Research Brief

Online Courses

Question:
- What are considerations for a high quality online program?
- What are characteristics of effective online course offerings?
- What are recommended characteristics of an online teacher?
- What are some ways to keep students engaged and make the program personalized?

Summary of Findings:

In a Nutshell

Although technology affects everyone's lives in a many ways, effective utilization of it has been slow to enter America's classrooms. The expectations of Millennial students (those born between 1980-2000) are different from those from previous generations. They expect immediate feedback, are skilled multitaskers and use various technological resources to learn (Conceiçãno, 2007; Shelton & Saltsman, 2004; Peiz). Online courses have been offered for adult learners attending college and in other settings for more than ten years, but are a relatively new instructional delivery model at the high school level. "Today's challenge is to ensure that information technology increases the quantity of educational opportunities while maintaining or enhancing the quality of those opportunities" (NEA Guide to Online Courses). Online courses can provide:
- more course offerings, especially in small schools and/or in a specialty content where there are not enough students in one school to justify having the class or there is not a qualified teacher to provide instruction,
- classes for students who may be advanced in a content area, which will allow them to continue their education at a higher level,
- access to courses for students who are not in the regular classroom setting.

"Online learning is a type of distance education in which teachers and learners are physically separate and instruction and content are delivered through the Internet" (Clark, 2008). These programs should have a qualified and certified teacher teaching it who works and interacts with and provides timely feedback to the students.

Quality Online Courses
When deciding whether or not to offer courses online and determining if and how this will meet the needs of the students so that it is a quality experience, the following questions should be examined:
- What schools are offering programs and how are they working for those schools?

- Will the course be a semester or yearlong course?
- Will it be offered for college credit?
- How and/or will it be used to fulfill graduation requirements?
- What policy will be adopted for dropping the course?
- Is the provider of the course or program accredited?
- How is the course aligned with district or state standards?
- How will the program be monitored?
- How will students and teachers be supported?
- How beneficial will it be for the students to take the course online?
- How will students be assessed and grades determined?
- How will the school, teachers and students interact with the provider?
- How will the teacher and students communicate with each other?
- Is the course taught by a certified teacher?
- Are the guidelines and expectations for the course realistic? (NEA. *Guide to online high school courses*; Clark, 2008)

Guidelines for Online Courses
- Curriculum should be aligned with standards.
- Curriculum should be challenging, relevant and relate to the students' lives with an emphasis on student learning.
- Syllabi should be structured with clear guidelines, expectations, course and assignment descriptions, and deadlines.
- Instruction should utilize the most current research about how high school students learn.
- Students should be active, collaborative and interact regularly with other students and the teacher.
- Assessment should occur throughout the class and be both formative and summative.
- Communication and dialogue among and between students and students and teacher should be on going and regular.
- Management and support systems should be provided to students, teachers and parents.
- The technology infrastructure should be in place so that it and any assistance needed is readily available.
- Teachers should have support, release time, mentors, professional development, technological and administrative support (Clark, 2008; NEA Guide to Online High School Courses; NEA Online Learning; Shelton & Saltsman, 2004; Herrington & Bunker).

Suggested Qualifications for Online Teachers
According to the NEA, in their *Guide to Teaching Online Courses,* Clark (2008) and Shelton and Saltsman, the following suggestions were provided as characteristics of a quality online teacher. They should:

- be certified in the content to be taught. Since each state has different requirements for certification, it was recommended that it be from the state where they will be teaching.
- receive training in appropriate skills for online courses such as: developing and setting up the learning environment, introducing material, supporting intellectual growth, evaluating the program, facilitating discussions, opening up and keeping lines of communication flowing, monitoring students online, establishing meaningful and relevant work and assessments, developing reasonable task and discussion timelines that take into account different time zones, setting up and monitoring collaborative learning, making appropriate adaptations and using adaptive software, and teaching to meet all learning styles
- demonstrate mastery of online teaching. It was suggested that a mentor work with the novice online teacher to support them through their learning process.

Suggestions for Online Pedagogy
Regardless of how long a teacher has taught in a traditional classroom, the online experience is different and can be daunting. Shelton & Saltsman (2004) and Peiz provided some suggested strategies to help make an online course a productive experience for teachers and students.

