

An elearning proposal for the education of online teachers

ELearning Proposal

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Introduction

The Forward Thinking plan, implemented by the Commissioner of Education at the Colorado Department of Education (CDE), has set forth numerous goals for the institution and for K-12 education across the state. Among those goals is to “make effective use of federal, state and private funds” and to “implement quality standards for the operation and administration of multi-district online educational enterprises and develop the infrastructure (policies, procedures, curriculum, practices and management tools) needed to support this effort” (Colorado Department of Education, 2007).

Online learning for K-12 students is a fairly new approach to education in Colorado, with the first program starting in 1999. Online education has evolved to become a widely accepted practice in the United States only within the past five years (NACOL, 2007). With the adaptation of the quality standards for online education in Colorado by the State Board of Education (Colorado Department of Education, 2008), and to ensure high quality teaching standards amongst our educator force, we must provide professional development (PD) that will directly impact their ability to effectively teach online and help close the achievement gap. The Unit of Online Learning proposes an elearning solution for the PD of online teachers in Colorado that addresses the need for closing the achievement gap through the development of highly qualified online teachers both in current technologies and instruction for online teaching, and in the course specific area of mathematics.

The results of the 2007 Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) indicates scores for online students, especially in core subjects like math, are well below proficient levels (Colorado Student Assessment Program, 2007). By providing professional development targeting this core subject, we can prepare our online teachers to make the

changes necessary in the delivery of these courses that will in turn impact testing outcomes. Through an elearning initiative, we will contribute to the education of “highly qualified teachers” (Colorado Department of Education, 2008) that can support math efforts in Colorado. The development of those teachers also supports the mandates set forth in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) federal regulation that “requires all teachers of core academic subjects be highly qualified in their assignment. While this requirement does not guarantee an effective teacher in every classroom, it does set a common expectation for teacher knowledge” (Colorado Department of Education, 2008).

Purpose of the elearning and rationale

Resources, skills and curriculum all work to “facilitate the integration and implementation of information and communications technology” (Solomon, 2008, p. 2). This proposal addresses each of these components and how they support the elearning initiative.

In order to meet the needs of 21st Century Learners, educators must be trained and in a position to take on those challenges. Twenty-first century learners, referred to by Prensky (2001) as digital natives, approach learning very differently than previous generations. The 21st century educator must be prepared to meet those learners and provide avenues for learning that make sense to them. According to Churches, (2008) 21st century educators must be visionary, “seeing the potential in the emerging tools and web technologies, then grasping and manipulating them to serve student needs” (p. 6) What better way to prepare our online teachers than to provide exposure through online professional development where they can become familiar with and practice a variety of web technologies within the environments that students are already actively participating.

This is verified by Joyce Faye White, an instructional technology specialist at the Virginia Department of Education, who indicates that districts need a well researched approach to online professional development “that shows the current techniques so teachers understand the latest best practices” (Davis, 2008).

Using a web-based approach for professional development of online instructors makes sense from an administrative angle as well. According to Barbara Treacy, project director for EdTech Leaders Online (EtLo) “the virtual world may also provide a better way of tracking how teachers are using the professional-development lessons they learn and whether they’re getting the most they can from the course offerings. The data is there. You can track how long a person took on an activity, how frequently they accessed material, how many times they ‘spoke’ in class, and how thoughtful and rich their comments are. It’s all documented and clear” (Davis, 2008). The use of a web-based approach will allow for an efficient gathering of data that will in turn be used to by administrators to make sound decisions for future courses.

Online professional development allows access to high-quality instruction and courses that may not be provided locally, and allows teachers to access the learning “from any time and any place” (Davis, 2008). For teachers to access professional development remotely will be an advantage for many reasons, including fitting this into their already busy lives. Online courses “allow for more people to participate, and the schedule is flexible so they can do it in their own space and on their own time” (Davis, 2008).

The final critical factor for using an elearning approach to professional development is the potential cost savings. Economic indicators reflect less money within

districts across Colorado to support travel costs for professional development. School districts across the state as well as the nation are drastically reducing their budgets. These reductions include cutting non-essential travel (eSchool News, 2008). By offering training virtually, we will promote cost savings and still reach those teachers that reside in remote communities, where travel adds an extra financial burden to school districts. With this virtual interaction and the use of Web 2.0 tools, these financial constraints will no longer be barriers for professional development.

