At Michigan LearnPort, Teachers Tap Social Networking

BY BILL PERRY

Public school teachers typically spend all of their time sharing knowledge with students, not each other. To encourage peer sharing, Michigan Virtual University created Michigan LearnPort, a social networking system that allows teachers in that state to collaborate and distribute ideas and best practices.

In 1998, the state of Michigan established Michigan Virtual University (MVU) as a not-for-profit corporation to serve as a champion for online learning. MVU, in partnership with Michigan schools, provides cost-effective services and technology that strengthen teaching. The organization funds its operations with grants, contracts and course fees.

Since its founding, MVU has been a leading change agent in Michigan for the use of online tools and resources for developing and sharing knowledge. Beginning in 2002, there has been a steady stream of state and federal laws aimed at improving education. These laws push teachers to participate in professional development (PD), but many educators feel strapped for time and resources when it comes to learning.

In 2003, MVU created a Web-based PD delivery system called Michigan LearnPort. Through Michigan LearnPort, school personnel are provided PD programs to help meet personal and district learning requirements.

Finding a Better Way

Over the years, MVU and its partner, the Michigan Department of Education, examined the typical ways school districts parcel out PD for teachers. MVU saw room for improvement.

"So often, as a school superintendent, I would bring in an expert to address my staff for the purpose of PD," said David Myers, executive director for Michigan LearnPort. "Lots of people would get excited by the presentations. But when teachers returned to their classes and the expert was gone, they had nowhere to go to build on what they learned."

Relaunching Michigan LearnPort

With this in mind, Myers and his colleagues set four goals for the relaunch of Michigan LearnPort:

1. Michigan LearnPort will become the premier Web site for delivering PD courses to Michigan educators.
2. It will trim the cost of PD for school districts by delivering training online. Myers envisioned teachers getting education at school, home, libraries, anywhere with an Internet connection — even during the summer months when most schools are closed.
3. Teachers will have a way to sustain what they learn.
4. Michigan LearnPort will serve as a repository for Michigan school districts' training records.

"We weren't trying to aggregate records simply for the sake of showing compliance with state mandates," Myers added. "We also wanted this capability so teachers and administrators could have one place to track their professional learning activities from graduate study, seminars and, of course, Michigan LearnPort online courses."

A New Twist for the LMS

MVU had experience with learning management system (LMS) software for tracking and distributing training. MVU's executives knew an LMS was a way for teachers in far-flung districts to easily register and take

online training. But along with managing the basics of learning, Michigan LearnPort was meant to bring the best of social networking software and knowledge exchange to one easy-to-use, accessible spot. So Michigan LearnPort personnel sought an LMS that would underpin an online community in which educators could exchange ideas to help one another.

"We needed to deliver training to tens of thousands of users, but we also wanted to foster collaboration," Myers said. "We had to have a system that was intuitive. Not all users are experts with e-learning or online collaboration."

After months of evaluating vendors, Meridian's LMS was chosen for the MVU project. With the LMS in place, Michigan LearnPort has a record of each teacher's development plan. It also links PD to school goals and offers access to training. Teachers can create transcripts to show they are complying with NCLB. And Michigan LearnPort offers online forums for teachers to join after completing PD.

"The collaborative features of our LMS, which we call 'community rooms,' were ideal for helping us reinforce the PD that teachers undertake," Myers said. "Our Michigan LearnPort community rooms are built around discussion threads, a resident e-mail tool and calendaring functionality."

A Community of Learning

According to Michigan LearnPort, since launching the new LMS in July 2007, users of the PD portal have built more than 134 community rooms. More than 100 online courses are available free to all Michigan teachers via the Internet. And Michigan LearnPort makes it possible for them to create and use a community room as part of an online course. By January 2008, about six months after the launch, Michigan LearnPort had served almost 30,000 users.

"It's amazing to see the proliferation of community rooms that educators have built in the six months since we relaunched Michigan LearnPort: We've gone from zero to 134," said Elizabeth Elliott, project manager at Michigan LearnPort. "Anyone who visits Michigan LearnPort can use our LMS to create a community room. The size of the rooms range from two people to an entire school district."

According to Michigan LearnPort, educators at opposite ends of the state now can connect through community rooms. For soon-to-be credentialed teachers who often are new college graduates, the community rooms are proving a favorite.

When teachers visit Michigan LearnPort, they will see the range of community rooms, as well as a feature for creating them. The social networking features of the LMS, coupled with its traditional training features, have the potential to improve the way teachers seek PD and the ways they collaborate. Before relaunching Michigan LearnPort, Myers said, teachers who wanted to collaborate would have to coordinate schedules, find e-mail addresses for colleagues and set up conference calls at the mercy of everyone's calendars. Now, educators can connect and learn when they have the time.

"If you calculate what it costs to chase people for training, compensate instructors and pay for courses and classroom space," Myers said, "then there's no question we've saved Michigan educators time and money, while improving their skills."

For example, one Michigan school district tapped Michigan LearnPort for an online course to meet Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) requirements. The district pegged its savings at $11 per employee. If the 150,000 school employees across the state were to take this hour-long, online OSHA course in place of face-to-face OSHA training, the potential savings would be more than $1.6 million, or equal to the approximate cost of operating Michigan LearnPort for one year.

Going forward, Myers and his team hope to make online learning a widely accepted alternative to the traditional models of PD that Michigan educators rely on. Early success with Michigan LearnPort is helping Myers' team make a case. **CLO**

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DATA POINT
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