Enabling a Community of Practice: Results of the LSCHE Web Portal Survey

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Abstract

The study explored usage patterns of the Learning Support Centers in Higher Education (LSCHE) web portal, an open educational resource (OER) that serves learning support center professionals. Results of an online survey taken by LSCHE users (N=41) tracked their self-reported usage and perceived value of resources on the web portal, which received an average rating of 3.3 out of 5.0 on eight characteristics. LSCHE scored highest on relevance of resources (3.8) and clarity of homepage (3.6). Lowest scores showed a need for improvement in ease of locating resources (2.9), timeliness (2.9), and ease of navigation (3.1). The article will also address the continued evolution of the web portal.

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"No one of us is as smart as all of us"—Rick Sheets

The Learning Support Centers in High Education (LSCHE) web portal (www.lsche.net) is an open educational resource (OER) affording postsecondary learning support center (LSC) professionals with over 500 web pages of 5,000 searchable files. The collection includes historical documents, instructional tutor aids, pertinent foundational scholarship, and documents underscoring the importance of management support, professional development, and LSC best practices, among many other topics. In fact, LSCHE is the only web portal to provide actual links to over 1,500 LSC websites from the U.S. and abroad (LSCHE, 2016a). LSCHE bridges the divide between practitioners and resources in terms of relevance, quality, and access. The purpose of this article is to report results of

an online survey taken by LSCHE users, tracking their self-reported usage and their perceived value of resources in addressing their needs. Now with the passing of both co-founders, Frank Christ and Rick Sheets, the article will also address possible future "next steps" in the continued evolution of the web portal.

Review of Literature

The roots of LSCHE began in 1965 as a collection of Frank Christ's handwritten notes about best practices for procuring and supporting postsecondary student success. By 1973, working as a learning center administrator at California State University, he transformed the notes into the McBee keynote card system. Once this system became obsolete, Christ and a colleague transformed the card system into a computer PLATO database—Programmed Logic for Automatic Teaching Operation, the first computer-based education system developed in 1960 created to support an emergent online community (Van Meer, 2003). Christ called the new system LINDEX, which he described as "an online information system relating to learning skills acquisition and assistance that would enable educational administrators, counselors, and faculty to increase their effectiveness and efficiency in helping students to achieve academic success … ." (LSCHE, 2016a, para. 7). LINDEX was first introduced to the field at the 1989 College Reading and Learning Association's annual conference in Seattle. Over the next decade, technical difficulties plagued the database, and information was transferred first to a desktop computer program managed by TeaMate software, then to a PIM (InfoSelect), and finally to a web portal in the mid-1990s under the LSCHE name (LSCHE, 2016a).

LSCHE was a result of a joint venture between Christ and Rick Sheets. At the time, Christ was a visiting scholar at the University of Arizona's Learning Resource Center (LRC) and Sheets was the LRC director at Paradise Valley College. Sheets served as LSCHE webmaster, developing and maintaining the web portal, and Christ became its content editor (LSCHE, 2016a). In 2000, LSCHE initiated an annual learning center website award, partnered with National College Learning Center Association (NCLCA), and in 2009, Alan Craig became LSCHE's first associate editor. As a gift to the

profession in 2012, the College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA) hosted the web portal. After the death of Christ in 2012, Sheets purchased LSCHE's own primary domain and hosted the portal independently in support of the Council for Learning Assistance and Developmental Education Associations (CLADEA) and its six member organizations (LSCHE, 2016a). In 2014, Sheets identified learning center experts, faculty members, and graduate students to serve as advisors, editors, and content consultants to collaborate in the expansion of resources available on LSCHE (LSCHE, 2016b). With the death of Sheets in 2016, for a time, the future of LSCHE became uncertain.

Given LSCHE's history of association with many learning support organizations, the web portal serves the function of promoting an online community of practice (CoP) in the learning support field. A CoP is a group of individuals who share a common interest and interact with the goal of building knowledge and improving in the field (McAlister, 2016). The CoP paradigm was founded on a constructivist approach to learning that forefronts the social process of knowledge construction (Panke & Seufert, 2013). The internet has expanded the scope of learning communities in such a way that professionals from across the globe can share resources and collaborate despite distance by providing platforms to share information and resources freely with other practitioners in the professional community. Matyas (2015) posited that, in building these communities, the first step is assembling a library of digitally available resources. OERs are collections of resources for educational purposes that are accessible to the public and free to use (Deimann & Farrow, 2013).

OERs can take many forms but share the goal of leveraging the internet to increase access to educational resources (Panke & Seufert, 2013). In essence, OERs were founded on the belief that "free access to educational material facilitates learning" (Panke & Seufert, 2013, p. 116). Past studies have focused on usage of OERs by students (Atenas, Havemann, & Priego, 2015; Bacisch & Pepler, 2014; Lee, 2010) and teachers (Farrow et al., 2015; Karunanayaka, Naidu, Rajendra, & Ratnayake, 2015); what is less known is how OERs are being used by practitioners in learning assistance centers.

