

Orientation to CAPsite Technologies

Niche Profile

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Introduction

The Alberta North distance education initiative, which involves most of the Clearinghouse partners, has a number of Community Access Points (CAPsites) throughout northern Alberta at which students can access training that they would otherwise have to leave home to take. The courses are delivered using videoconferencing and the Internet for the most part. In many cases students and potential students are unfamiliar with these technologies. This lack of familiarity can be a problem for some students. Some spend the first few classes learning the technology rather than concentrating on course material and other people don't take courses because they are afraid to try the technology involved. A few of the issues involved in distance education are reflected in the abstract from a paper on student perspectives on distance learning:

A survey of 52 high school students taking advanced placement courses in psychology, French, Spanish, German and Latin via interactive television revealed that 90% agreed that the learning experience was different from a regular classroom; 77% agreed that a fax machine sped up the exchange of materials; and 61% agreed that technical difficulties interfered with the course. (Tiene, 1997)

This report looks at the need and demand for short courses to orient new students to the distance education technologies before their courses begin. Such training would, it appears be valuable not just for newly registered students but also for other potential students in the various communities.

Methodology

The information for this report comes from a series of interviews conducted with Alberta North CAPsite Coordinators. The coordinators were asked about the technologies at the respective sites, the number of students using the facilities, the number of potential students and the need for a training program to orient the students to the technologies. While not all of the CAPsite coordinators were reached, at least one from each of the Clearinghouse partners' areas was interviewed

Findings

Technologies

Most of the CAPsite are equipped for videoconferencing and for the Internet. Some have audioconferencing equipment as well.

Number of Students

The number of students using the CAPsites in any one semester varies from 0 to 20, but most of those contacted have fewer than 10 students at a time. Almost all of the coordinators said that

they see strong potential for greater use of their facilities.

Barriers

Coordinators contacted point to several barriers preventing some potential students from using the Alberta North facilities. Some of these are technology and “comfort level” problems, such as “camera shyness” and ignorance or even fear of computers. While two coordinators stated that they are able to help students to learn to use the technology effectively without a formal course, most said that a course would be valuable.

Other barriers mentioned have more to do with the courses themselves and how they are marketed. These barriers include:

- The minimum of 4 students required for many classes to be delivered
- The lack of flexibility in scheduling (facilities not available either at night or during the day)
- Course selection not meeting local needs
- Lack of advertising within the community
- Lack of awareness of the concept of distance education and what training can be taken this way.

One coordinator, frustrated by the lack of appropriate courses offered at appropriate times, said that: “It’s hard to push a product that’s only partly there”.

An orientation course may also be helpful in dealing with this second set of barriers if it is offered free of charge to the general community in an open-house setting, not just to registered students.

Recommendations

Generally speaking, most students who sign up for courses through Alberta North CAPsites do adapt fairly well to the distance delivery technologies. After the first week or two of classes they are able to make effective use of the facilities. Coordinators pointed out that the colleges train their staff well on the equipment which, in turn, allows them to train the students. Even so, most of those interviewed agreed that an introductory course would help students as they begin their courses. Students who do need training need it at various levels, from introduction to computers, to introduction to the Internet, to techniques in videoconferencing.

When trying to attract more students to the CAPsites it is important to remember that the people who are comfortable with computers are more likely to be aware of distance education and familiar with the technology than are others. As a result, expanding the student base means going beyond the technology-friendly to those in the community who have no connection to CAPsites. Many coordinators suggested that the best use of an orientation to distance delivery technology

course would be as a marketing tool. Open Houses geared to particular groups (one CAPsite is planning a Tea for seniors, for example) will give people a chance to see what is available without having to sign up for anything. Social, small group sessions will help people to get to know the technology in a non-threatening situation.

By combining the orientation to the technology with an orientation to the concept of distance education, such training could increase the student base while making the students' training more effective.

Sources

Tiene, Drew, "Student Perspectives on Distance Learning with Interactive Television"; Techtrends. Vol. 42, No. 1, Jan-Feb 1997, pp.41-47.

Contacts

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