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Online Professional Learning for Educators



## CAPSTONE REPORT

### Master's Degree in Instructional Technology

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Date:	7-16-2011
Capstone Title:	Online Professional Learning for Educators
Is this a Capstone Project or Study?	This is a project to develop an online professional learning course for educators in the Cherokee County School District
Client Name & Description	<p>Cherokee County School District</p> <p>This capstone project will provide all teachers in grades K-8 in the Cherokee County School District the opportunity to complete an online professional learning course which will earn them 1 PLU. This course will cover seventeen online resources that the district currently has a subscription. The course will also give the teachers the experience of collaborating with other teachers while exploring these resources and creating projects to support and improve their student learning.</p>

## **1. CAPSTONE EXPERIENCE AND RESULTS**

I started my capstone project with attending an introduction course to Moodle. Moodle is the Learning Management System that is used in our district. This training was offered as a two day, 10 hour course last summer through our professional development/technology departments. The course was being taught by Dan Gagnon, a teacher at Cherokee High School. He has been using Moodle for several years with his high school students. My intention was to take the complete course, but I was conducting a different professional learning course on the second day of the Moodle training, so I didn't attend the second part of the training. I was disappointed, but knew the training class was going to be offered again in the fall. During this summer training, I was only able to login, create the course title, and learn about site navigation, design of the course, settings, and permissions. We also explored the different resources and activities we could add to our course.

After this initial training, I met with Debbie Childress, the Supervisor of Instructional Technology, Esther Brenneman, the Instructional Technology Facilitator, and Jackie Miller, Supervisor of Professional Development within our school district. We discussed the three year district technology plan and the goals for professional development within that plan. We also looked at reports that showed usage data for our online subscription resources. These reports showed that usage was low for some resources. With budget cuts, these resources with low usage would run the risk of being cut for next year's budget. We determined that an online course that would better familiarize the teachers with the features of all of our online subscription resources, would meet the needs for professional learning, improve student learning, and impact school improvement. We also decided to focus on elementary and

middle as the target audience. This would help build foundations for our younger students to utilize these online resources as they advanced into higher learning.

One of my professional goals for last school year was to develop instructional tutorials for different software and trainings that I have conducted in the past. Many teachers attend training, but then may forget a few steps if they aren't using the software every day. These instructional tutorials were to be designed to help teachers remember. They were also created for any new teachers to a school or grade level that were not familiar with the software. Our district had purchased Camtasia software for the purpose of creating these tutorials. The tutorials would then be placed on our Mediacast server for everyone to access. During this time, I created several Camtasia instructional tutorials that I would be using for the online resources class. The tutorials included logging into the site, navigation of the site and certain key features. I designed these tutorials to be short, about 5 minutes and focused on one specific thing, so teachers could choose what they need. I planned on taking the Moodle course training that was going to be offered later in the fall, but the October course was cancelled due to lack of enrollment.

During January I was finally able to attend the full Moodle training being offered again through our district training program and taught by Dan Gagnon. The course met every week for four weeks after school at our training facility. During the introduction course, Dan shared how he used the Moodle software with his high school students. We learned how to edit settings, which included the course name and course summary/description. We made decisions in the settings about format, course dates, and upload size permissions. We also learned about creating groups, so we could differentiate within the online course to assign

our students different assignments. I thought this would be very beneficial to differentiate for K-12 students, but didn't see that it would help teachers. Then, I got to thinking about teachers that have attended technology training that I have offered in the past. They have suggested in the evaluations that we have beginner, intermediate and advanced courses available. I think an online course is the answer because the advanced learner can move ahead and the beginner can take more time and review tutorials at their own pace. However, the group mode would allow me to create the same course, but assign different assignments to different groups. There was also a neat feature in the settings that I didn't find until after my course had started. It was called Completion Tracking and it allows the participants to check off assignments as they complete them. It's turned on now for my next course which I plan to offer in September. Between the first and second class, I designed a preliminary plan to what I wanted to include and cover during each week of the course. During the second class we learned about different resources and activities that we could add to our online course. Resources enable almost any kind of web content to be inserted into the course. Activities include forums, quizzes, wikis, and allow you to enable interactive content to the course. During this class, we also practiced posting content, such as uploading files, adding links, and embedding video. The remainder of the class was spent working on adding resources and activities to our course. The third class included creating and assigning assessments and investigating all of the components of the gradebook feature. The final class focused on blended learning and all of the report features.

In March, I met again with Debbie Childress and Esther Brenneman to discuss progress, design, and evaluation techniques. Over the next several weeks, I spent revising my original plan, creating and revising handouts, creating various video tutorials, and reviewing all

seventeen online subscription resources that would be included in the course. I realized that some of the resource sites had changed and would continue to change, so my handouts and tutorials will need to be updated possibly every year. The next step was to upload content, add links and create discussion boards. I also chose to create the evaluation in QUIA since that was one of our online resources. This whole process took a lot longer than I thought it would. I had some peer instructional teachers login and peer-review the site for problems and errors.

During this same time, I conducted a mini literature review on the effectiveness of online learning. The review involved searching and finding fifteen peer reviewed published journal articles that addressed my three research questions: (a) What does the literature say about online learning for professional development of teachers, (b) is online learning more effective than blended or face to face instruction for teacher professional development, and (c) what are the essential components needed for effective online instruction and learning of teachers? This mini review was especially helpful when creating my course. Instructor presence, the design of the course, authentic and meaningful assignments, and an evaluation component are all crucial elements that were revealed through my review for an effective online course. After reading the study, *Professional Development at a Distance” A Mixed-Method Study Exploring Inservice Teachers’ Views on Presence Online* by Holmes, Signer and MacLeod, there are several key components necessary for the online course. Teacher presence, social presence and cognitive presence are important to the success and level of learning of the online course. Learners felt feedback from the teacher was vital. However, they wanted private feedback from the teacher for negative criticism. Social presence was evident by the learner placing value on the discussion responses from their classmates, in

addition to learning from them. Cognitive presence was evidenced by the participants wanting to apply their learning to real-life situations and to incorporate their learning into their instructional strategies. Results of the study survey also found with the growth of social networking and an increased ease of use of Web 2.0 tools, teachers want to use this kind of online interaction with their classmates and instructor in their professional lives, as they do in their personal. The study also found quality online courses to include these key areas; content, instructional design, student assessment, technology, and course evaluation and management. I used this information to improve the online learning experience for my teachers.

