Chapter XII

United We Stand–Divided We Fall! Development of a Learning Community of Teachers on the Net

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INTRODUCTION

In 1998, I became a program director of a Net-based distance education (DE) graduate level program at Iceland University of Education (Kennaraháskóli Íslands) focusing on information and communications technology (ICT) in education. The main goal of the program is to help people develop leadership skills in this area within the Icelandic educational system. However, many applicants for the program already are leaders or have been involved in innovative practices concerning use of educational technologies for a number of years as teachers at the preschool, elementary or secondary level. But a major problem for the last decade has been lack of connection and collaboration within the educational community to help spread the use of technology to enhance teaching and learning. With ever-increasing amounts of accessible materials and resources, it has become more and more important for people to cooperate and share what they have read and done in order to sail rather than sink in our new information-rich environment.

Objectives for this Chapter of the Section

In this paper I will describe how we have successfully created in our program, with the aid of different types of technologies, a strong educational community of teachers involved with ICT use. I will especially focus on how the first course of the program is organized where I can draw upon personal experience. Many of you are now in the process of creating or changing courses or programs to an on-line format. This article provides a good model to design such courses.

OVERVIEW

Kennaraháskóli Íslands (KHÍ) is the main teacher education institution in Iceland located in our capital city Reykjavík. KHÍ has about 1800 students, which is a 20% increase in students from last year. The increase is mainly due to the addition of distance learners who will, for the first time this fall, make up over half of the total number of students. The ratio of DE learners in the Department of Graduate Studies is much higher–93% of our approximately 250 graduates are DE learners. The ICT program in the Department of Graduate Studies was originally organized as a one year 15 credit program, but since the Fall 2000 students have been able to register for either 15 credits or a two year diploma program with 30 credits. Each credit is considered equal to one week or 40-50 hours of student work, so 15 credits per year is considered a half time load. To gain a Master's degree, students complete an additional 30 credits (core courses and a final project, usually a research-based thesis). The DE programs in our graduate departments are net-based with short face-to-face sessions on-site (usually close to the beginning and end of courses). The programs have been very popular among teachers within the country who can complete the programs and work from anywhere, given that they can come to campus once or twice per semester and have Internet access and a fairly new computer. Also, the half time study tempo adds to the popularity; students within our department work full time or close to full time with their studies. (Workaholism is very common in Iceland and teachers' salaries are also relatively low, so most teachers can ill afford to take much time from work. However, they usually are able to manage a half time study load).

In the following sections I will describe the students in the ICT program the focus and content of the program. I also describe how ideas and principles have been translated into practice and some of the effects those experiences appear to be having on the students.

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