
Preparing School Technology Leaders for Online Professional Development: Training Efforts with El Paso Teachers for Online Course Facilitation in Texas STARgate

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Abstract

Much research interest in the field of distance education by necessity focuses on student achievement. However, instructor preparation may be of equal concern, particularly when considering the lack of direct human contact between instructors and learners. Toward this end, 41 technology leaders in El Paso Independent School District engaged in online facilitator instruction through Texas STARgate, a professional development portal for Texas teachers, from December, 2003 to January, 2004. In February, 2004 a select few from this group volunteered to lead the first online professional development courses for El Paso teachers. This paper will examine the background of the STARgate project, including the literature surrounding support efforts given to online learners and facilitators; identify key issues for course facilitation offered in STARgate guide training; and illustrate the efforts used to discern if the El Paso facilitators put the knowledge offered in their training to effective use.

Introduction

The Texas Center for Educational Technology (TCET) at the University of North Texas (UNT) remains at the forefront of many state technology initiatives in the K-20 arena. In 2002, TCET partnered with Classroom Connect, a division of Harcourt Education, to apply for a grant through the Texas Telecommunications Infrastructure Fund (TIF). Classroom Connect previously partnered with other state entities to develop portals offering teachers online professional development specifically tailored to their state standards. Most notably Classroom Connect worked with New York, which like Texas has a large number of teachers in a variety of districts. TCET, UNT, and Classroom Connect approached the TIF board in partnership with a large urban district, Ector County Independent School District (ISD) and a small rural district, London ISD. These five partners were granted \$500,000 to pursue the creation and administration of a statewide online professional development portal for K-12 teachers in Texas. STARgate became the portal created out of this grant money.

TCET led the grant, and remained in charge of creating state-specific content while administering the portal. Classroom Connect provided the server space and software running the portal, the URL and technical support. The two partner districts provided initial enrollment for testing of STARgate, and received free access for their teachers rather than having to buy subscriptions. Classroom Connect's sales force in the state approached other districts regarding subscriptions.

El Paso ISD

In August, 2003, with the site running well, most of the bugs smoothed out, and content in place, STARgate became fully prepared for additional districts. In short order, several districts signed up with large subscription purchases. El Paso ISD became the first large district to move forward on sending teachers through the entire online professional development regimen. The district's administration decided in the 2003-2004 school year to offer leadership opportunities to 75 technologically savvy teachers, granting them a stipend to work with other teachers in their buildings. These 75 were subsequently offered online training for facilitating professional development in STARgate. A total of 41 of these teachers elected to go through the online training. Additional teachers elected to go through separate leadership training offerings on STARgate at later dates.

The online training course used in STARgate is developed by Classroom Connect and modified as needed by TCET personnel. Another site TCET developed, www.txstargate.net, housed additional materials developed for leading the state-specific courses. This URL served as the support site for technology leaders in STARgate as well as a promotional venue for interested districts. Through txstargate.net, TCET practiced its own support theories with teachers serving in online leadership positions. The site allowed access to course-specific content in a password-protected area. In this way, teachers going through the online training course are instructed according to TCET's specifics where applicable, in combination with Classroom Connect's underlying theories.

Purpose

This purpose of this paper will be to give a broad background of the STARgate project by examining applicable literature surrounding support efforts for online learners and facilitators used in the creation of courses on the portal, identify key issues for course facilitation offered in STARgate guide training, and discuss implementation of the initial El Paso online professional development courses where TCET personnel observed facilitators to see if the knowledge offered in their training is put to effective use.

Project Background

The issue of student support in distance education has a long and varied history. Tiffin and Rajasingham (1995) go so far as to state the issue of support in correspondence education has existed at least since Biblical times. Orientation as a mechanism for preparing students for the online environment is strongly promoted by Hardy and Boaz (1997), Granger and Benke (1998), and Johnson (2003). Understanding that orientations are important, especially when supporting novice participants, TCET designed the state-specific courses in STARgate to be hybrid in nature, including at least one face-to-face meeting between course leaders and participants.