The course officially began on Monday, April 30<sup>th</sup>. I enjoyed being an instructor of an online course. I published specific times every afternoon and every Saturday morning that I would be available for online chats, if the students wanted to talk to me. But, I found myself logging in other times, as well, to read discussion posts, review projects, comment on posts and projects, and create news reminders. I enjoyed the email and online chat feature in Moodle. If a student sent me a message, it would pop-up as soon as I logged in and they experienced the same thing when I sent them a message. I really liked the conversations that went on between the participants in the class. They didn't just say, "Good job". I believe they were learning from each other by seeing things that others had missed and creating projects that others could use in their classroom. I learned things about the online resources from the students, as well. They found some things that I hadn't seen before. This was supposed to be a 10 hour course=1 PLU. I believe most of the teachers that completed this course spent more than 10 hours exploring the resources and creating projects. I know that I spent more than 10 hours monitoring the course. I enjoyed it, but if I had been teaching face-to-face, this would

have only involved 10 hours. This is what our professional development department would pay us for instruction. It's possible that this course could be offered as a 20 hour=2 PLU course, but this would need to be discussed further with the professional development department and my facilitators. Convenience of learning was one of the reasons why teachers choose online learning and originally twenty teachers registered for this course. This was very surprising for two reasons. One, we haven't been able to fill our technology training classes very well this year because of state not requiring the PLU credits. This should change next year. Secondly, this was surprising because the class was scheduled for the month of May, which is usually a very busy month for teachers. However, only twelve teachers completed the course, but the evaluations were very positive. The initial evaluations indicated the project's success by the following results:

- The participants learned about many new online resources that they now plan on integrating with their students next year.
- The overall feedback from the discussion boards was positive and they enjoyed learning from each other.
- The participants felt the assignments were aligned with the coursework, authentic and meaningful.
- They all agreed to there should be no changes to the coursework.
- They liked the layout and ease of use of Moodle.
- They all felt the handouts, videos, and instructor responsiveness was excellent.
- 94% of the participants felt their overall online experience was excellent.



I plan on following up with this group of participants in about six months with a second evaluation that will inquire what kinds of online resources they are currently integrating with their students, how often and how they are using these digital resources to support and enhance higher order thinking skills (e.g., analyze, evaluate, and/or create). I will be offering this online course again at the end of September to a new group of participants. I plan on adding two more evaluation questions that pertain to which online resources do they plan on integrating and which level of higher order thinking skills do they plan on using to integrate the online resources with their students.

## **2. DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION**

This capstone experience helped me to realize the many components that a technology facilitator need to create an effective online professional learning course for educators. I needed to learn and understand the vision for technology in our district. I needed to be able to create, support and manage effective digital learning environments through the use of Moodle and the other online resources. Through this course, I promoted digital citizenship and responsibility by encouraging the use of reliable online resources. I learned how to develop a technology-based professional learning program with an evaluation component to assess effectiveness and impact on student learning. Throughout this whole process, I have continued to learn from professors, members of mine and other cohorts, other teachers, and from participants in my online course.

In regards to PSC Standard 2: Teaching, Learning and Assessment, I gained the knowledge, skills and dispositions a technology facilitator needs to effectively integrate technology into their teaching practice through learning how to manage the Moodle learner management system and creating the online professional learning course. I learned how

important collaborating with stakeholders is to the planning of a course to improve teaching and learning. During the creation of the course, I included authentic learning experiences for the participants that they could use to engage their students with the digital tools and resources.

The learning gained that supported PSC Standard 3: Digital Learning Environments focused on the majority of the content of the online course. I acquired the knowledge of all seventeen online subscription resources, as well as creating tutorials to assist the participants with gaining a better knowledge. The course was designed to focus on collaborative learning strategies to maximize student use of the digital tools while learning from each other. This experience also supported growth in my learning for facilitating opportunities and choice for professional learning for teachers.

PSC Standard 4: Digital Citizenship and Responsibility again focused on the content of the course. I learned about modeling and facilitating the safe and ethical use of digital information through the use of these specific online subscription resources by encouraging teachers to integrate these tools in their classroom.

This experience supported PSC Standard 5: Professional Learning and Program Evaluation by giving me an opportunity to develop and implement technology-based professional learning that aligned to professional learning standards, while integrating technology to support an online component, modeling principles of adult learning, and promoting student learning. This online course also gave me an opportunity to learn how to design and implement a program evaluation to determine the overall effectiveness of professional learning in regards to strengthening teacher's content knowledge, improving their pedagogical skills and increasing student learning.

I have several recommendations for anyone considering creating an online course for professional learning. First, take an in depth training on the learner management system you will be using for the course. Second, determine the learning need by surveying your teachers and/or analyzing data in regards to school improvement needs. Third, allow yourself plenty of time to design the course, create handouts, and video and/or audio tutorials. The whole process may take nine months to a year. Last, develop an evaluation plan for the end of the course, a follow-up or check-in with teachers about a month after the course to see if they have any questions, and then another follow-up evaluation to check on level of integration of learning.

## References

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