Empowering Teachers to Excel

The Professional Development Institute helps K-12 teachers lift classroom standards with engaging online courses

K-12 teachers dedicate their lives to their students—but balancing that commitment with family life and other responsibilities can leave little time for professional development. By working with D2L to build a flexible online learning platform, the Professional Development Institute is helping teachers fit learning into their busy lives and lift classroom standards around the world.

Company

The Professional Development Institute (PDI) provides high-quality online courses that help K-12 teachers across the globe gain new skills and learn practical strategies they can put to immediate use in the classroom. Its courses—designed by experienced teachers and taught by highly qualified instructors—are approved for credit by the University of California San Diego (UCSD) Extension.

AT A GLANCE

Client: Professional Development Institute
Industry: Training/Education

CHALLENGE

• Bridge the learning gap for busy K-12 teachers
• Provide better education options for teachers who can’t travel to attend courses in person
• Boost teachers’ earning potential by empowering them to earn course credit
• Provide affordably priced continuing education

SOLUTION

• D2L’s Brightspace platform
• Discussion boards
• Quizzes
• Release conditions
• Dropbox integration

RESULT

• Saves four days of administrative work per week
• Frees up the PDI team to focus on customer service and scaling the business
• Provides a flexible online environment at an affordable price
• Enables PDI to meet UCSD Extension’s rigorous course approval requirements
The Challenge

Twenty-two years ago, Connie Ryan founded the Professional Development Institute (PDI) to help solve a problem that still plagues the education sector today. Like many others, she had spent years juggling two full-time roles: teacher and mother.

“Trying to find time for continuing education was always a struggle,” says Ryan. “If I wanted to renew my credential and earn a higher salary, I had to leave my family and go to class in the evening or on the weekend. It was inconvenient and difficult to do as a busy working mom.”

BRIDGING THE LEARNING GAP

Today, approximately 77 percent of K-12 teachers are women, and many have to balance the same demanding set of career and child care responsibilities. Others—men and women alike—have a similar problem for different reasons; perhaps they need to care for a sick or elderly relative, or maybe they live in a remote area that is several hours’ drive from the nearest professional development classes.

The result is a learning gap between teachers who have the time and opportunity to develop their skills and those who—through no fault of their own—do not. Over time, this gap can widen to the point where new employment opportunities and career progression can feel out of reach.

“Continuing education is vital for teachers who want to improve both their pedagogy and their earning potential,” says Ryan. “But it’s often so difficult to fit into an already busy schedule that they effectively decide to put their career aspirations on hold. That’s why I started PDI in the first place—to give every teacher access to the continuing education they need, regardless of their personal circumstances.”

OFFERING A Viable ALTERNATIVE

PDI needed to provide an alternative to traditional courses that require learners to attend in person or at fixed times. Technology was the answer, and PDI started by building a basic system that enabled it to deliver online courses.
“As the number of learners grew, and as the use of computers and the internet became more pervasive in the education sector, we began running into the limitations of our first system,” says Ryan. “We started looking for a new platform that could help us deliver much richer, more engaging course materials and really make the quality of our content stand out.”

At the same time, PDI wanted to ensure that its online courses would be recognized and approved by school districts across the U.S. and began looking into getting its courses approved by the University of California San Diego (UCSD) Extension.

“UCSD Extension sets very high standards, not just in terms of the quality of the course material but also in terms of administration,” says Ryan. “For example, we needed to be able to report on a weekly basis which learners had completed their courses, and it was hugely time-consuming to pull together that data manually. We wanted a technology platform that could help automate our processes and therefore, help us scale the business without multiplying the administrative burden.”

“When I first talked to D2L about our reporting requirements, I thought what I was describing was a dream... When we saw the final version of the custom reports they built for us, we were literally dancing around the office because we realized what a complete game changer it was for our business.”

Connie Ryan, Founder of the Professional Development Institute

The Solution

PDI began researching the market for learning management systems and drew up a shortlist of four possible partners. After reaching out to each of these vendors, the company quickly realized that D2L had both the right technology, the right support, and the right approach to meet its needs.

“It was evident from the beginning that D2L was genuinely interested in its customers. The D2L team really paid attention to our needs and were very responsive. And that’s been true not only during the initial sales process but also throughout our relationship. It is also what sets D2L apart from others. You aren’t just a number or sales quota. D2L seeks to help you develop and grow your business. This has been my experience with D2L over the last seven years.”

