outlined in the checklist. These general characteristics also can be applied to other types of activities.

## Characteristics of Effectiveness in Specific Experiences

A high-quality online professional learning experience can be characterized by the following attributes:

- Supports active rather than passive participation
- Is grounded in empirical theories and models of learning
- Aligns purposefully with student outcomes as well as individual educator and organizational learning goals
- Is engaging and relevant
- Is paced and timed appropriately
- Is led or designed by skilled online facilitators
- Establishes a set of norms for participation

## Instructions for Using This Checklist

Please use the checklist in each of the following categories to determine whether the online learning event you are evaluating is rated red (does not meet the criteria), yellow (meets enough of the criteria), or green (meets most of the criteria). Use the “notes” section to add your comments as you reflect on your options.

# Webinars

Webinars are Web-based synchronous events conducted using video conferencing software, such as Adobe Connect, WebEx, or Google Hangouts. The term also applies to the archived recordings of the webinars.

Because some of the criteria for webinars are difficult to distinguish in advance, it is advisable to have participants check for quality during the webinar using this tool and then share feedback as a means of guiding future choices in webinar providers and sessions.

Criteria	Status	Notes
Aligns with the general principles of best practice listed on page 1		
States clearly the purpose, goals, and outcomes for the webinar		
Uses highly interactive, facilitated approach instead of lecture. Some techniques might include the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Polling</li> <li>• Active questioning</li> <li>• Collective wondering</li> <li>• Encouraging and modeling use of back channel chatting</li> <li>• Co-creating learning objects on the whiteboard</li> </ul>		
Led by seasoned facilitators who are knowledgeable about the topic to be presented		
Facilitates the contributions of participants in ways that enhance the intended topic of discussion. These techniques may include the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open-ended, thought-provoking, questioning techniques that draw on personal as well as professional experiences</li> <li>• Protocols to help learners connect around shared problems or possibilities</li> <li>• Paraphrasing of participants' contributions as well as comparisons and contrasts between participants' views</li> </ul>		
Provides options for active learning, such as the ability to contribute to webinar discussions and to make comments on content and materials		
Emphasizes sharing of experiences among participants		
Creates a general sense of trust among participants as evidenced by willingness to share failures and works in progress		
Takes advantage of the available features of the platform—such as backchannel chat, polls, video, and whiteboard—to present content and engage participants		
Produces archives for anytime-anywhere learning and content review		
Limits group size or encourages the use of breakout rooms, enabling personal sharing in smaller groups		

Here are possible ways to show evidence of the learning event's value add through documentation and artifact collection as a means of credentialing or determining the quality for awarding professional learning credits:

**LOW-LEVEL EVIDENCE**

- Certificate of participation or badge
- Archive of the webinar

**MEDIUM-LEVEL EVIDENCE**

- Results from a quiz or test based on content covered in the webinar
- Completed template that demonstrates learning acquired

**HIGH-LEVEL EVIDENCE**

- Blog post with deep reflection about what was learned
- Documented change in practice and corresponding effect on students related to new knowledge and skills resulting from participation

# Hashtag Twitter Chat

A hashtag Twitter chat is a prearranged chat that happens on Twitter through the use of Twitter status updates (called tweets) that include a predefined hashtag (such as #edchat) to link those tweets together in a virtual conversation.

Criteria	Status	Notes
Aligns with the general principles of best practice listed on page 1		
Is facilitated by hosts skilled in online moderation. Effective facilitation techniques include the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open-ended, thought-provoking questioning techniques that draw on personal as well as professional experiences</li> <li>• Protocols to help learners connect around shared problems or possibilities</li> <li>• Paraphrasing of participants' contributions as well as comparisons and contrasts between participants' views</li> </ul>		
Uses precrafted questions to provide a structure within which more spontaneous give and take can occur		
Encourages participants to share resources, such as webpages and videos, via links during the chat		
Is part of a regular series of chats rather than a one-time event		
Encourages participants to share their learning outputs using a <a href="#">Creative Commons license</a>		

Here are possible ways to show evidence of the learning event's value add through documentation and artifact collection as a means of credentialing or determining the quality for awarding of professional learning credits:

## LOW-LEVEL EVIDENCE

- Transcript of chat participation

## MEDIUM-LEVEL EVIDENCE

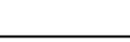
- Bookmarked collection of resources shared

## HIGH-LEVEL EVIDENCE

- Blog post reflecting on the learning experience
- Documented changes in practice and corresponding effect on students resulting from participation

# Online Conference

An online conference is an online version of the traditional conference with virtual participation. It can be a blended approach to conference participation that supports both face-to-face and online attendance or a stand-alone online event.

