

Update: ESUCC e-learning/Distance Education Vision

November 29, 2010

Context: The ESUCC continues to develop dialog and seek partnerships in the development of a comprehensive approach to digital education in Nebraska. As the ESUCC is already charged with statutory responsibilities in distance education and in the use of learning management systems, it has been apparent that the development of a common vision for synchronous and asynchronous education tools within the ESUCC projects is necessary. Additionally, a broader interest among other ESUCC projects including instructional media and the continued development of online professional development resources through the ESU Professional Development Organization (ESUPDO) and its affiliate groups unites the ESUs and ESU related projects with a common need for vision and direction. A considerable amount of dialog and discussion led up to the November 17, 2010 meeting of the ESUCC where the the ESU administrators voted unanimously to further develop and implement a plan that would begin to develop a common platform for e-learning and distance education.

Dialog & Partnerships: Undoubtedly, any effort to pull together a comprehensive vision is enhanced by developing partnerships with the many state and local resources in this arena. Many of these conversations have been underway for months (even years) and as a result, substantial progress can be reported in this dialog. There is an substantial opportunity for meaningful partnerships between ESUs, the Nebraska Department of Education, Nebraska Educational Telecommunications, higher education partners including the UNL Independent Study High School, the University system, state colleges, community colleges, and potential partners from within state and local government. The ESUCC continues to “cast a wide net” in this effort.

Survey of Collective Capacities: Among the many efforts underway, is an informal survey of the capacities internal and external to the ESUCC. Previous efforts to build and share statewide capacity in distance education, Network Nebraska, and the NITC, through the ESUPDO affiliate groups, and many other existing examples of Nebraska partnerships demonstrate the adage “the sum of the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.” There are substantial roles for a variety of partners and a collective vision begins to root those out.

Elements of the Dialog: The recent months of conversation have led to several key elements in the development of a vision document. Additionally, there are multiple paths and choices to be made in the collective conversation. Numerous details have developed based on technical or educational perspectives as well as details that have surfaced based on other valid perspectives on the development of a digital education platform. Certainly, others will develop and surface. However, at this point the following seem to be critical to the development of the plan.

- **User Interface/ Authentication:** There is broad agreement that a user interface and authentication system is necessary for a scalable system. This has the potential for tremendous benefits for state data systems, assessment, data sharing across entities, etc.
- **Searchable Content Management System:** Again, there is broad agreement that collectively developing a system to search/manage content is necessary. This may be based on a user interface which allows federated searches across multiple content management systems. A variety of resources from media, educational databases, online courses, online course modules, and the like could be included. This could include open education resources as well as fee based content.
- **Online Content/Courses Sharing & Exchange:** A full spectrum of opportunities has been

discussed including blended learning to full virtual educational offerings. Among the critical elements under discussion is a system/process for vetting content for educational use. For instance, fully online courses would likely need approval to qualify for inclusion in the virtual education offerings. However, other materials might be simply made available for classroom use at the discretion of a district or school.

- **Learning Management Systems:** A variety of systems are currently in use across the state in K-12 and higher ed. The elements of discussion have included perspectives ranging from a single statewide enterprise system to a “use what you choose” approach. Most seem to agree that a LMS is critical to the effective delivery of content however, there is not an agreement at this point as to a need to pursue a single system. There are real costs and real benefits to both centralized and decentralized systems. The ESUCC will continue to explore LMS options and potential interoperability and support those in demand by school districts.
- **Professional Development:** A statewide system of professional development both to support the development of content as well as to improve educational practice in the use of such content would be developed. This allows for the interaction between many partners from schools, ESUs, higher education, the Nebraska Department of Education, and certainly others. The system could both be used for developing professional development content as well as delivering training.
- **Assessment & Analysis:** Among the other tools and benefits of a single platform is the use of assessment and analysis tools to identify and address areas that may include targeting specific subject matter (e.g. Science, Technology, Engineering, & Math / STEM) or areas of demonstrated weakness or shortage areas. A linked data system would potentially allow the NDE to identify school districts for special assistance and interventions to address such areas.

Summary: A number of conversations will continue as the specifics of a plan are finalized. Draft documents are being prepared by the ESUCC. Both a narrative and a more detailed multi-phase plan are being developed. These are both intended to be “living documents” to capture the conversations as they occur. Additionally, efforts are being made to pull elements of the plan into a demonstration project to assist in crafting the vision. There is a substantial amount of work to be conducted to make any of this vision a reality.

If you have questions or comments about this effort, please email:

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