The current study aims to address this gap in knowledge by exploring usage patterns of an OER that specifically serves learning support centers in higher education.

Methods

Given the focus of LSCHE on providing resources specific to learning assistance center professionals, the web portal has the potential to serve an important role within the learning assistance community, providing a space to connect experts and information without the pressures of market forces and private interests. To understand the role of LSCHE more fully, as well as how the web portal functions as a resource provider, the study addressed three questions:

1. How is LSCHE perceived by users?
2. How often is LSCHE visited by practitioners?
3. How is LSCHE being used in the learning support field?

Participants

In order to learn about LSCHE users' preferences as well as the web portal's usage trends, this study targeted educators and practitioners within the field of postsecondary learning support and developmental education (DE). Survey invitations were distributed in fall of 2016 using the "LRNASST" listserv and were made available on the LSCHE homepage. Participants (those that completed the survey [N=41]) were over the age of 18 but were not limited to any demographic characteristic such as sex; ethnic and/or racial group; socioeconomic or immigrant status; level of education; disability status; sexual orientation; gender identity; or language preference, et cetera. The majority of respondents (80.5%) were administrators of learning support centers, with faculty members being the second to use the LSCHE web portal (19.5%). Survey respondents held positions at 4-year (31.7%) and 2-year (26.8%) institutions.

Materials

Creswell (2014) described the aim of survey research as a way to provide a "numeric description of trends, attitude, or opinions of a population" (p. 13). Since the LSCHE web portal was created to serve practitioners in the learning support field, users' comments and perceptions of the LSCHE web portal can inform future

updates. Given the objectives of the current study, the authors utilized a survey to explore the attitudes and usage trends of the learning assistance community. The Survey Monkey website was the only tool used for the collection and storage of survey feedback from participants in this study. In order to measure the perceived convenience and efficacy of the LSCHE web portal, a survey was designed using 10 questions and a short-answer comment section. For example, to indicate opinions of the overall web portal, participants rated it on a scale of 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent) on eight characteristics: clarity of homepage, organization, visual appeal, timeliness, ease of navigation, accuracy of resources, relevance of resources, and ease of locating resources. Survey responses accumulated over four months during the fall academic semester (October through December of 2016).

The study also explored how convenient the organization of the web portal was for users in locating relevant resources and what specific resources users looked for on LSCHE. A scale from 1 to 5 measured the ease of finding resources: not at all easy, not so easy, somewhat easy, very easy, and extremely easy. In addition, participants indicated which types of LSCHE resources were used among the categories of resources from the web portal, such as Calendar, Learners and Learner Assessment, Learning Support Center Management, Online Teaching/Learning, Professional Development, and Publications for the LSC Professional.

For the purpose of measuring usage, participants indicated the frequency of visits to the LSCHE web portal as well as how likely they were to explore, revisit, and recommend the LSCHE web portal to colleagues based on a scale from 1 (not at all likely) to 5 (extremely likely). For the purpose of tracking how LSCHE was being shared, participants had the opportunity to indicate how they first heard about LSCHE with response options such as conference, word-of-mouth referral, and online search.

Results
How is LSCHE perceived by users?

Given the exploratory nature of the questions addressed in the study, the researchers used descriptive statistics to analyze the data gathered from the survey. The web portal received an average

rating of 3.3 out of 5 on eight characteristics, such as timeliness and organization. LSCHE scored highest on relevance of resources (3.80) and clarity of homepage (3.63). Lowest scores showed a need for improvement in ease of locating resources (2.92), timeliness (2.95), and ease of navigation (3.07). A majority of respondents (43.9%, N=41) reported that relevant resources were "somewhat easy to navigate," followed by 29.27% responding "very easy."
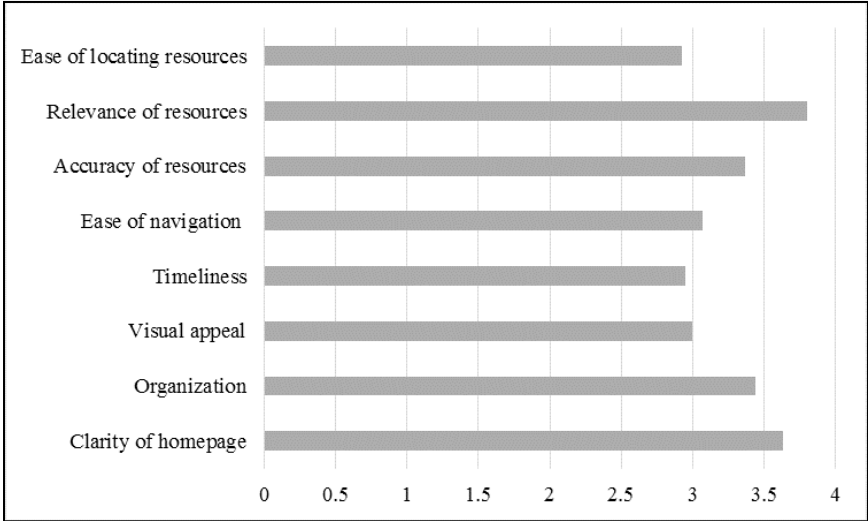