Criteria	Status	Notes
Aligns with the general principles of best practice listed on page 1		
States clear purpose, goals, and outcomes for the conference		
Provides opportunities for self and collective reflection throughout		
Makes available opportunities for collaborative construction of knowledge		
Provides opportunities for intentional matching or connecting of attendees		
Organizes around multiple time zones for global participation		
Offers a diversity of presenters and topics around specific themes or strands		
Encourages participation from individuals, teams, or collectives		
Sponsors or encourages informal gatherings or social experiences between sessions for individuals and organizations to connect and learn informally from one another		
Provides easily accessible and archived session recordings and materials		
Furnishes transcripts in different languages when international in scope		
Supplies resource lists for learning more and presenter contact information with each session		
Uses help desk and scaled technical support for participants		
Provides broad access and availability (e.g., limiting file sizes and offering multiple formats)		
Encourages participants to share their learning outputs using a <a href="#">Creative Commons license</a>		

Here are possible ways to show evidence of the learning event’s value add through documentation and artifact collection as a means of credentialing or determining the quality for awarding of professional learning credits:

## LOW-LEVEL EVIDENCE

- Certificate of active participation in conference activities
- Comments made during or about presentations, within the conference tools or on social media

**MEDIUM-LEVEL EVIDENCE**

- Badges earned for participation

**HIGH-LEVEL EVIDENCE**

- URL of a blog dedicated to reflections related to participation
- Documented changes in practice and corresponding effect on students resulting from attendance

# MOOC

MOOC refers to a Web-based class designed to support a very large number of participants.

Criteria	Status	Notes
Aligns with the general principles of best practice listed on page 1	  	
States clearly the goals and objectives of the learning to take place in the MOOC experience	  	
Provides accurate, complete, clear, and accessible content	  	
Uses a variety of multimedia and interactive media	  	
Allows for ongoing formative and summative assessment of the learning	  	
Provides multiple pathways for learners throughout	  	
Encourages and expects high levels of reflection in online spaces	  	
Expects learners to take control of their own learning; this is not something done to them, but rather something they create for themselves	  	
Encourages diverse perspectives	  	
Expects learners to communicate extensively and share on blogs, discussion boards, or other online venues	  	
Encourages high levels of collaboration	  	
Encourages participants to share their learning outputs using a <a href="#">Creative Commons license</a>	  	
Supplies resource lists for learning more and presenter contact information with each session	  	
Uses help desk and scaled technical support for participants	  	
Provides broad access and availability (e.g., limiting file sizes and offering multiple formats)	  	

Here are possible ways to show evidence of the learning event’s value add through documentation and artifact collection as a means of credentialing or determining the quality for awarding of professional learning credits:

## LOW-LEVEL EVIDENCE

- Certificate of active participation in open online activities

## MEDIUM-LEVEL EVIDENCE

- Badges earned with preset criteria of specific learning outcomes
- Course assessment results

## **HIGH-LEVEL EVIDENCE**

- URL of a blog dedicated to reflections
- e-Portfolio with artifacts of participation, such as discussion forums, blog posts, and other multimedia reflection

# Online Course

An online course is composed of a specific set of loosely structured learning objectives and outcomes that are supported with online activities, tools, and interactions. It can be self-paced or facilitated by an instructor.

