

21st Century Teaching and Learning at Michigan LearnPort

Background

In 1998, the State of Michigan established *Michigan Virtual University*[®] (MVU[®]) as a not-for-profit corporation created to serve as a champion for online learning. MVU, working in partnership with Michigan schools, provides cost-effective services and technology that strengthen teaching and learning. The organization funds its operations with grants, contracts and course fees. And, since its founding, MVU has been a leading change agent in Michigan for the use of online tools and resources for developing, delivering and sharing knowledge.

Challenge

Beginning in 2002 with the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), there has been a steady stream of state and federal laws aimed at improving education. These laws push teachers to take professional development (PD). But many educators feel strapped for time and resources when it comes to learning.

In 2003, MVU created a web-based PD delivery system called the Michigan LearnPort[®]. Through Michigan LearnPort, school personnel were provided PD to help meet personal and district learning requirements.

Over the years, MVU, and its partner the Michigan Department of Education, examined the typical way school districts parcel out PD for teachers (i.e., face-to-face training and workshops). MVU saw room for improvement. In fact, a February 25, 2008, Time magazine article titled "How They Do It Abroad" notes that "Most U.S. teachers ... have no time to work with colleagues during the school day. They plan by themselves and get ... little opportunity to share knowledge"

"So often, as a school superintendent, I would bring in an expert to address my staff for the purpose of PD," said David Myers, executive director for Michigan LearnPort. "Lots of people would get excited by the presentations. But when teachers returned to their classes, and the expert was gone, they had nowhere to go to build on what they learned."

"Michigan traditionally spends hundreds of millions of dollars a year to support local PD activities," said Jamey Fitzpatrick, president and CEO of MVU. "Our goal is to harness the Internet to consolidate high-quality PD resources and create efficiencies never before realized in the K-12 community."

With this in mind, Myers and his colleagues set four goals for re-launching Michigan LearnPort.

First, Myers wanted Michigan LearnPort to become the premier web site for delivering PD courses to Michigan educators.

Next, he wanted to trim the cost of PD for school districts by delivering training online. Myers envisioned teachers getting education at school or home, libraries, anywhere there is an Internet connection—even during the summer months when most schools are closed.

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Third, Myers and his team wanted teachers to have a way to sustain what they learned.

And fourth, he saw *Michigan LearnPort* as a repository for Michigan school districts to aggregate training records.

"We weren't trying to aggregate records simply for the sake of showing compliance with state mandates," added Myers. "We also wanted this capability so teachers and administrators could have one place to track their professional learning activities from graduate study, seminars, and, of course, *Michigan LearnPort* online courses."

Solution

MVU already had experience with learning management systems (LMS), software for tracking and distributing training. MVU's executives knew an LMS was a way for teachers in far-flung districts to easily register for and take online training. But, along with managing the basics of learning, *Michigan LearnPort* wanted to blend the best of social networking software and knowledge exchange in one easy-to-use, accessible spot. So *Michigan LearnPort* sought a next-generation LMS that would underpin an online community where educators could exchange ideas to help one another.

"We needed to deliver training to tens of thousands of users, but we also wanted to foster collaboration," said Myers. "We had to have a system that was intuitive. Not all users are experts with e-learning or online collaboration."

After months spent evaluating many vendors, MVU picked Chantilly, Va.-based Meridian and its LMS for the project. "I was pleased with the process MVU used to select its next learning management system and more pleased with the product," said Bruce Umpstead, director of education technology and data coordination for the Michigan Department of Education. "Meridian's LMS is best-in-breed; it is a professional tool that can manage Michigan's online PD needs."

With the newly chosen LMS in place, *Michigan LearnPort* would be able to keep a record of each teacher's development plan. It would link PD to school goals and offer access to training. With *Michigan LearnPort*, teachers could create transcripts that showed they were complying with NCLB. And *Michigan LearnPort* could now offer forums for teachers to join after completing PD.

"The collaborative features of our LMS, which we call 'community rooms,' were ideal for helping us reinforce the PD that teachers undertake," Myers added. "Our *Michigan LearnPort* community rooms are built around discussion threads, a resident email tool and calendaring functionality."

Results

According to *Michigan LearnPort*, since launching the new LMS in July 2007, users of the PD portal have made more than 134 community rooms. More than 100 online courses are available free to all Michigan teachers via the Internet. And *Michigan LearnPort* makes it possible for people to create and use a community room as part of an online course. A bit more than six months after launch, it serves almost 30,000 users.

"It's amazing to see the proliferation of community rooms that educators have built in the six months since we launched *Michigan LearnPort*; we've gone from 0 to 134," said Elizabeth Elliott, project manager at *Michigan LearnPort*. "Anyone who visits it can use our LMS to create a community room; the size of the rooms range

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from two people to an entire school district.”

According to *Michigan LearnPort*, educators at opposite ends of the state can now use *Michigan LearnPort* to connect through community rooms. For soon-to-be credentialed teachers, who are often new college graduates, *Michigan LearnPort*'s community rooms are proving a favorite.

“Online social networks are second nature for young people,” said Elliott. “But the discussions taking place here are not superfluous. They’re discussing best practices and solving real pain points organizations have.”

When teachers visit *Michigan LearnPort*, they will see the range of community rooms as well as a feature for creating them. The social networking features of the LMS, coupled with its traditional training features, have the potential to improve the way teachers seek PD and the ways they collaborate. Before *Michigan LearnPort*, says Myers, teachers who wanted to collaborate would have to coordinate schedules, find email addresses for colleagues and set up conference calls at the mercy of everyone’s calendars. Now, educators can connect and learn when they have the time.

“If you calculate what it costs to chase people for training, compensate instructors and pay for courses and classroom space,” said Myers, “then there’s no question we’ve saved Michigan educators time and money, while improving their skills.”

For example, one suburban Michigan school district tapped *Michigan LearnPort* for an online course to meet Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) requirements. The district pegged its savings at \$11 per employee. If the 150,000 school employees across the state were to take this one, hour-long online OSHA course in place of face-to-face OSHA training, the potential savings would be \$1.6 million, or equal to the approximate cost of operating *Michigan LearnPort* for one year.

Along with teachers, *Michigan LearnPort* offers its online courses to professional educators’ associations.

“Our association consists, in part, of school administrators, business managers and secretaries,” said Dan Pappas, executive director of the Michigan Institute for Educational Management (MIEM). “Our members are taking online classes at *Michigan LearnPort*, but they’re also exchanging information and discussing professional requirements.”

Going forward, Myers and his team hope to make online learning and collaboration a widely accepted alternative to the traditional models of PD, which Michigan educators rely on. Early success with *Michigan LearnPort* is helping Myers’ team make a case.

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