



# The Problem with Continuing Education

**M**y grandfather once quipped, “I’m looking for a Doctor who’s through practicing and ready to do it for real.” His ironic humor points out a basic concept; throughout their careers true professionals are always learning and honing their skills. Knowledge and ability not possessed by the general public, acquired through training, experience and education is, generally, what defines a particular field as a profession. Personal commitment to continuous improvement is the hallmark of *professional practice*.

The surveying profession is currently in the throes of an “education revolution”. Several of the states now require an academic education as a pre-condition of licensure. And, most of the states require “continuing education” as a condition of license renewal. No true professional could seriously question the benefits of education, either to individual practitioners, their clients or society as a whole. But, the cost-benefit relationship of both fundamental education and professional development can and should be questioned. In fact, we have

an obligation to ask, “Do the benefits equal or exceed the investment?” And, if they don’t—“Why not?”

I recently attended a one-day workshop on improving the quality of field data. It was sponsored by the state professional society; and the presenter was a well educated, experienced, and nationally known surveyor. But, to be completely candid, I feel that the workshop “fell short” of reasonable standards for continuing education. At the beginning of his presentation, the speaker announced that he had *only* brought 100+ slides. The handout materials were merely prints of his slides; they did not include an outline, reference information, or discussion of the topics. During some portions of the presentation, the speaker was “clicking” through the slides so quickly there was not enough time to even read them, let alone think about the subject and formulate a question (if I had one). At other times he went off into “war stories” that, although entertaining, had little or nothing to do with improving the quality of my field measurements. By the end of the day I felt “ripped off”. Not only had I paid the registration fee and incurred the associated travel expenses, I had invested a full day of my time. In my mind,

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the cost-benefit ratio did not justify attending the workshop. Which is not to say that I didn't learn anything, I did.

The problems with "continuing education", "professional development", or whatever it is called in your state, are numerous. There is more than enough responsibility to be shared by all who are involved. The state legislatures, the licensing agencies, the professional societies and the presenters themselves all have "a share of the blame"; as do we—the members of the profession—who ultimately pay for these programs.

The politicians in most states simply painted a picture in "broad strokes". That is, they merely created quantitative standards (X number of hours per year/license cycle) while ignoring both substantive and qualitative standards. The statutes fail to define which topics meet or do not meet the requirements, or even that the required hours include specific subjects—such as ethics, business practices, etc. And to make matters worse, the statutes fail to provide any control with regard to the educational value of the courses or who presents them. The salons have merely dictated that we attend (and pay for) the "education". The situation would not be so bad if the legislatures had mandated that the licensing agencies assume these responsibilities.

The authority of state regulatory agencies is based primarily on "protection of the public". I wholeheartedly agree with the concept that the public is better protected if a profession regularly engages in continuous improvement than if it does not. These agencies have established standards as to who may and may not practice the profession and what constitutes acceptable practice. Why couldn't they do the same thing with regard to continuing education/ professional development? Beyond the questions of substantive and qualitative standards lays another issue, verification. Some attendees sign-in and then leave, some bring other work with them, while others simply sleep through the presentation. The states are "all over the map" on this subject. In some parts of the country all that a licensee is required to do is sign a statement that she/he completed the required hours. In some jurisdictions the licensee must submit copies of the "completion certificate". Only a few states require independent verification. The reason I hear most frequently as to why the regulatory agencies do not have standards regarding these matters is economics.



They assert that they cannot afford the cost of enforcement—so they won't establish rules. This seems to be a spurious argument. If necessary, renewal fees could be raised slightly; and, governmental agencies—which regularly attach "user fees" to all sorts of services—could require the sponsors of the classes to help defray the cost of quality controls.

### **Evaluating Presentations**

Continuing Education/Professional Development requirements have been an economic boon to our professional societies. More than any other single factor, they account for both increased membership and overall revenues. Personally, I'm glad about both. But, *he who derives the benefit must also bear the burden*. Our professional societies, more than any other institution, are in a position to address the problems. Who better knows which topics the workshops need to cover? Who, other than our peers, will recognize those individuals who have both expertise and the ability to communicate it to their fellow professionals? As a condition of their imprimatur (sponsorship), the professional society could set quality standards, both as to the oral presentation and the handout materials. They could place an evaluator in the audience so that they had "first hand" knowledge. They could compile an annual report of attendees and provide it to the regulatory agency, relieving us of the burden of saving the "certificates" (sometimes for years) and eliminating whatever fraudulent reporting exists. Our state and national societies could share information so that we, the profession, had a greater variety of high

quality offerings to choose from. And, with their swollen coffers, the societies could offer those courses which, by their nature, are not profitable but do benefit the practitioner.

None of this should be taken to excuse the course designers/developers from measuring-up to higher standards. Those of us who "stand in front of our peers" and "profess to know" must be willing to do our part. We should be expected to design and develop courses that will be of real value to the professional. Too many of us create nothing more than PowerPoint presentations. All too often the presenter simply turns his/her back to the audience and reads what is being projected on the screen. A quality presentation uses PowerPoint to emphasize and/or illustrate the key points in a discussion; it cannot replace instructional preparation or substantive course materials. The overuse/reliance on PowerPoint all too often leads to poor handout materials as well. How many workshops have you attended where the "booklet" consisted of page after page of three (small-size) slides with blank lines for you take notes? You have a right to expect more. You must demand better.

There can be little doubt in anyone's mind that, at least in the foreseeable future, continuing education/professional development will be required of virtually all surveyors. The number of hours may even increase. Given this reality, the only meaningful course of action is to improve its quality. Each presentation should begin with a "pre-course assessment" of our knowledge. Good questions will help us to focus on the most impor-

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 tant topics to be presented. And a “post-course assessment” (the same questions) will provide us with a measure of how much we actually learned. We should be evaluating the presentation as well. Was the speaker well prepared? Was she/he open to differing viewpoints? Did he/she adequately answer our questions? Did we finish early (as if that were a good thing)? Was the room set-

up appropriate (individual space, “post free” view, warm/cool enough, comfortable chairs, etc.)? Will we be able/are we likely to use the handout materials later? What do we think would lead to improvement?

Pogo once said, “We have met the enemy and he is us”. *We* are the profession; and we must take responsibility for its conduct. If the quality and variety of our continuing education/professional

development does not meet our needs or cost-benefit standards *we* are, ultimately, responsible. After all, we continue to attend (and pay for) these programs. If individual professionals took advantage of alternate means of meeting the requirements (buy a book, attend local chapter meetings and annual conferences, take a course at the Community College, etc.) they would create an economic incentive for change. If the practitioners joined and became active in their professional societies, they could create a political incentive for change. It is all too easy to point the finger outwards.

When I was a very young man my father told me “There is no free lunch.” If we feel that continuing education/professional development needs improvement we must be willing to pay for those improvements. Small increases in our licensing fees and/or course registrations can make big differences in the quality of these programs. Contrary to popular opinion, presenting continuing education to surveyors is not very rewarding—economically speaking. On some occasions I have actually lost money, and on many more the “profit” was negligible. Like most of those engaged in this activity, I do it because I believe that Teddy Roosevelt was right: “Each of us owes a portion of our time to the profession wherein we make our living.”

If legislative or administrative law needs to be changed surveyors must actively lobby for those changes. If the professional societies need to do more and better, we must become active in the societies and see to it that they do. If instructors need to improve their presentations, we must tell them so—and withhold our economic support if they do not. The future is ours; only by avoiding fractious argument and through collective effort will it improve. *A*

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