Criteria	Status	Notes
Aligns with the general principles of best practice listed on page 1		
States clearly the goals and objectives of the learning to take place in the course		
Aligns meaningful content objectives with evidence of mastery in a manner appropriate for an online learning environment		
Presents course content activities that are of sufficient rigor, depth, and breadth to stimulate higher-order thinking skills		
Supports the development of self-directed learners		
Enables learners to customize the course according to their needs and preferences, individually and collectively		
Provides multiple opportunities for self-assessment and reflection		
Offers multiple opportunities for interaction among learners, between learners and the instructor, and between learners and content		
Encourages transparent thinking and sharing		
Presents or enables a global or diverse perspective		
Enables co-construction of knowledge		
Encompasses a design that is inclusive and accessible to all learners		
Uses a variety of technology tools that are appropriate and effective for facilitating online learning		
Expects learners to take control of their own learning; this is not something done to them but rather something they create for themselves		
Encourages participants to share their learning outputs using a Creative Commons license		
Led by instructors and facilitators who are highly qualified in adult learning and have subject matter expertise		
Encourages the growth of relationships among participants that continue beyond the span of the course		

Here are possible ways to show evidence of the learning event's value add through documentation and artifact collection as a means of credentialing or determining the quality for awarding of professional learning credits:

**LOW-LEVEL EVIDENCE**

- Documentation or “certificates” of involvement and completion
- Badges earned by showing evidence of specific outcomes

**MEDIUM-LEVEL EVIDENCE**

- Instructor evaluations and participant feedback
- Evidence of goals met in a district- or school-created professional learning plan
- Grades aligned with graduate credit or CEU requirements

**HIGH-LEVEL EVIDENCE**

- Portfolio of artifacts created during the course (e.g., discussion threads and chat transcripts)
- Artifacts of project work
- Reflections captured on blogs, videos, podcasts, or tools such as VoiceThread

# Online Community of Practice

An online community of practice is a group of individuals who share a practice and interact regularly about it to advance their collective knowledge using online tools. For the purposes of this checklist, online communities include both those anyone can join and those open only to members of a particular group or organization.

Criteria	Status	Notes
Aligns with the general principles of best practice listed on page 1		
Has a clearly stated purpose and domain of interest		
Employs trained and skilled community facilitators, who receive appropriate support from the community sponsor		
Evidences active and consistent participation		
Displays culture of inquiry and promotes deep thinking		
Promotes co-construction of knowledge, including collaboration around common outcomes and opportunities to innovate and create new ideas		
Promotes collective responsibility for the community goals: Members set the learning agenda for the community, and leadership is distributed across the membership		
Attends to building and sustaining social bonds among members, including through intentional trust building, regularly celebrating successes, and frequently providing opportunities for socializing		
Builds a shared body of knowledge in the community's domain, including models and examples		
Uses technology that is appropriate to the purposes and activities of the community and is accessible to and usable by its members		
Integrates face-to-face interactions and participation in social networks		
Encourages participants to share their learning outputs using a <a href="#">Creative Commons license</a>		

Here are possible ways to show evidence of the learning event's value add through documentation and artifact collection as a means of credentialing or determining the quality for awarding of professional learning credits:

## LOW-LEVEL EVIDENCE

- Analytics and metrics of user participation and contribution

## MEDIUM-LEVEL EVIDENCE

- Badges earned with preset criteria of specific learning outcomes or uses of the community spaces

## **HIGH-LEVEL EVIDENCE**

- Artifacts of member-created content analysis of conversations around practice as aligned with district or school improvement goals
- Portfolio of artifacts created during engagement within the community (i.e., discussion threads, shared videos, and negotiation of meaning with others)
- Artifacts of project work
- Documented changes in practice resulting from participation
- Documentation of action research plans and implementation

