Chapter XXXVIII
Social Support for Online Learning

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes the design of a sociotechnical system to support rural high school students in an online distance education (ODE) course. The design is based on the American Psychological Association's Learner-Centered Psychological Principles (LCPs). The system includes a Web-based module to train school-based facilitators to create a socially-supportive local environment for students and encourage community building among facilitators. The system also includes an online instrument for collecting data on learner-centered practices in the classroom and student perceptions of these. ODE typically has high attrition rates, in part because participants' social needs are often neglected, leading to perceptions of isolation. Additionally, success in online courses depends on students' abilities to engage in self-regulated learning, effective time-management and self-reflection, skills that many students in high school are still learning and may need help with as they engage in ODE. This system is an attempt to address these issues.

Nine tenths of education is encouragement.

—Anatole France

INTRODUCTION

Rural schools make up 30% of all schools in the United States and educate approximately one out of every five children, amounting to more than 10 million children nationwide (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007; Rural School and Community Trust, 2005). Frequently, rural secondary schools are small, with more than half enrolling fewer than 400 students (Hobbs, 2004). Many of these schools face challenges resulting from their size and geographic isolation. These include a lack of highly-qualified teachers, limited curriculum offerings, reduced funding and threats of consolidation, where small local schools and districts are combined into larger, regional schools.

Rural high schools typically play a vital part in their communities and consolidation negatively impacts the social and economic health of these communities. Many students face bus journeys of several hours per day to consolidated schools, and both families and students participate less in school-based activities when the school is not local (Rural School and Community Trust, 2005). Thus rural communities are reluctant to embrace school consolidation and are increasingly turning to the Internet and other emerging technologies to address these challenges.

Online distance education (ODE)[1] can provide students with access to specialized courses, interaction with master teachers, and comprehensive and flexible learning opportunities that may not be readily available otherwise (Simonson, Schlosser & Hanson 1999; Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2006).

In 2005, the National Research Center on Rural Education Support (NRCRES) conducted the first national ODE survey to focus exclusively on rural school districts (Hannum, 2006). The survey found that the majority of the participating districts (85%) had used ODE at some point, and 69% of districts were using ODE at the time of the survey. Many states have implemented online learning programs, with 50% of states now having a "virtual school"—more than double the numbers two years ago (Hannum

& McCombs, 2008). However, incidents of student isolation and higher dropout rates in distance learning courses are frequent findings in ODE research. Given the large numbers of students who are educated in rural communities and the increasing use of ODE to extend and improve their educational opportunities, more attention needs to be focused on ways to enhance the effectiveness of ODE in rural schools and improve academic outcomes.

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the design, development and implementation of a Web-based intervention currently underway in rural high schools as part of a national research study funded by the U.S. Department of Education. We sought to enhance an ODE system, and thereby to improve academic outcomes for rural high school students, by offering social support for students at the local classroom level. This includes encouraging the development of a range of cognitive and metacognitive practices and strategies that will be beneficial in both virtual and face-to-face learning experiences. The participants in the system play one of three roles. The *online instructor* teaches the content of the course, the *student* takes the online course during an assigned class period each day in a small rural school, and the *on-site facilitator*, a staff member within each school, supervises and is available to help students with technological and other issues. All participants communicate via technology, but some also communicate directly, face-to-face, in the local environment.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

There has been less ODE research conducted on the K-12 age group (primary and secondary schools) than in tertiary education and typically it has not examined the impact of different student populations or geographic regions such as urban, suburban or rural. Consequently, less is known about the effectiveness of ODE in high schools and the variables that influence it. Most distance learning studies compare the traditional face-to-face courses with distance learning and hundreds of these have

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