Classroom Connect designers feel strongly that guides need teaching assistants (TAs) when leading online courses. The notion of having a backup person for the guide and offering additional support when necessary is fleshed out in *TAs and Professors as a Teaching Team: A Faculty Guide to TA Training & Supervision* (1992). This book, released by the Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, is a strong source document for Classroom Connect's philosophy on the guide/TA relationship. The book indicates TAs are to hold an apprenticeship role in the learning process. Under Classroom Connect's philosophy, once the TA has served in a class or two he or she may want to move up to the guide position.

While drawing upon this notion of strong role definition between the guide and TA, which is

amplified in the online guide training required for both in Classroom Connect courses, a distinction between traditional roles and Classroom Connect's vision becomes apparent. University-based online courses are typically administered by terminally degreed faculty with student TAs, while online professional development may be administered by teachers with fellow teachers serving in the TA role. The two may then swap roles in future courses with no external changes occurring in their salary or work status. This notion of *critical friends* in the guide/TA relationship is discussed in Classroom Connects' own literature on the topic (McElroy, McKenzie, Rollins, Spear, & Woods).

TCET Course Design

TCET personnel designed their courses with certain underpinnings of theoretical assumptions surrounding adult learners. Specifically, Knowles' assertions concerning adult learner preferences are fundamental in TCET's course design. Knowles states adult learners enjoy self-directed instruction, use experiences to link the understanding of new material, like to learn new things that are personally relevant, and should be able to personally apply new information (Knowles, 1984). Additionally, the TCET team noted the declarations of O'Connor, Bronner, and Delaney (2002) that learning for adults should be practical in nature, integrated into their current knowledge, that adult learners should be informed why new ways of doing things are practical, be granted a wide range of control over their learning processes, and be given meaningful as well as self-paced practice.

When training the trainers to lead the TCET courses, TCET personnel elected to put Holmberg's assertions regarding empathy into practice. Holmberg states, "[The] most favorable factor paving the way for motivated students' success and preventing dropout is empathy between the learning and teaching parties, availability of immediate support and advice when difficulties crop up, ease in consulting tutors and other subject specialists and general feelings of rapport" (Holmberg, 2001, p. 74). Preece and Ghazati (2001) define empathy as being able to recognize and fully grasp learners' feelings and situations. TCET instructors exemplify empathy to those being trained as guides in hopes the guides use empathetic techniques when leading their own courses.

Additional Support

TCET planners desire teachers serving in the capacity of guides in STARgate to be well-prepared. While the Classroom Connect training for online faculty course is very good in teaching participants the mechanics of serving as a guide, it does little in preparing participants in the content of state-specific courses. TCET personnel therefore tapped Wlodkowski's assertions regarding expertise. Wlodkowski states that when instructors realize they have knowledge beneficial to students, understand the knowledge thoroughly, and transmit the knowledge through an instructional process, then the instructors are practicing expertise (Wlodkowski, 1993).

Since the Classroom Connect guide course offers little in regard to state-specific content, TCET created additional support materials designed to quickly bring novice guides to an acceptable level of expertise in the content. These materials, placed on the support site, offer distilled versions of the courses with summary paragraphs of pertinent data, as well as pre-made teaching resources such as PowerPoint presentations and guide notes. Through these mechanisms, a new guide or TA can quickly learn material covered in the course before beginning and thus hopefully avoid appearing to be a complete novice. Combining expertise with empathy is a key means of achieving student motivation (Wlodkowski, 1993), and it is hoped through the additional support material combined with the guide course content that new guides can effectively combine both and make a powerful impact upon teachers going through STARgate.