# References

---

- Anderson, T. (1977). Analysis of a global online debate and the development of an interaction analysis model for examining social construction of knowledge in computer conferencing. *Journal of Educational Computing Research*, 17(4), 397–431.
- Annenberg Institute for School Reform. (2004). *Professional learning communities: Professional development strategies that improve instruction*. Providence, RI: Author. Retrieved from <http://annenberginstitute.org/pdf/proflearning.pdf>
- Atkins, D. E., Bennett, J., Brown, J. S., Chopra, A., Dede, C., Fishman, B., et al. (2010). *Transforming American education: Learning powered by technology*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Barab, S. A., MaKinster, J. G., & Scheckler, R. (2003). Designing system dualities: Characterizing a web-supported professional development community. *Information Society*, 19(3), 237–256.
- Bersin, J. (2004). *The blended learning book: Best practices, proven methodologies and lessons learned*. San Francisco, CA: Pfeiffer.
- Boettcher, J., & Conrad, R. (2010). *The online teaching survival guide: Simple and practical pedagogical tips*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Bottoms, G., & Schmidt-Davis, J. (2010). *The three essentials: improving schools requires district vision, district and state support, and principal leadership (10V16)*. Atlanta, GA: Southern Regional Education Board. Retrieved from <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/school-leadership/district-policy-and-practice/Documents/Three-Essentials-to-Improving-Schools.pdf>
- Dede, C., Breit, L., Ketelhut, D. J., McCloskey, E., & Whitehouse, P. (2005). *An overview of current findings from empirical research on online teacher professional development*. Retrieved from <http://www.academia.edu/2857333/An-overview-of-current-findings-from-empirical-research-on-online-teacher-professional-development>
- Department of Education & Training. (2005). *Professional learning in effective schools: The seven principles of highly effective professional learning*. Retrieved from <https://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/teachlearn/teacher/ProfLearningInEffectiveSchools.pdf>
- de Schutter, A., Fahrni, P., & Rudolph, J. (2004). Best practices in online conference moderation. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 5(1). Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ852069.pdf>
- de Ward, I., Abajian, S., Gallagher, M., Hogue, R., Keskin, N., Koutropoulos, A., & Rodriguez, O. (2011). Using mLearning and MOOCs to understand chaos, emergence, and complexity in education. The

- International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 12(7). Retrieved from <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/1046>
- Collier, L. (2007). The shift to 21st-century literacies. *Council Chronicle*, 17(2), 4–8. Retrieved from <http://www.stenhouse.com/assets/pdfs/ccnov07shift.pdf>
- Fullan, M. (2007). *The new meaning of educational change* (4th ed.). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Grünewald, F., Meinel, C., Totschnig, M., & Willems, C. (2013). Designing MOOCs for the support of multiple learning styles. *Scaling up Learning for Sustained Impact—Lecture Notes in Computer Science*, 8095, 371–382. Retrieved from [http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-642-40814-4\\_29](http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-642-40814-4_29)
- Hanover Research Council. (n.d.). *Best practices in online teaching strategies*. Retrieved from <http://www.uwec.edu/AcadAff/resources/edtech/upload/Best-Practices-in-Online-Teaching-Strategies-Membership.pdf>
- International Society for Technology in Education. (2008). *Standards: NETS for teachers*. Retrieved from [http://www.iste.org/docs/pdfs/20-14\\_ISTE\\_Standards-T\\_PDF.pdf](http://www.iste.org/docs/pdfs/20-14_ISTE_Standards-T_PDF.pdf)
- International Society for Technology in Education. (2009). *Standards: NETS for administrators*. Retrieved from [http://www.iste.org/docs/pdfs/20-14\\_ISTE\\_Standards-A\\_PDF.pdf](http://www.iste.org/docs/pdfs/20-14_ISTE_Standards-A_PDF.pdf)
- Ivanova, M. (2009, April). *From personal learning environment building to professional learning network forming*. Paper presented at the 5th International Scientific Conference: eLearning and Software for Education, Bucharest, Romania. Retrieved from <http://adlunap.ro/else2009/papers/1001.1.Ivanova.pdf>
- Jaques, D., & Salmon, G. (2006). *Learning in groups: A handbook for face-to-face and online environments* (4th ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Jenkins, H. (2006). *Confronting the challenges of participatory culture: Media education for the 21st century*. Retrieved from [https://mitpress.mit.edu/sites/default/files/titles/free\\_download/9780262513623\\_Confronting\\_the\\_Challenges.pdf](https://mitpress.mit.edu/sites/default/files/titles/free_download/9780262513623_Confronting_the_Challenges.pdf)
- Jill, B. F. (n.d.). *Active learning: Theories and research*. Retrieved from [http://www.lookstein.org/online\\_journal.php?id=260](http://www.lookstein.org/online_journal.php?id=260)
- Jones, D. (2010). Best practices for designing third party applications for contextually-aware tools. In *Proceedings of the 28th ACM International Conference on Design of Communication* (pp. 95–102). New York, NY: ACM.
- Lai, K. W., Pratt, K., Anderson, M., & Stigter, J. (2006). *Literature review and synthesis: Online communities of practice*. Retrieved from <http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/curriculum/5795>
- Lewis, J. H., & Romiszowski, A. (1996). Networking and the learning organization: Networking issues and scenarios for the 21st century. *Journal of Instructional Science and Technology*, 1(4). Retrieved from <http://www.ascilite.org.au/ajet/e-jist/docs/vol1no4/abstract.htm>
- Lieberman, A. (2000). Networks as learning communities: Shaping the future of teacher development. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 51(3), 221–227.
- Means, B., Toyama, Y., Murphy, R., Bakia, M., & Jones, K. (2010). *Evaluation of evidence-based practices in online learning: A meta-analysis and review of online learning studies*. Technical Report. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