- *Utilize ungraded ice breakers*. For example, students ask critical questions about the readings, discussions, etc.
- *Allow students to serve as discussion facilitators for website discussions*. For example, after completing specific readings, students respond to three questions of other students. Students find and research a website that is about the specific content, submit an overview and lead the discussion
- *Students serve as peer assistants*. For example, students help each other understand a concept by either explaining it in their own words or asking for assistance
- *Permit students to grade their own homework*. For example, students compare their work to the professor's grading key. When it's not in agreement, the student must determine why.
- *Use case analysis*. For example, students read a case/situation and develop a plan/prognosis, etc. The case can then be discussed by students when online.

Resources:

Developing an Effective Online Program

- NEA. *Guide to online high school courses*. (n.d.). Retrieved online from
  http://www.nea.org/technology/onlinecourseguide.html
  This is a narrative checklist for the components necessary for an effective online high school program.

- NEA. *The guide to teaching online courses*. (n.d.). Retrieved online from
  http://www.nea.org/technology/onlinelearning.html
  This was "designed to provide an overview of the development of an effective online education system, focusing particularly on the skills teachers need to teach effectively online."

- Southern Regional Education Board. (2006). *Checklist for evaluating online courses*. SREB: Atlanta, GA. Retrieved online from
  http://learningonlineinfo.org/2007/01/23/sreb-checklist-for-evaluating-online-courses/
  This was "designed to assist states and schools in determining the quality and effectiveness of online courses."

- Southern Regional Education Board. (2006). *Standards for quality online teaching and online teaching evaluation for state virtual schools*. Atlanta: Author. Retrieved online from
  www.sreb.org/programs/EdTech/pubs/pubsindex.asp
  "This publication examines the essential components of quality online courses in the context of today's learners and the increased emphasis on accountability."

Instructional Strategies for Online Classes

- Herrington, A. & Bunker, A. (n.d.). *Quality teaching online: Putting pedagogy first.* Retrieved online from http://www.herdsa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/conference/2002/papers/HerringtonA.pdf
  "This paper reports on the use of guidelines, which are clearly providing a practical tool that can be used for a range of applications…"

- Peiz, B. (n.d.). *(My) three principles of effective online pedagogy*. Retrieved online from http://www.sloan-c.org/publications/JALN/v8n3/v8n3_pelz.asp
  Descriptions and examples of practical methodologies are presented in this article.

- Shelton, K. & Saltsman, G. (n.d.) *Tips and tricks for teaching online.* Retrieved online from
  http://www.itdl.org/Journal/Oct_04/article04.htm
  This site compares online teaching to gardening and provides practical tips for a successful online teaching experience.

The Online Instructional Environment

- Chute, E. (2005, May 8). Cyber schools spring up in state. *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. Retrieved online from www.post-gazette.com/pg/05128/500990.stm

  This article provides a brief overview of cyber schools in Pennsylvania.

- Clark, T. (2008, May). Online learning: Pure potential. *Educational leadership.* http://www.ascd.org/portal/site/ascd/template.MAXIMIZE/menuitem.c00a836e7622024fb85516f762108a0c/?javax.portlet.tpst=818d37ec925d82800173fc1062108a0c_ws_MX&javax.portlet.prp_818d37ec925d82800173fc1062108a0c_viewID=article_view&javax.portlet.prp_818d37ec925d82800173fc1062108a0c_journalmoid=9f9dcdae25b99110VgnVCM1000003d01a8c0RCRD&javax.portlet.prp_818d37ec925d82800173fc1062108a0c_articlemoid=511fcdae25b99110VgnVCM1000003d01a8c0RCRD&javax.portlet.begCacheTok=token&javax.portlet.endCacheTok=token

  This article provides an overview and description of online learning and offers suggestions to schools about how to set up online programs.

- Conceiçãno, S. C. O. (2007). *Understanding the environment for online teaching.* Retrieved online from http://www.voced.edu.au/td/tnc_89.658

  "This chapter provides guidelines for understanding the online environment and the use of online teaching strategies."

- Watson, J. & Ryan, J. (2006). *Keeping pace with K-12 online learning.* Retrieved online from http://www.nacol.org/docs/Keeping%20Pace%20with%20K-12%20Online%20Learning%202006.pdf

  This is an extensive report on state led online programs and state level policies regarding online education and includes a state-by-state summary.

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http://www.educationpartnerships.org/