The Forgotten Teachers in K-12 Online Learning: Examining the Perceptions of Teachers Who Develop K-12 Online Courses

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ABSTRACT

Like many K-12 online learning programs, the Illinois Virtual High School (IVHS) began by utilizing vendor content to populate its online courses. In its fourth year, the IVHS began a concerted effort to design more of its own online course content internally. The aim of this study was to examine the nature of the support needed and application of tools used by IVHS course developers. The data consisted of a two-part, web-based survey and telephone interviews that were analyzed using descriptive statistics and inductive analysis. The results showed these developers had a strong desire to use interactive elements in their course as well as working in cooperative teams. Further, developers were opposed to using a forced template, but indicated a need for general structural guidance and additional professional development. Finally, developers recommended that subject matter teacher-developers and multimedia specialists be split into two separate roles, and these individuals work together as a part of a design team. Further research should be conducted on the intended use of technology tools requested.

Keywords: Course Development, Instructional Designer, K-12 Online Learning, Online Tools, Virtual School

INTRODUCTION

The Illinois Virtual High School (IVHS) was a state-sponsored virtual school designed to provide online learning opportunities. The IVHS was not a school in the traditional sense, rather its purpose was to enhance and supplement the educational offerings of local schools. As a result, students registered in and received credit for IVHS courses through the school they attended. These schools were responsible for determining the students’ ability to enroll and their final course grade (based upon feedback from the IVHS teacher).

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During its first three years of operation, the IVHS primarily relied on external vendors for its course content. However, around 2004 they became more aggressive towards its own course development. As the IVHS began to develop more of its courses internally, there was a need to explore the experiences of teachers who had been contracted to design courses in the past to be able to recommend improvements and specific design principles for the adolescent learners who would be enrolled in these courses.

The purpose of this study was to explore the IVHS course development process based on the literature. In this article, we describe the evolution of online course development. We then outline our case study methodology; followed by a discussion of the results from surveys, interviews and course content reviews. Finally, we discuss our findings, as well as outlining lessons for future K-12 online course development projects and specific avenues for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Formal and informal course development has been around for decades. The advent of online instruction has made significant impact on course development practices and how educational institutions at all levels approach this process. Developing a model and the support mechanisms to meet course development needs is critical to successful course development products, and it begins with understanding past practices of course development and continues through understanding what tools course developers use and desire to adequately produce their courses.

Online Course Development

Initially, most courses incorporated asynchronous components like “letter writing, fax, e-mail, and threaded discussions… [and some synchronous components including] the telephone, instant messaging or chat tools, and virtual classroom tools that allow file sharing, audio and even video communication” (Rice, 2006, p. 438). While this description was often the case, the complexity of the online course varied substantially throughout various offerings. McFeeters, Moore, and Chief (2008) stated theses synchronous and asynchronous features were used to “allow the instructors and students to communicate in this virtual learning environment” (p. 68) – both individually and in small group format, instead of just being a way to deliver instruction online or at a distance. “Some [online courses] had extensive lecture notes; others had minimal notes. Some used a real time chat room for lab sessions and homework discussions…. Some used bulletin boards as the primary method for group communications and discussion of assignments” (Gibson, & Herrera, 1999, para. 11). Perrin and Mayhew (2000) pointed out “many instructor-led classes rely heavily on the email and chat room systems” (para. 4). This was common among early online courses and still exists in many courses at both the higher and secondary education levels.

The majority of preliminary methods and tools have been usurped by increased needs from the course developers and teachers (Rice & Dawley, 2007). These users have developed a marked Internet savvy over the past few years and have come to demand increased functionality in online course offerings. A functionality that had not been accessible to the common instructional practitioner is now necessary in course development. Web, graphic and Internet game designers have influenced the user’s technology palate in a tremendous way (e.g., the Florida Virtual School’s [FLVS] Conspiracy Code) (Jantke, 2010; Searson, Monty Jones, & Wold, 2011), especially when it comes to experiential expectations while using the Internet. Davis, Roblyer, Charania, Ferdig, Harms, Compton and Cho (2007) noted that “effective virtual teachers have qualities and skills that often set them apart from traditional teachers” (p. 28). Only these advanced technical or academically trained practitioners were able to bridge the gap between rudimentary elements of online course development that was more of the norm in the past and the multimedia rich
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