

The Virtue of Patience: Building an Online and Blended Learning Program

Historical and Organizational Context

Background

UEN Professional Development is a state technology-related training department. Our audience is educators throughout the state of Utah. Most participants are K-12 teachers from the Wasatch front. Our department consists of a manager, 5 full-time instructors and an administrative assistant. Historically, we offered 2-day in-person classes for credit. Our participation has grown from 1000 in 2001 to almost 10,000 participating in classes last year.

Staff

The manager and four instructors have been certified teachers and taught for several years at different grade levels and subject areas including computer fundamentals, math, social studies, language arts, drama, P.E. at the elementary, secondary and college levels. Two of those instructors have Masters degrees in instructional design and educational technology. The fifth instructor has a background in marketing, with a Masters in educational administration.

Training

UEN Professional Development participated in a grant from PBS TeacherLine as they developed their online professional development program for teachers. Several staff participated in a 6-week online “facilitator training” offered by PBS TeacherLine and then facilitated courses created by TeacherLine. We used the “scheduled asynchronous” model TeacherLine created based on research of best practices for online learning for developing our own online offerings.

Key Steps to Growth

- Grow slowly.
- The content has to be appealing initially. The topics need to be attractive, and people need to have a positive, enjoyable, rewarding experience. Once you build a constituency, people will look for more similar classes, and will be willing to take courses on topics that may not have appealed to them initially, just because the format is familiar to them.
- Use your existing channels of communication. We reached out to USOE curriculum specialists, did a postcard that we handed out in every class and at conferences, highlighted online classes on our web page and in our e-Newsletter.

Word of mouth is the best, most effective way of attracting participants, but you have to reach a critical mass first. In my experience that is a 2 – 3 year process.

- For course development, use resources, experts and topics that you have already. Focus on topics that are unique to your organization.
- If using content or topics from others, focus on those which take the least fresh investment. This can help you satisfy demand without killing your staff.
- With others' content, focus on the value you can add. Be sure that you take in general content and make it your own first! If you are going to “pass through” content, people will find other, cheaper sources for the same product
- Overall:
 - Start with one test pilot class. See how it goes!
 - Check the interest level – having only 5 -10 participants the first time is OK since you will probably make a lot of mistakes.
 - Based on what you learn from that first class, revise and offer it again and add 1 or 2 more class topics.
 - It is most critical that every participant has a positive experience. It's better to have a smaller number of devotees than a larger number with many unsatisfied.
 - THEN, do your initial “roll out” – hit as many people as often as possible with the information.
 - Sometimes people worry that if they send “invitations” to 20,000 people everyone will respond and they will be overwhelmed. With online classes this is very unlikely to happen! Don't be afraid to get the word out. Worst case scenario, you turn away people and leave them anxious to sign up faster next time.

Pitfalls We Encountered

- Tried to offer too many classes at the beginning; participation was spread too thin and this made interaction/discussion ineffective.
- Offered topic that WE wanted people to learn about, but there was almost no interest from participants.
- Instructors/facilitators who have never been a student in an online class are NOT the best designers! It is hard for them to gauge the time requirements, and the engagement on different activities. For example, I thought a variety of activities from week to week would be appealing, as it is in a face to face class. However, this just about killed participants – they'd finally get a routine down or figure out what they were doing, then it would change! I didn't understand this “organizational” problem until I took a class and had a hard time remembering all the components even when they were the same every week.
- The most successful instructors for us are those that have taken an online class, more so than those who have only designed classes.

Tools and How They are Working

UEN-TV

People love watching TV/video, but the discussion component has resulted in a real “learning community” that has people coming back time after time. It helps tremendously that the programs are available via video on demand through the Web.

Blackboard/WebCT Vista

We started with Blackboard because UEN was already supporting it. When they added WebCT our dept. was able to use WebCT at no cost and dropped our license with Blackboard. Without these course management systems, the classes would be impossible. Most people, once they learn WebCT Vista, take more classes and within a month or so the tool fades into the background, enabling them to really focus on the content.

The biggest issue with course management systems is the login/password required and the small learning curve getting people used to the environment.

LearnKey

People love having the CDs to refer back to and use at their own pace, then have the interactive component and community online – they appreciate and are motivated by a live facilitator, even when that person is not an expert in the content.

Due to cost issues, we plan to ultimately have all the content in the WebCT environment and not have the CDs anymore. There are advantages both ways.

The partnership with LearnKey allows us to offer popular topics including Macromedia products, MS Office and Adobe Photoshop without having to invest the time and expense required to produce the high-quality materials.

Use Partnerships

UEN-TV workshops utilize broadcast programs developed by Annenberg/CPB. We are able to offer classes in many subject areas that our instructors do not have credentials for. We use the “national experts”, then put our own local stamp on the material and provide a greater variety of opportunities for Utah educators.

LearnKey has been working with us for over a year on different models for online/distance delivery of their video-based training. The negotiation process has been rocky, but we are committed to offering software skills training and have a clear audience for it. Since we have no ability in house to produce the high-quality materials they have, we have persisted and are reaching an effective solution for everyone.

Strategies for an Adult, Working, Professional Audience

- Make clear expectations with regard to technical proficiency and resources required of participants. (We really like a face-to-face orientation meeting for this.)
- Capitalize on the experience and prior knowledge that adult learners bring through interactive discussion boards, and publishing or sharing class products for all in the class to see. Make the classes truly student-centered, where participants are generating the knowledge base.
- Create learning communities and find ways to bring people together. Many adults involved in online learning are at home with kids or otherwise not available to interact with colleagues – they love the opportunity to engage in professional activities and are highly motivated.
- Carefully define the facilitator/instructor role. It is critical that participants feel supported and encouraged by this person, but equally critical that the person isn't dominating discussions or other activities.

Summary

- Grow slowly
- Use what you have
- Seek partnerships
- Respect the contributions of participants, and plan to incorporate them
- Build Learning Communities