Project Implementation

In December, 2003, 41 El Paso ISD technology leaders began online guide training in Texas STARgate. Two program/project coordinators at TCET served as their guide and TA, using the critical friends model favored by Classroom Connect. The training stretched into January due to the Christmas holidays. Six online courses were established for El Paso teachers in STARgate, with a capped enrollment of 36 per course, set to begin in February, 2004. Trained technology leaders subsequently volunteered to lead course sections for the district. Since this was the first large-scale effort in STARgate to train several guides at once who then would immediately begin serving in that capacity, much interest stemmed from the effectiveness of the training. Several key issues were identified in the support training as important measures which, it was hoped, were to be carried over by the guides in leading the courses.

Faculty Training Course

Classroom Connect's online faculty training course is an excellent resource, covering several aspects of guiding courses online in general and working within the Classroom Connect system in particular. TCET administrators agree the following material covered in the four week guide training course are of particular significance for Texas guides:

- The general mechanics of the Classroom Connect system, including how to set up forum discussions, create weekly greetings, e-mail all students on the roster, move, delete, and edit posts, and perform student evaluations.
- How to allow forum discussions to proceed naturally so that user participation enhances knowledge and learning within and through the forum.
- How to tactfully intercede with users dominating the forum, or conversely not using the forum enough.
- How to intercede with users who use the forum as a sounding board for complaints.
- How to redirect off-topic conversations within the forum.

TCET administrators elected to focus training efforts on key issues deemed important in keeping with theories of empathy in online environments. In this regard they keyed in on user intercession issues during training. Guides are instructed to go to TCET administrators for help if and when acute problems develop among participants. Finally, TCET administrators concentrated on some other issues not emphasized in the training material, which they felt made for a better experience while leading courses on the system. These include:

- How to use the right angle bracket in Classroom Connect's HTML engine to offset quotes from previous messages in new messages in the forum (that is, quoting someone's previous comments, then responding to them in an easy-to-read manner).
- Coached them to sign off forum posts using their names.
- How to click on the javascript popup of the user ID to discern the names of those who did not sign their posts, then instruct those users to sign their names in future posts.
- Gave basic lessons in HTML text formatting, including how to bold, italicize, and underline text, how to make fonts bigger, and how to change the text color.
- Gave more advanced lessons in HTML for forum posting including how to add lines between text, how to make ordered and unordered bulleted lists, how to add the "mailto:" command in messages, and how to make hyperlinks open in a separate window rather than leading users out of STARgate.
- Focused on the fact professional development courses are different from college courses, and evaluation comments need to remain highly positive in nature.

The training concluded with TCET personnel giving El Paso ISD personnel a face-to-face debriefing in El Paso. This procedure modeled for the new guides the face-to-face element of their hybrid courses. Following implementation of the guide training, the first round of El Paso courses were monitored by TCET personnel. Noting the areas given special attention during the guide training, TCET personnel were interested in observing the guides to see if they followed their training, at least in those areas in which special attention was given. If TCET personnel noted a discrepancy by the El Paso guides in actions deviating from training, they intervened either directly in the course section or instructed the guides in what to do. In this way TCET personnel followed a system of formative feedback designed to help maximize the positive experiences of both guides and users.

Post-training Results

TCET personnel noted the mechanics of the forum were clearly mastered by the new guides within the first week of courses. Guides and their TAs used HTML tags to reply to messages in easy to understand methods. Guides were able to set up and organize their course forums. Empathy was also established in the tone of the forums, and a clear rapport between course leaders and participants became evident. One guide suffered a situation in which one of her students overenthusiastically tried to answer all the questions for the entire course in a single sitting. This student created her own questions in the forum then proceeded to answer them. The courses are designed to be processed weekly with questions being posted by the guide then answered by participants in their respective weeks. The pre-posting of the questions and answers created a dilemma for the guide who did not want to upset the enthusiastic user but felt at the same time the direction of her course was being taken away. TCET personnel suggested she move the premature posts to the “water cooler,” or off-topic section of the forum, and explain clearly to the poster by e-mail the necessity for following a weekly schedule in the course. As each new week started the guide then moved the errant posts back to the regular part of the forum, making them the first posts in the discussion for the week. The enthusiastic user was referred by the guide to TCET personnel as a good candidate for guide training, and subsequently enrolled in the next training course.

