I love technology. I am what geeks call an early adopter, the person who tries the newest technology before others even hear about it. But, I am also a teacher, and while the brave new world of electronic professional development is fast and fantastic, it is most definitely not a wholesale replacement for a live human being standing right in front of you just a few yards away.

There are pluses and minuses to each professional development option. Here at Youth Change Workshops, we offer all the high tech choices, but we really think our teaching shines the most in person.

There are two basic kinds of online professional development: online classes and webinars. For those of you that have not actually sampled an online course or webinar, you're probably curious about the difference between in-person and online training, I can capture the difference quite easily for you. When people call me to ask if they should take my Breakthrough Strategies classroom management workshop live or online, I always say that it’s the difference between being in Times Square on New Year’s Eve, or watching it on your TV—that’s a dramatic difference.

Even the best virtual teacher on earth has to fight to leap off the screen of your desktop computer—or, even worse-- your tiny mobile phone or tablet. I believe that you could take the most amazing speaker on earth, and on your teeny phone screen, he would be decidedly less amazing. If you think it's hard to compete for attention when the human being is in the room right in front of you, now imagine what it takes to hold the focus of a human being who may be also listening to music and grading papers at the same time.

There is another huge difference between virtual and online instruction. For teachers, whose whole world revolves around relationships and the nuances of interactions with students, losing that human connection definitely diminishes the effectiveness of the content being delivered electronically. Think about it: Do you relate as powerfully to a picture on a screen as you do to an actual person who gives an occasional endearing little wink or has a funny little chuckle? Those are things that help us connect with and enjoy a good speaker, and those are all things that screen viewers will never have the opportunity to notice. Just between you and me, I suspect that...
online students aren’t watching a talking head on a screen all that closely anyway. I suspect they are often multi-tasking, and doing so far more than they would do in person.

Teachers often call me confused about the difference in types of online professional development, asking “Is there a difference between a webinar and an online class?” Here’s the difference.

**Online Courses**
These are like watching a pre-made video or slide presentation as illustrated in the two images at right. You can’t change what’s already been recorded, and you can’t ask questions as you watch. There may be no mechanism to ask queries at all. If you look at the top image, you can see how tiny I am in this video. Size does matter. It makes it tougher to command attention from a teeny screen.

See how well you like pre-recorded, online professional development by trying a few of my online mini-classes. These fast tutorials are actually a bit more than one minute long, but they are packed with information on working with difficult students, and a quick way for you to sample online training for yourself. View the tutorials here: https://www.youthchg.com/free-teacher-professional-development/

**Webinars**
Since a webinar is live online, it’s halfway between in-person training and an online course that is pre-recorded. Many webinars allow time for questions but generally queries go on hold until a set time like the end of class. Questions often are relayed via a moderator, and are usually sent by typing, further diminishing the humanness of it all.

Your screen will look similar to the online courses shown above but may have a panel on one side that you use to communicate to the instructor or moderator if and when interaction is accepted.

Like in-person workshops, online courses usually provide you with a workbook of resources and references. At right you see an example workbook, taken from my Control the Uncontrollable Student online course, but, as is typical, it’s actually an electronic PDF file that you must print yourself. Online courses can provide college credit and clock hours just like live professional development courses. The workbook often contains tests that you take to earn the credit or hours.

**How to Choose Live vs. Online Teacher Professional Development**

Attend a live course when experiential learning or the human factor is important. In my courses I use very unusual experiential devices to help teachers walk inside the shoes of troubled students. Those devices almost completely lose their impact when the learner is a spectator not a participant.

When the material is sensitive, complex or safety-related, learning from a live human is the best format. In our classroom management course, we cover critical topics like how to prevent a school shooting, identify potentially violent students, and notice and help students at risk of self-harm. In a virtual course that’s potentially life-saving content that an online learner could fast forward through or misunderstand— not to mention the possible consequences of the participant’s unasked questions.
Choose an online option if you need immediate training and local, live options don’t exist. If you don’t care about asking questions during the presentation, and you won’t miss interacting with the instructor, then online courses might be the solution. Be sure you have the discipline to finish the online course because only you will know if you watch it and pay attention to it or not. Depending on the subject of that online class, what you didn’t learn could really matter.

Author and Workshop Instructor Ruth Herman Wells M.S. is the Director of Youth Change Workshops, http://www.youthchg.com. Ruth provides professional development training to teachers, principals and counselors throughout North America on how to reach and teach problem and troubled students. Her **Breakthrough Strategies to Teach and Counsel Troubled Youth Workshop** will be in Seattle, Washington on May 1-2, 2014, and in Portland, Oregon on October 9-10, 2014. Ruth’s workshops are offered online, at your site, and in general sessions, all with college credit and hours. Ruth’s books include the **The Quickest Kid Fixer-Uppers Series**. Email Ruth at dwells@youthchg.com or call 800-545-5736. Get Ruth's free **Problem Student Problem-Solver Magazine** and hundreds of other interventions at www.youthchg.com.