Chapter 12

EMxC3 = e&mLearning Cultivating Connected Communities:
Sustainable Workforce Talent Development

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ABSTRACT

This chapter covers the building of an ecological system to convert a workforce development organization to adopt blended electronic and mobile learning (e&mLearning) as part of its processes and practices. The chapter describes the organic approach to diffuse the technological innovation to cultivating supportive teaching and learning communities. Starting with the process of establishing and implementing an academic vision and strategy, the building of a blended, electronic, and mobile learning criteria taxonomy, as well as a technology integrated educational framework. The results and findings of the implementation of an LMS as the foundation of the e&mLearning vision is also shared followed by recommendations from current successes and organizational needs.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on the vision and strategic introduction of electronic, blended and mobile learning into the educational processes of a non-profit's workforce development program. The perspectives are offered from a higher education diffusion of educational technology, program design and leadership lenses. Through a year-long intensive training program, Empowered Professional Internships with College Credits (EPICC) provides urban young adults, between the ages of eighteen to twenty four with a unique combination of hands-on technical and professional skills, college credits, and corporate internships. The year is divided into two six month phases starting with a learning and development phase and culminating in an internship.

In order to initiate systems change and introduce mobile elearning in an integrated manner as part of the learning and development processes, a research framework was established. The framework consisted of field observations through site visits, semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Existing organization survey data were interrogated and enhanced to create survey feedback loops to gather information from student and staff as customers with fidelity. The results of the research site visits were conducted as listening tours which informed the construction of the academic vision and strategy, an educational taxonomy as well as the building of a blended, electronic, and mobile learning criteria matrix to help select a mobile friendly Learning Management System (LMS). The results and findings of the LMS implementation is also shared followed by recommendations from current successes and organizational needs.

BACKGROUND

Four years ago, EPICC, the then twelve year old organization, was running its six month learning and development primarily with paper based models. In one week of the Information Technology course alone, students were needing to print five to ten assignments with screen grabs. The assignments would typically be 20 or more pages per student. Apart from the heavy printing cost and printer maintenance, which was not tracked separately as line budget items, the "instructors" would be saddled with massive stacks of assignments to grade. Imagine the motivation that an instructor would have to muster when looking upon those heaps of assignments to grade. Additionally, instructors were only required to submit grades at the end of seven weeks, which is the time frame of one module. This of course impacted whether students and staff, could see immediate or regular evidence of a student's learning and development progress. For the most part, aside from a few instructors at all sites, there was a heavy reliance on anecdotal evidence of a students' progress. The lack of criteria based assessments and evidence of learning was overwhelmingly present within the organization. The issues of clarifying why criteria based assessments were important, was further compounded by the lack of hiring educators that have undergone any type of teacher training. At times, the struggle to attract experienced or teacher trained staff was a result of industry needed subject matter expertise, remuneration, and the short pressured time frame in which to catch up students with less than desirable K-12 educational experiences and to deliver internship ready young talent.

EPICC students often face a unique set of preparation and professional challenges on their path to professional careers and post-secondary education. These challenges include systemic educational inequalities in their K – 12 learning experiences, no ownership or limited access to computers or the internet, or no professional training, and limited access to professional networks. Another somewhat universal aspect that impacts EPICC's students is the predominantly massive gap between the modus operandi of high schools, colleges and the work place. Also to note is that many EPICC students combine their participation in EPICC with additional jobs and family responsibilities, placing learning time at a premium. The young adults being served either just completed high school, earned a GED, or just started or dropped out of college. The latter of which, on average, makes up 40% of the cohort each cycle. Despite having a high school diploma or GED, many EPICC students were registered for remedial classes when they did attend college. For its first twelve years the EPICC organization addressed all of the above with paper based models, with sparse and piece-meal electronic engagement.

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