Goals/intended outcomes

The goals of this eLearning proposal initiative include:

1. Initiate a long-term model for professional development for online teachers in Colorado that will meet the standard for quality online teaching;
2. Support the training of two current online teachers; these teachers will then facilitate the additional training of other online educators in the state;
3. Train online teachers in courses specific to content areas that will improve student CSAP scores. Those courses will include mathematics; and
4. Utilize current technologies to introduce online teachers to Web 2.0 tools, and provide guidance for their use in the online environment for their students.

Selected Model of eLearning

The instructional learning model used for this elearning initiative is based on a blended learning approach. The five components of this model include: live events, self-paced learning, collaboration, assessment and performance support materials (Carman, 2002).

The proposal for this elearning plan includes all of these ingredients. The synchronous interaction amongst the teachers will occur through scheduled webinars during the cohort I and cohort II courses. The self-paced learning ingredient is demonstrated within the individual work that the teachers will be doing in the online coursework. Further, the opportunity for collaboration occurs in the online courses as well, through group discussions. An assessment is planned for each teacher, as they move through the modules of the online course. These assessments will provide instant feedback to the individual teacher, as well as to the facilitator. They will also provide feedback to the Unit of Online Learning, which can be used to make changes in the courses. Finally, downloadable documents will be available to all online participants, along with resources for application of the tools they learn.

Audience

Currently there are 14 certified multi-district online programs across the state of Colorado, serving well over 10,000 students. There are also multiple single-district online programs serving students on a full-time or part-time basis within their own districts. The teachers working in these programs are full-time and part-time instructors who are located at a distance from the students they serve. Many of these teachers are highly qualified teachers, meaning that they “hold a college degree, are fully licensed in the state of Colorado and demonstrate subject matter competency.” (Colorado Department of Education, 2008). All teachers serving online students in Colorado are fully licensed.

The first annual Online Learning Teachers Best Practices Workshop (OLTeach) was held in August of 2008. Over 200 teachers and online administrators attended sessions featuring current trends and practices within the state. The second annual

conference is being planned for 2009. Prior to this conference, there was no organized professional development for online teachers in Colorado. Along with an annual conference, the need for ongoing professional development offered virtually for practice improvement is crucial as more teachers take on the role of online instructing.

This initiative reflects the beginnings of a long-range plan for professional development targeting online educators in Colorado. What is the best approach for teaching these adults learners?

Today's adult learners differ from traditional college-age students. They tend to be practical problem solvers. Their life experiences make them autonomous, self-directed, and goal- and relevancy-oriented—they need to know the rationale for what they are learning. They are motivated by professional advancement, external expectations, the need to better serve others, social relationships, escape or stimulation, and pure interest in the subject. Their demands include time and scheduling, money, and long-term commitment constraints. They also tend to feel insecure about their ability to succeed in distance learning, find instruction that matches their learning style, and have sufficient instructor contact, support services, and technology training (Howell, 2003).

Given what has been discovered about adult learners, and applying this to adult learners who are online instructors, presents many challenges. By approaching PD with

online courses supported by a trainer and the Unit of Online Learning at CDE, teachers will gain hands-on practice in technology, and find avenues for just-in-time learning within their own schedules.

Feasibility, planning and implementation

An application will be developed to recruit teachers interested in completing a train the trainer course. Four teachers would be selected to participate in this training, and all fees would be covered. Part of the application for this piece includes a commitment to facilitate a minimum of one course for teachers in Colorado at the completion of this training.

An exploration of existing professional development course offerings has been completed and this proposal seeks the use of Ed Tech Leaders Online (ETLO). The goal of ETLO is to “establish successful, sustainable, statewide online professional development programs that address teacher quality and student achievement goals” with the use of “high-quality, standards-based online workshops focused on specific K-12 subject areas and grade levels“ (ETLO, 2008).

Two of the selected teachers would enroll in an online training course focused on teaching K-12 students online. This eight-session course includes pedagogy, skills and techniques, and is based on the Southern Regional Education Board standards for quality teaching (SREB, 2007). The other two teachers selected would enroll in a content specific training—21st century technical skills for teaching math online.

After completing the training, these specialists would each facilitate the next four ETLO online courses that were offered statewide on online instruction or math. One session of each of these courses would be offered in the fall of 2009 (cohort I students)

and spring of 2010 (cohort II students). These courses are developed and kept up-to-date by leading experts in educational technology at ETLO and offer six online sessions, including an overview, resources, activities, and discussions. These courses would be limited to 25 users.