An immediately obvious discrepancy between the forum for the guide course and the TCET courses appeared. The Classroom Connect training for online faculty course is a four week program with intense activity. In the case of the El Paso ISD personnel, with 41 participants, posting to its forum became very heavy. Good forum management dictates the creation of weekly folders, into which older posts are relegated. This keeps the top of the forum clean and aids overall navigation. In the TCET courses, limited to fewer users with lower participation requirements and lasting only three weeks instead of four, too many folders becomes a hindrance to navigation. Where the Guide Course might have four to seven topics of discussion per week, each with hundreds of separate posts, the courses for the teachers might have two topics of discussion per week with considerably fewer messages. Thus, the structure of the forum in the courses they led looked different than what the guides had initially been exposed to, and some needed to adjust to the idea of not using folders at all except perhaps in certain high traffic areas like the help desk or water cooler. Additionally, some of the guides initially demonstrated unclear understanding of the difference between creating a topic of discussion versus a folder containing several related topics. These misunderstandings were cleared up by TCET personnel before the courses began.

TCET personnel decided to create a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) list due to the similarities in questions from the guides, TAs, and their users. The FAQ sought to address such common questions as file uploads. Confusion reigned regarding strict filename and size

requirements for documents uploaded to STARgate. The Classroom Connect system limits uploads to one megabyte in size per user per course. Enthusiastic users who created massive projects for their course felt stymied when they discovered they could not upload their entire projects. TCET personnel counseled guides to instruct the more prolific users to post their entire projects on the district Web server and shorter versions in text only on STARgate, with a link to the complete project along with verbiage stating more could be found online. In later courses, issues such as these became less of a concern as teachers became more familiar with the system.

Conclusion

Texas STARgate is a statewide portal for teacher professional development based on the Classroom Connect online course software engine. Classroom Connect successfully implemented similar portals in other states, including states like Texas with large populations of teachers. The Texas Center for Educational Technology coordinates the STARgate portal and designed content adhering to state standards for professional development. TCET used assertions regarding adult learning made by Knowles (1984), as well as O'Connor, et. al. (2002), among others in the design of the state-specific online professional development offerings on STARgate.

The first large-scale training of local guides occurred for El Paso ISD in December, 2003, concluding in January, 2004. Almost immediately afterward the district began online professional development for El Paso teachers through simultaneous course offerings on STARgate. TCET personnel put theory into practice while preparing the El Paso ISD guide candidates. Specifically, TCET personnel used Holmberg's notions of empathy (2001) while training the candidates and encouraged them to likewise employ empathetic techniques in their own courses.

TCET personnel used the standard Classroom Connect online faculty training course when training teacher guides for STARgate, emphasizing empathy in personal interaction, formatting of messages, forum management, and personalizing communications with users. TCET personnel also noted that professional development offerings in K-12 settings differ from university courses, and the same holds true when they are held in an online environment. While university courses may adhere to a rigorous set of evaluation criteria, the purpose of professional development is to offer useful training to teachers. Therefore, evaluation requirements are more relaxed in professional development environments. Similarly, the titles guides and TAs hold online do not necessarily reflect their position, status, or salaries within their respective organizations.

Classroom Connect, UNT, Ector County ISD, London ISD, and the TIF board all helped make the prospect of online professional development a reality in Texas. The first large-scale attempt to train teachers as online guides in Texas then assist them while leading their first courses revealed areas for improvement in future trainings, provided confirmation of theoretical assumptions underlying initial efforts by TCET personnel, and resulted in a broad range of enhanced online professional development offerings impacting many teachers in El Paso, Texas.

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State University of West Georgia, Distance Education Center
[Back to the Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration Contents](#)