

DEVELOPING A SUPPLEMENTAL WEBSITE FOR 8TH GRADE AMERICAN
HISTORY IN THE OLATHE DISTRICT SCHOOLS

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

As technology is integrated into schools more and more, both students and teachers have access to materials and means of instruction that have not been available in the past. One of the most commonly used pieces of technology in classrooms is a classroom website. Classroom websites can be designed with many different uses in mind. From a simple calendar, links to other interactive websites relating to the subject matter, or even providing extra copies of assignments for students, these web sites can provide a distinct, interactive method of instruction.

The concept behind this project is to serve the needs of many different students. Students homebound due to illness or suspension, students with learning disabilities who achieve more when information is presented in a different format, students simply wanting a review of information prior to an assessment, and parents interested in knowing what their children are doing in the social studies classroom all can find some benefit in this website. (One long sentence break it up)

The website was designed using Blackboard for ease of use by both the students and the instructor. Once students log on to the site, they have a variety of choices available at their fingertips: a daily calendar, copies of homework assignments, important vocabulary, teacher-prepared notes over readings, links to sites that may be of assistance to students, a discussion board for weekly current events, and a virtual classroom available for online review prior to an assessment.

This website will be implemented in an 8th grade American history class at Chisholm Trail Junior High School in Olathe, Kansas. Chisholm Trail has an enrollment

of nearly 800 students in grades seven, eight, and nine. It is one of eight junior high schools in the Olathe District Schools feeding into one of four senior high schools. Many of the high schools in Olathe are now featuring 21st Century programs such as Aerospace and Engineering, Web Design, and E-Communications as part of their curriculum, and many of those classes are available online through the use of Blackboard. Hopefully, not only will this site be an effective means of supporting my eighth grade students, but also an introduction into a method of receiving material from teachers the students have not been familiar with until now. The web site will be a bridge between what happens at the junior and senior high levels.

CHAPTER 2

Review of the Literature

There has been a drastic difference in the amount of research conducted at the university level compared to that at the K-12 level regarding online learning. Currently, universities seem to be the institutions most focused on finding how online learning effects not only their students and faculty, but their bottom line as well. According to Shiveley and VanFossen, “This relative lack of study of K-12 classroom use seems even more incongruous given that the learning opportunities...align well with the goals and purposes of...education” (Shiveley, VanFossen, 2005, p. 4). However, there is no reason to believe that with some adaptation, that same data could not be applied to K-12 education.

One thing we do know about how technology is being used by students is, the number of students using computers and the internet continues to rise. Of the 12,522 students in grades 6-8 randomly surveyed by the National Center for Educational Statistics study, 95 percent of those students use a computer and 70 percent use the internet on a frequent basis” (DeBell, 2005).

As more technology becomes available to classroom teachers and students, the use of that technology has the potential to improve student learning. According to Wiske, “Such technologies...extend the teacher’s repertoire to traditional tools to make learning interactive, engaging, collaborative, and linked to the world outside the classroom” (Wiske, 2004, p. 47). For example, many teachers today are using classroom websites. At the school where I teach, Chisholm Trail Junior High in Olathe, Kansas, 38 of the 61 classroom teachers use some form of an online site, whether it is a website or an online

calendar (<http://schools.olatheschools.com/chisholmtrail/staff.htm>). These online sites often contain simple, basic information such as a daily calendar and upcoming events. The sites are often designed specifically for informational purposes rather than to enhance learning. While this is certainly one use of technology, teachers and students may not be getting everything possible out of the site. When websites are designed to provide more than just basic information, they may actually improve student achievement.

There are actually a number of things making online learning attractive to both teachers and students. Using the Internet as a way to supplement classroom education can simply be another way to connect with students, but in a more nontraditional way. Many students today feel more comfortable interacting with a computer at home than in a classroom setting. For some students, this may also be the least restrictive environment for them. In other words, it is the environment that causes them the least amount of stress and helps them produce the best results. Finally, as more and more students feel at ease in front of the computer as shown by the NCES study, using that computer to supplement their education becomes a natural fit.