Figure 1. Web portal characteristic ratings from eight surveyed categories based on a five-point rating scale, 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent) from 41 survey participants (N=41).

How often is LSCHE used?

The majority of respondents reported visiting LSCHE several times a year (21.95%, N=41), with 19.51% visiting several times per month and another 19.51% about once a month. Only 2.44% of respondents indicated they visited LSCHE more than once per week. Once accessing LSCHE, more than half (58.54%, N=41) of respondents reported that they were "extremely likely" to explore the web portal, while a quarter of respondents (26.83%) selected "very likely" to explore it. No respondents indicated that they would not recommend LSCHE to a colleague. In addition, 60% (N=41) of respondents reported that they were "extremely likely" to revisit LSCHE; 35% selected "very likely"; 5% selected "no so likely"; and no one selected "somewhat" or "not at all likely."

How is LSCHE being used in the learning support field?

As an OER, LSCHE is dedicated to connecting practitioners to resources. At the time of the study, 13 resource categories existed on LSCHE. The most commonly used categories were Articles, Presentations, Reviews, and Research (82.93%, N=41) and Learning Support Center Management (70.73%). The least used categories were Technology, Social Media, and MUVES (Multi User Virtual Environments) (7.32%) as well as Winter Institute and LSCHE Archives (9.76%). Respondents were allowed to select more than one category.
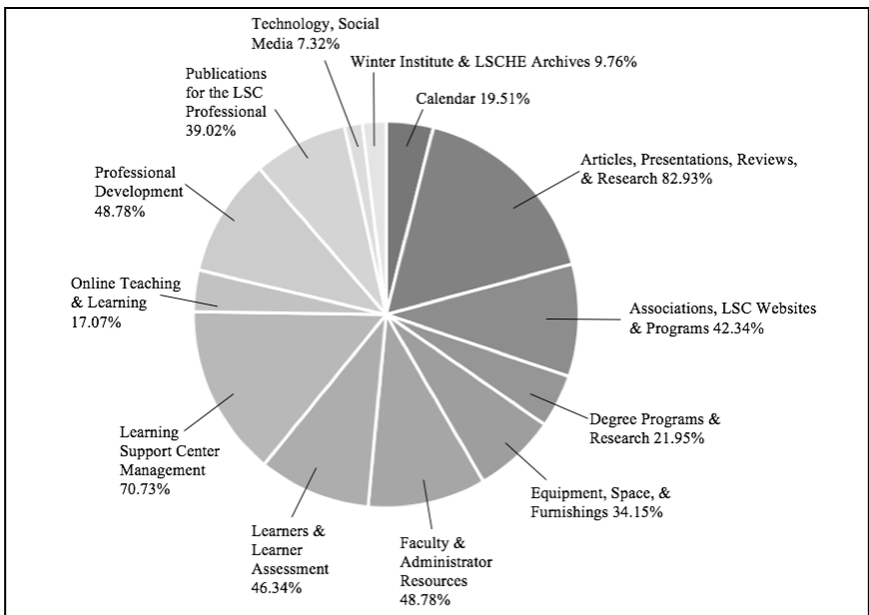

Figure 2. Percentage of use by resource category (N=41).

Discussion

How is LSCHE perceived by users?

When considered as a whole, the results from the survey provided a more complex story of how users utilize LSCHE. Survey results showed that the majority of users found resources at least somewhat easy to locate; however, users were not fully content with many of the web portal's characteristics. Ratings of the various aspects of LSCHE fell within scores of two and three (out of five),

which indicated multiple areas for improvement. Ease of locating resources received the lowest rating (2.92), which is concerning given the primary goal of LSCHE is to connect practitioners with resources. Timeliness of resources earned a slightly higher rating (2.95). The ratings on ease of navigation (3.07) and organization (3.43) may offer insights into the low scores pertaining to locating resources. Organization of LSCHE is essential to ensuring that users can find the resources relevant to their needs.

How often is LSCHE visited by practitioners?