Connie Ryan, Founder of PDI

PRACTICING AGILE COURSE DEVELOPMENT

Together, PDI and D2L built a learning management system that fits the company’s unique requirements exactly. It provides easy-to-use templates that make it simple for PDI’s course designers to collaborate..."
with external authors and content experts, so once course content is complete, they can begin offering a new course in a matter of hours. As a result, PDI can keep up with the fast pace of new ideas in the K-12 sector and ensure its courses are always relevant to teachers’ needs.

“We review feedback from our learners every week to ensure we stay on top of the most critical education topics and build content today that teachers can use in their classrooms tomorrow,” says Ryan. “That level of responsiveness sets us apart, and it has been a key factor in building our relationship with teachers and school districts across the country.”

CREATING AN ENGAGING ENVIRONMENT FOR LEARNING

The templates also enable PDI to build courses that follow a standard format, providing a consistent experience for learners across all the topics they study and allowing them to focus on learning the material rather than learning how to navigate the platform.

One learner gave feedback, saying, “The format of quizzes, projects and reflections that is consistent with all PDI courses takes the stress out of taking a class. You know right from the beginning what you are signing up for and can use the information right away in your teaching.”

To make the learning experience more engaging, PDI integrates D2L features such as quizzes that enable learners to test their knowledge and discussion boards that empower them to share ideas and strategies with their instructors and peers. When a student completes an assignment, such as creating a lesson plan, they can either share it publicly on the discussion board or post it privately via Dropbox to get feedback from an instructor.

“The unique features of the D2L platform help us build truly engaging courses that help our learners use their time efficiently,” says Ryan. “That’s extremely important when teachers are trying to fit professional development around all the other commitments in their busy schedule.”

Connie Ryan, Founder of PDI
STREAMLINING ADMINISTRATION
Besides offering a flexible online learning environment for PDI’s customers, the D2L platform also helps the company automate many of its internal course administration processes. For example, instead of spending hours compiling course tracking and grade release reports every week, the PDI team has set up a scheduled report that delivers the results automatically.

“When I first talked to D2L about our reporting requirements, I thought what I was describing was a dream,” says Ryan. “The data is so complex and there are so many exceptions, I thought it would be impossible to automate the process.”

“But the D2L developers thought they could find a way, and they were right. When we saw the final version of the custom reports they built for us, we were literally dancing around the office because we realized what a complete game changer it was for our business.”

With the reporting capability in place, PDI has been able to eliminate nearly four days of administrative work per week, making a huge difference for its core team of full-time employees. Instead of needing to hire additional staff, the company is now able to support much larger numbers of students without increasing its operational costs.

“Removing the administrative burden has created a pathway for us to scale our business and focus on customer service,” says Ryan. “With the procedures automated through D2L, we can grow as much as we want to—there’s nothing to stop us now!”

Since 75 percent of PDI’s business comes from referrals, it’s vital to put learners and their experience at the top of the agenda.

“The less time we spend on administration, the more we can spend on developing new, relevant courses that put our learners at the forefront of educational theory and practice,” says Ryan.
Equally, the combination of high-quality course material and accurate, streamlined administration has helped to cement the relationship between PDI and UCSD Extension.

“We’re the first external company ever to achieve approval from UCSD Extension for course credit that teachers can use for salary advancement or credential renewal,” says Ryan. “That’s a huge differentiator for our business, compared with other professional development companies. When a teacher takes a course with us, they know that it’s backed by one of the top 10 universities in the U.S.—and that school districts throughout the country will recognize it.”

PDI currently enrolls thousands of teachers from across the globe, and feedback from the learners themselves is universally positive. In particular, they appreciate the flexibility of the platform, as one testified: “I enjoyed the opportunity to take the course at my own pace and when I found time in my schedule to devote to the various lessons. It’s great to be able to do the assignments at 11:00 at night or 8:00 in the morning!”

“Our online course content is available 24/7, allowing teachers to work on their professional development whenever their own schedules permit. There is no requirement to be online at any specific day or time. Plus, we allow up to one year to complete a course, offering even more flexibility to busy teachers. The beauty of the D2L platform is that it is always available.”

Connie Ryan, Founder of PDI

She concludes, “The real goal is to impact the lives of students across the country. How many actual K-12 students do we touch every day because of the lessons and techniques their teachers learned from a PDI course? We are giving educators the tools they need to put research into action—practical knowledge that teachers can leverage immediately in the classroom.”