As the trainers run the selected courses, they continue to receive support and mentoring via an online forum from ETLO and support from the Unit of Online Learning. Opportunities would be explored for further train the trainer options, which would allow an additional two teachers to become trainers.

Technical specifications include a Moodle content management system (CMS), Version 1.9.3+. Moodle is a free, “open source software package designed using sound pedagogical principles, to help educators create effective online learning communities” (Moodle, 2008). The Moodle CMS will host the courses for cohort I and II, and will also hold the database that includes records of attendance in courses, successful course completion rates, and evaluation surveys.

As for necessary technology tools, all participants will need internet access, a computer with built in audio capabilities, or an external microphone. A webcam will be optional for participation in the webinars.

Roles

Oversight for this program will fall to the Director of Online Learning at CDE. The lead teachers would directly report to the director. The principal consultant within the Unit of Online Learning will be acting as the project manager for this initiative. Under the leadership of the director, she will be involved in the initial selection of the train-the-trainer teachers, working with the technology support department at CDE to

manage the Moodle server, and formulating a plan for the compilation of data that comes as the teachers complete their online courses. She will also work with the director in the marketing of this initiative.

This initiative also indicates the need for one additional full-time staff, with senior consultant status, experienced in online education and instructional learning, that will be responsible for coordinating the activities of the trainers and evaluating the success of the teacher trainings through surveys and reporting on that data as courses are completed. This individual will also be the point of contact to help coordinate a future certification process, working with Department of Education licensure in providing the necessary documentation for completing the online work by the teachers.

Finally, the administrative assistant currently staffed in the unit will assist with communication via emails and on the website.

Budget for elearning proposal

Following is the outlined budget for this initiative.

Training for 4 Train-the-Trainer instructors	\$2750 x 4=\$11,000.00
Stipend for conducting each 6-week session of cohort I and II courses	\$1,000 x 4 = \$2,000.00
Cohort I-License of 2 courses first semester for 2 classes (25 teachers/class)	\$500 x 2=\$1,000.00
Cohort II-License of additional 2 courses for second semester for 2 classes (25 teachers/class)	\$500 x 2=\$1,000.00
Moodle software	\$0.00
Server:	\$5,000.00
Technical support (CDE): Initially, 20 hours per week x 2 weeks; minimal after that	\$2,000.00
Additional staff: Senior Consultant (Salary plus benefits)	\$70,000.00
Total Projected Budget needs: \$92,000.00	

Project timeline

Process	Timeline
Application process for trainers	January 2009-March 2009
Train the Trainer	April 2009-July 2009
Marketing	May 2009-August 2009
Set-up leased courses	June 2009-July 2009
Sign-up teachers for courses	May 2009-July 2009
OL Teach conference-round table for Cohort I	Early August 2009
1 st Semester: Initial courses offered-Cohort I (2 courses)	Mid-August 2009-November 2009
Survey and data collection for Cohort I	End of November 2009-early January 2010
Webinar for Cohort II participants	Early January 2010
2 nd Semester: Initial courses offered-Cohort II (2 courses)	Mid January 2010-March 2010
Survey and data collection for Cohort II	April-May 2010

It is anticipated that from the posting of the applications for the train-the-trainer positions, to the completion of the course by Cohort II, the timeline involves 17 months. This timeframe would also include the set-up of the Moodle server, the hiring of additional support staff and the initial marketing for this program.

Marketing and promotion

The initial marketing for the program, including the recruitment of our trainers, will be a joint effort between the director of online learning and the principal consultant. After an application is finalized for the train the trainer positions, the Unit of Online Learning will be sending out bimonthly announcements through the list-serve to solicit interested applicants. Announcements will be posted on the Unit of Online Learning website as well as send postings to school superintendents through the bi-weekly CDE publication, the Scoop. Webinars will be conducted for all interested parties, and will be broadcast through a web-enabled interface. These webinars will introduce this initiative, and present the application for the train the trainer positions. Continued partnerships with

state agencies, including Colorado Online Learning (COL), Colorado Association of School Executives (CASE) and our existing online programs will all provide avenues to market this exciting opportunity for teachers.

Evaluation of eLearning initiative

Evaluation for the first year of this professional development model will take place several ways. The senior consultant will design online surveys for each of the cohorts, plus an online survey for the teachers selected for the train-the-trainer program. These surveys will be conducted at the midway point, and at the conclusion of the course. There will also be moderated discussions throughout the courses to solicit feedback that can then be used to refine the course for future trainings that will be facilitated by the trainer as well as the senior consultant.