Results from both the survey and comments revealed several areas for improvement on the LSCHE web portal, which may affect the frequency of visits and usage of LSCHE. Findings from the survey indicated that users were displeased with the relevance of the vast resources, many of which were old and out-of-date. For example, many of the online resources published in the early 2000s are no longer relevant with today's technology. Survey results showed that users accessed LSCHE monthly or less frequently. The low rating on relevance of resources reported by survey respondents may also be reflected in the reported frequency of use. Users might visit LSCHE more frequently if the resources provided were more regularly updated.

How is LSCHE being used in the learning support field?

Results showed that usage of LSCHE categories varied significantly, with less than 8% of LSCHE visitors (N=41) using technology and social media resources, while over 80% of LSCHE visitors used resources on articles, presentations, reviews, and research. While many factors may influence the discrepancy in usage of resources, possible factors include web portal organization and the updating of resources. First, the organization of the resource page on LSCHE has Articles, Presentations, Reviews, & Research and Learning Support Center Management at the top of the page—the two categories that received the highest usage rates. In contrast, Technology, Social Media, & MUVES and Winter Institute & LSCHE Archives, which had the lowest usage rates, are located at the bottom of the page. In addition, the technology page has few links to current resources, which also influences usage trends.

Finally, as an OER, LSCHE has the potential to connect

practitioners, yet there is a lack of dialogic function on the web portal itself. Access to the listserv archives is available although difficult to locate on the web portal. In terms of comments, one respondent suggested an "arena for doctoral candidates like myself to pose questions to each other. This might help us locate information and network with each other."

Despite the need for updates on LSCHE, the survey results indicated the role of LSCHE within a CoP. Users of LSCHE represented a variety of roles in the field with a shared common interest in learning support. The aspect of community surfaced in the high rates reported of recommending LSCHE to colleagues. Almost half of respondents reported being very likely to recommend LSCHE, whereas none reported that they would not recommend it. This shows a building of community around LSCHE.

Limitations

The survey study had some limitations. First, the small sample limited the ability to draw meaningful results. Future studies should include more short-answer questions or follow-up interviews to delve deeper into users' perceptions of LSCHE's strengths and weaknesses. Second, the survey was conducted over an academic semester, which, given the finding that users visit LSCHE monthly or less, was an insufficient timespan to reach users. Future studies should examine a larger time period. Tracking usage of the web portal over time could also show trends in LSCHE usage and inform when and how it is updated on a regular basis.

Recommendations

Improving the organization of LSCHE should be a priority, as indicated by the large variation in usage of certain web portal categories over others. Improved web portal organization would also improve ease of locating relevant resources. The majority of respondents (43.9%, N=41) reported that relevant resources were only somewhat easy to locate. A major goal of LSCHE, as an OER, is to provide easy access to online resources. To accomplish this goal, the web portal must be organized in a manner that facilitates the location of resources. One way to accomplish this task would be to update LSCHE and replace the current list-format with broad

categories that could more efficiently direct users to the resources they need.

Ensuring timely updated resources may increase LSCHE usage by current users. Because the resources are updated periodically without a specified time frame, practitioners might not see any benefit to checking the web portal regularly. One suggestion for increasing the relevance of resources would be for LSCHE moderators to begin making regular updates to the resources listed.

Finally, another means to increase LSCHE usage would be to embrace the community-oriented and dialogic possibilities of the OER model. Practitioners may access a listserv for the learning support field from the LSCHE web portal, as well as archives of the listserv discussions; however, a message board or similar feature could help in building a CoP around LSCHE. Providing a platform for practitioners to discuss concerns and network with one another may increase traffic by allowing a larger community access to sharing resources on LSCHE and may help users locate information and network with each other.

Frank Christ's and Rick Sheets' Legacy

As a true CoP, a number of individuals dedicated to LSCHE's future are offering expertise. Alan Craig has now stepped into the role of webmaster, and Ethan Fieldman, co-founder of Tutor Matching Service, and his team have offered to host LSCHE and to provide the technical assistance to make any needed updates and changes at no cost. Karen Agee, Alan Craig, and Russ Hodges will continue to serve as lead advisory team members. Texas State University continues its support, which began in 2014, by offering a 10-hour-a-week doctoral assistantship. The lead author of this article is the current doctoral assistant and, based on this survey, has begun a redesign proposal (Salma Abdul Sultan Amlani, Anthony Megie, and Yuting Lin held assistantship roles previously). LSCHE's additional content assistance is provided by David Arendale, Johanna Dvorak, Hunter Boylan, Lucy MacDonald, Gail McCain, Saundra McGuire, Kate Sanberg, Norm Stahl, Penny Turrentine, Amy Webberman, and Daphne Williams. With this cadre of experts lending their continued dedication and support, the legacy of Christ and Sheets will endure to assist learning assistant professionals for years to come.

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