While online learning has many attractive features, it would be irresponsible to only talk about those aspects without mentioning some limitations. For junior high students especially, the lack of social interactions with peers and other adults could be a cause for some concern (Cavanaugh, Gillan, Kromrey, Hess, and Blomeyer, 2004, p. 5). Online learning requires the student to be self-motivated and self-driven as far as completing assignments on time, which could mean it is not a good fit for some students. Finally, online learning does, by definition, keep the student and the instructor separated.

For students who learn best by actually hearing directions given, online learning may not be the most successful learning tool for them. Finally, online learning is not always more effective than regular classroom education. According to Cavanaugh and colleagues, “Given instruction of equal quality, groups of students learning online generally achieve at levels equal to their peers in the classroom” (Cavanaugh, et. Al, 2004, p. 6). However, these obstacles can be overcome.

The supplemental website created for my class will address these issues listed above while providing those positive aspects of online learning. Because my students still attend the traditional classroom setting, they have peer interactions and teacher interactions where external motivation can still be used. However, because notes, summaries, and activities will be included on the supplemental website, students have the opportunity to use the site to help check their understanding and help them as they prepare for upcoming assessments. Beyond that, because the site will be hosted by Blackboard, the virtual classroom will provide students with an opportunity to meet with me either on an individual basis or in a group setting. Many times, students may not take advantage of their teachers’ offers to “Come in and see me if you need help” because of an intimidation factor. The possibility of meetings during prearranged times in Blackboard could help erase some of those fears. The students aren’t the only ones who will benefit from the site either. Parents will receive the same password as the students to allow them to keep track of what is happening in class. The website will also allow parents the ability to participate in their child’s education by helping them review class notes or discuss material covered in class.

As technology continues to improve in schools, and students continue to master that technology at faster intervals, the need to integrate technology into how we teach becomes paramount. “Evidence...demonstrates that...electronically delivered education...can improve how students learn, can improve what students learn, and can deliver high-quality learning opportunities to all children” (Cavanaugh, et Al, 2004, p. 6). No longer can we expect students to sit in a classroom and listen to lectures everyday and then wonder why their achievement is waning. As teachers, we need to find out how our students learn best and adapt our teaching to fit them. The use of a supplemental classroom website can be a step in that process.

CHAPTER 3

Design Model (Methods?)

The design model chosen for this project was the ADDIE model of design. The five stages of the ADDIE model (Analyze, Design, Development, Implement, and Evaluate) fit extremely well with the goals of this project.

Analyze

At Back-to-School night, attending parents were given a survey (included in appendix) to complete asking a number of basic questions about the potential usefulness of a supplemental class website. The students were provided the same survey to fill out the following day. When the surveys were completed and turned in, 100% of the students had responded, while around 48% of the parents responded. Based on the information provided to me by both students and parents in the Website survey, a majority of students and parents felt a classroom website would be helpful in keeping track of daily assignments, upcoming tests and projects. However, a large number of parents and students felt it would be beneficial to include other, more specific and curriculum related information as well. For example, a number of students indicated including numerous external links to websites that could assist them in work completion and comprehension would be an important feature to add.

Parents and students, alike, responded very favorably to the possibility of the teacher including prepared notes from all of our readings completed in class. In addition, through discussions with other teachers on my eighth grade team, we identified comprehension as one of the group's main struggles. Students were having difficulty understanding the basic material. Therefore, providing notes to reinforce the information

that was read could be a positive way to help encourage and support students in their comprehension of the material.

The other item from the survey that received very good feedback was the inclusion of an online study session or review before an assessment. Students seemed intrigued by the opportunity to be online and “talk” not only with their teacher, but anybody else enrolled in the class prior to a test, including students not in a student’s regular class, because of the virtual classroom and chat capabilities. This is an advantage because students could then receive feedback from other sources other than what they are used to. Because of the large number of students that felt this could be beneficial to them, I decided Blackboard would be the most effective site host.