- Metiri Group. (n.d.). *enGauge 21st century skills for 21st century learners*. Retrieved from <http://www.techlearning.com/techlearning/pdf/events/techforum/sd06/CherylSkillsBrochure.pdf>
- Moore, J. E., & Barab, S. A. (2002). The inquiry learning forum: A community of practice approach to online professional development. *Technology Trends*, 46(3), 44–49.
- Moore, M., & Kearsley, G. (2011). *Distance education: A systems view of online learning* (3rd ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning.
- National Council of Teachers of English. (2007). *NCTE framework for 21st century curriculum and assessment*. Retrieved from <http://www.ncte.org/governance/21stcenturyframework>
- iNACOL. (2011). *National standards for quality online courses*. Vienna, VA: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.inacol.org/cms/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/NACOL-Standards-Quality-Online-Programs.pdf>
- Nussbaum-Beach, S., & Ritter Hall, L. (2012). *The connected educator: Learning and leading in a digital age*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.
- Palloff, P., & Pratt, K. (2004). *Collaborating online: Learning together in community*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Partnership for 21st Century Skills. (2009). *Framework for 21st century learning*. Retrieved from <http://www.p21.org/our-work/p21-framework>
- Preece, J. (2000). *Online communities: Designing usability, supporting sociability*. New York, NY: Wiley.
- Preece, J. (2004). Etiquette, empathy and trust in communities of practice: Stepping-stones to social capital. *Journal of Universal Computer Science*, 10(3), 294–302.
- Shepherd, P. (n.d.). *The road to self-actualization*. Retrieved from <http://www.mind-development.eu/maslow.html>
- Siemens, G. (2005). *Connectivism: A learning theory for the digital age*. Retrieved from <http://www.elearnspace.org/Articles/connectivism.htm>
- Siemens, G. (2006). *Knowing knowledge*. Retrieved from <http://www.elearnspace.org/KnowingKnowledge/LowRes.pdf>
- Siemens, G. (2008). *Learning and knowing in networks: Changing roles for educators and designers*. Retrieved from <http://itforum.coe.uga.edu/Paper105/Siemens.pdf>
- Tech and Learning. (n.d.). *Technology for learning: A guidebook for change*. Retrieved from [http://www.thelearningcurve.org/pluginfile.php/11122/mod\\_resource/content/1/Guidebook%20for%20Change.pdf](http://www.thelearningcurve.org/pluginfile.php/11122/mod_resource/content/1/Guidebook%20for%20Change.pdf)
- U.S. Department of Education. (2010). *Transforming American education: Learning powered by technology. National Education Technology Plan 2010*. Retrieved from <http://www.ed.gov/sites/default/files/netp2010.pdf>
- Wasko, M. M., & Faraj, S. (2000). “It is what one does”: Why people participate and help others in electronic communities of practice. *Journal of Strategic Information Systems*, 9(2), 155–173.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.



OFFICE OF  
Educational Technology

*The Mission of the Department of Education is to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access.*

---

<http://tech.ed.gov>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons  
[Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).