Change effort/leadership factors

“To prevent yourself or your organization from becoming stranded on the mudflats of an obsolete ideology, you must become a champion of change” (Clark, 1997). As CDE moves to accept this elearning proposal, ongoing support and encouragement must be provided for the online teachers along with administrators who are weathering the potential storm of change that may occur from this new approach for professional development. Throughout this change process, “the risks of change must be compared with the even more significant risks of maintaining present practices” (Reeves, 2006, p. 98). The forgotten question in most discussions of change is “what is the risk if you fail to change? We must compare the inconvenience to the risk and lifetime consequences associated with student failure” (Reeves, 2006, p. 98).

Teachers “are most motivated by work that is meaningful and by a sense that their personal efforts make a difference” (Reeves, 2006, p. 95). Educators can develop the skills necessary for effective teaching with applicable professional development and by doing so, will have a greater impact on the students they teach. According to Jim Collins in *Good to Great*, (2001) we should recognize that “it is not about having a goal to be the best, a strategy to be the best, an intention to be the best, a plan to be the best. It is an understanding of what you can be the best at” (p. 98). It is critical for the success of this initiative that our teachers feel supported throughout this process, and a reminder that our teachers can be the best at online teaching if we educate and support them.

Perhaps the strongest rationale for supporting this professional development and the changes necessary during this transition is expressed by Helsing, et al. (2008):

Changing educators’ behaviors is important because their actions may affect student achievement...for changes in practice to occur, educators have to know how and when to use new ideas and what specific behavioral changes are needed. They must practice new ways of acting, receive feedback on these new ways of acting, and be able to experiment further until they become skilled in the new behaviors.

Quoting Darwin on change: “It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the most responsive to change” (1859, as cited in Reeves, 2006). As CDE looks to the future to define and build 21st century skills in learners, there will be ongoing discussions about change and incorporating technology into our schools.

According to Collins (2001), “great companies will not become great because of snazzy technology and hype...only if it figures out how to apply technology to a coherent concept that reflects understanding of ...what you can be the best in the world at; what drives your economic engine; and what you are deeply passionate about” (p. 153). With the direction of the Forward Thinking plan, the Unit of Online Learning will take a leadership role in demonstrating how a solid, well-planned technology-based PD initiative will work, and how we can become the best in the world at it. By utilizing a content management system, and quality professional online courses, we will demonstrate effective teaching and learning through technology and move our online teachers towards greatness. “Technology and technology-driven change has virtually nothing to do with igniting a transformation from good to great. Technology can accelerate a transformation, but technology cannot cause a transformation” (Collins, 2001, p. 11).

The online teachers and online program administrators are part of a unique culture in this state. Until a year ago, the support they received from CDE primarily came from the auditing department in relation to how to count and document their online students. With the passing of Senate Bill 215 (Colorado Department of Education, 2007) and the rules for the administration of online programs (Colorado Department of Education, 2008), the need for a bringing together our online teachers to support a culture of 21st century learning is imperative.

As leaders in this online professional development initiative, we can have a great impact on the culture, depending on “the words we use, to the cultural norms that can drive behavior” (Glaser, 2005, p. 120). Over time, the organization of these online

educators can move from the “unspoken ground rules to development of more extensive, codified practices, procedures and processes” that will promote growth of each individual. “When that happens, a unique culture emerges with its own rules, ethics and standards of behaviors” (Glaser, 2005, p. 120), and in the case of Colorado online educators, a new standard for highly qualified teachers.

Culture refers to “norms of behavior and shared values among a group of colleagues” and forms the basis of “interacting and communicating within a group” (Glaser, 2005, p. 121). By creating an interactive and open culture of online learning, we can build a strong cadre of online learning professionals in our state. According to Glaser (2005), there are seven lessons for making over culture in a company, including communication, recognition and helping people think differently. To support this culture of change, there will be ongoing communication between the trainers and the professional staff at CDE. There will also be planned time for open forums in the webinar area for teachers and trainers to talk about what is working and what needs improvement. As the completion of these “semesters” of training happen, we will recognize those teachers who have been successful. At the annual OL Teach conference, those teachers will be recognized among their peers. Committing to change and encouraging everyone to think differently about this type of professional development is critical for a culture change and acceptance of learning.

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