Design

Once all surveys had been completed and collected, deciphering what would be the most important information to include on the site became the next step. Based on the student and parent responses, and district curriculum standards, I narrowed down the list of items to be included by the following:

1. Teacher prepared notes over all sections from the book
2. Prepared vocabulary lists
3. External links to sites that can assist students with numerous activities
4. Copies of all readings and assignments
5. Access to the virtual classroom and chat features prior to assessments

Development

The development phase of this project was by far the most time consuming. This is the phase when all features of the website were completed, such as the teacher prepared

notes and uploading of the assignments. During this development phase, important concepts needed to be identified to help students with comprehension. Again, through informal discussions with other teachers, the need for students to be able to recognize important information from the text was identified as a needed area of growth. Once teacher prepared notes were posted on the web site students could compare their notes with the teachers. This helps them recognize pertinent information while eliminating nonessential data.

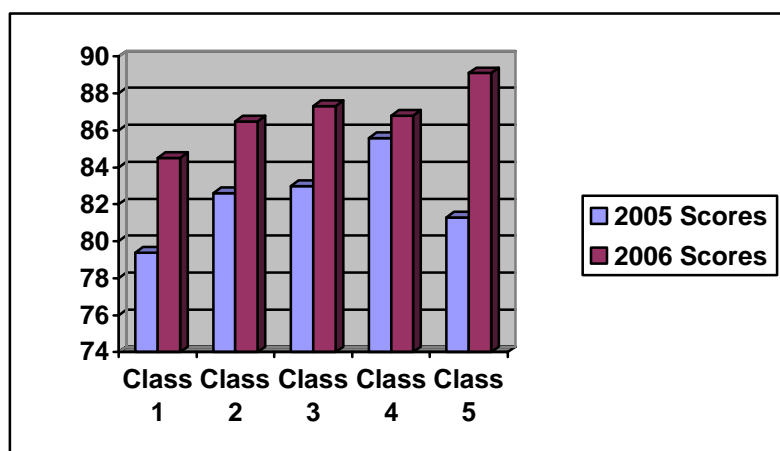
Implementation

Once the basic parts of the site had been established and accounts created for all students, a day was reserved in the computer lab so we could go through the specifics of the site collectively. All students received the same password to begin with and were provided with a step by step instruction process to actually log on to the site. Once all students had navigated to the site and gone through the process of individualizing their passwords, we took a group “tour” of the basic features provided by the website. After all students had navigated through the site as a group, they were asked to log completely off of the computers and find their way back to the discussion board section of the site. The students were then asked to complete two questions which had been posted prior to the time in the lab. Most students were successful in navigating to the discussion board and answering the posted questions. Students who struggled were either assisted by other students or by me. After the first day of introductory activities, more features were added for student use. Notes were provided as a section was completed, thus giving immediate information to the student to supplement their own material.

Evaluation

A formative evaluation took place after the first assessment was given. The assessment was over a large unit on the Constitution. Student scores and class averages were compared to student scores and class averages from last year. Last year's students completed the same assignments and took the same assessment, but they did not have access to a supplemental site like the students this year. A chart is provided comparing the 5 different classes from both years. Scores are shown in percent (Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1 Class Comparison



Check alignment

While scores seemed to drastically improve, not all improvement should be attributed to the supplemental Blackboard site. Different students, different class discussions over the topics, different student interest, and other factors possibly affected the outcome of the assessment. However, current students were asked if and how the site assisted them on the assessment. Students responded indicating the site did assist them in preparation and the teacher prepared notes were the most effective items on the site.

At the end of the year, a summative evaluation will be completed to find out how students feel the Blackboard site assisted them on any and/or all parts of the American History course. Through the results of the summative assessment, changes will be made

to the Blackboard site for next year's students to hopefully continue to make it more effective for student learning.

CHAPTER 4

Results

Because this is an ongoing project, the final results will not be fully available until the end of the school year. However, I have received quite a bit of feedback from both parents and students regarding the Blackboard site. Most of the feedback received has been positive, but there are some areas needing to be addressed.

One area receiving the most feedback on, both positive and negative, was the virtual classroom, in regards to the online study sessions. Prior to our first assessment, two study sessions were set up using the virtual classroom. Unfortunately, due to a large number of technology issues through the district's Blackboard site, the virtual classrooms were unable to be loaded on student computers. For one reason or another, the Java plug-in needed to run the session would not load on student computers, resulting in a significant loss of study time. In response to those issues, students and parents alike became rather worried. The idea of the online study session was one both parents and students were excited about, but because of technology issues, it turned out to be one that raised their level of concern. This is, obviously, something needing to be corrected prior to the next assessment.

Another area receiving quite a bit of feedback was the Discussion Board. Students responded very favorably to opinion style questions posted concerning recent discussions. One of the areas students have enjoyed has been responding to classmates' answers. These responses have sparked interesting commentary. Through informal discussions with students, the discussion board and reply features provided them with a way to participate in class discussions without feeling embarrassed or nervous about what

classmates may say. In other words, they feel in some situations the discussion board has been a safer environment for them to participate in than the regular classroom setting.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

Overall results of the supplemental website on Blackboard, although incomplete, have been favorable. There are obviously questions, problems, and issues needing to be addressed throughout the year, but at this point in the process, those items have been minimal. Typical responses through informal communication with both parents and students indicate the notes and extra assignments have been extremely helpful so far.

One of the major obstacles with the development stage of the site was the time commitment. Trying to balance the items that need to be completed and taught within the regular classroom setting, typing up notes over each section, and uploading all assignments has been a challenge early on. Hopefully, as time progresses, not only will my knowledge and understanding of the site continue to improve, but my aptitude in how to further incorporate the site into my everyday class routine, too. Students and parents have been an invaluable resource as to what features should be included and what could be left aside, but it is also not easy to incorporate the ideas of so many into one site. Obviously, certain things some may feel important may be left aside due to time constraints or due to feasibility issues. Attempting to find the middle ground among 85-90 students and their parents will continue to be a challenge, but I have no doubt that in the end, it will be to the benefit of the students with respect to their knowledge level and comprehension of the subject matter.

My hope is that next year, I will be able to incorporate new technology that will be available with the new textbooks our district is purchasing for American History,

which will only enhance students' experiences with the Blackboard site. (Long sentence break up)

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APPENDIX A: Website Survey

In order to better serve the American History students on the Superstars team, and to fulfill my project requirement for my Master's degree, a website will be developed to assist the students and parents as we move through the year. The website is in the very first stages of development, and I need your input to make it most effective. If you could please take just a few minutes to reflect on some things that you personally would like to see that would be of assistance to you, I would greatly appreciate it.

Chris Graham
8th Grade American History
Superstars Team
Chisholm Trail Junior High

SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree, NO = No Opinion

- 1) We would use a class website to keep track of upcoming projects, tests, etc.
SA A D SD NO

- 2) It would be helpful to know what homework assignments are assigned on a daily basis.
SA A D SD NO

- 3) Your student would benefit from the use of a supplemental class website.
SA A D SD NO

- 4) It would be beneficial to include a weekly newsletter to keep up with classroom events.
SA A D SD NO

- 5) It would be helpful to have online resources available to assist students with class work.
SA A D SD NO

- 6) A summary of the daily readings would be beneficial for student review and for parents to keep track of what is happening in the class.
SA A D SD NO

7) A reserved block of time directly before a test for an online discussion/review would be beneficial.

SA A D SD NO

8) It would be beneficial to have important vocabulary posted on the website.

SA A D SD NO

9) It would be beneficial to include important notes, events, etc. within the site.

SA A D SD NO

10) If you have any other suggestions that would help make this site the most useful for you and your student, please list them here.