

The Power in the Portal

Empowering Your Learning Community

Educational portals put together links to sites and resources educators would be interested in viewing. They eliminate the hours of searching that might be invested if typical search engines were used. Educational portals feature lessons, units, printable resources, creative ideas, and more. Many of these sites are free, while others are subscription services that offer additional resources. However, many of these portals have differing educational goals and may not match the goals for your school or district. What do you do then?

In the Oswego City (New York) School District, we chose to create our own portal eight years ago. We found that certain questions helped us provide useful Web-based resources to the teachers in our district.

- Are the educational portals currently available the best way to provide our teachers with the resources they need?
- Shouldn't we build a district site that allows teachers to enter and

feel confident that the resources they receive connect directly with the district's goals?

- What would these resources look like?
- How would we get them there?

We used these questions to guide our planning and development of a portal that provides our teachers with the tools they need to meet district, state, and federal goals.

Unpacking the Resources

After you have decided that a portal tailored to meet the needs of your school or district is the best way to use the Web, you will need to decide what resources will support your vision and how to organize and present them. Believe me, deciding which resources would be most beneficial is the easy part. Deciding how to organize and create the pages can be more difficult. We kept building the resources on our site as we moved

forward with our district initiatives. As our site grew, we began thinking carefully about our audience and the experience they might have as they visit our portal. Here are a few of the resources we provide on the Oswego site and the background behind how we chose and implemented them.

Standards and Curriculum

The Goal. We should offer a way to view the curriculum essential to all learners at each grade level. By creating a virtual spot for teachers, students, and parents to view the curriculum, we are creating a road map for the instructional journey. This section should allow site visitors to choose the grade level and subject to

By Cathy Chamberlain

Subject: Sharing school information

Technology: Internet

Standards: *NETS•S 3; NETS•T II, III; NETS•A II* (<http://www.iste.org/nets/>)



We found that certain things must be in place to create a successful educational portal.



Vision:
Create an image in your mind of what you want the site to represent and what you want it to do for your school or district. What is the focus of your work going to be?



Commitment:
You need dedication and assurance that the vision will always be in view. Find ways to present the message you want your teachers, parents, and students to go away with. Realize that a majority of what you will do instructionally should be captured on the Web.



Technical Expertise:
You need programmers to make sure your site is rich and easy to use.

see the key learning elements that the students need to master. It should also be easily printable.

The Process. We spent a couple years working with teachers in groups in collaboration with another district to create the core curriculum. These are the elements the students will need to master. Our goal was to stay true to our state's standards document and ensure that each statement was written in procedural or declarative language. All of the work was then put into a database and a coding system was devised. We worked with programmers from a group our district had contracted with for multiple projects to create the interface for searching the standards. Each curriculum item was aligned with resources. This thinking is aligned to Robert's Marzano's body of research published by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Develop-

ment (ASCD) on the importance of producing a guaranteed curriculum. We believe we have created not only a curriculum that is visible to all but also a rich repository of resources to help students meet the educational challenges we present to them.

NY Learns were partners with us on this project. Their programmers worked with our teachers and staff to meet both groups' goal of providing strong curriculum materials on the Web. Their Web site offers a search feature to capture the curriculum for any grade and any subject. It is easy to use and print.

The Result. We created a rich curriculum database that teachers, students, and parents use on a daily basis. This section of the site offers a plethora of ideas and standards-driven resources. Teachers know what they are expected to teach, kids know what is expected of them, and parents can see what

their children are learning. And students can use the database of shared resources to practice concepts they struggle with.

Study Zone

The Goal. We decided early on that we needed to provide a resource to help students prepare for the state tests. We brought master teachers together to create pages aligned with the curriculum that would be tested. These pages were created with kids in mind so they might use them as tutorials to understand those main concepts they were responsible for knowing to be successful on the tests.

The Process. After securing grant money from the state department of education, we hired teachers who were experts in their field to create the resources for students to use. These teachers had to be taught how to create engaging Web pages and present

**Coordination:**

One person or a small group must manage the effort to keep it alive and promote the continued enhancement of the resources.

**Feedback:**

You need a structure in place to gather information about your users' needs and to make decisions based on that feedback.

**Forward Motion:**

You must keep forging ahead so that the site doesn't stagnate but continues to provide for the needs of the audience and matches your school's or district's beliefs.

**Instructional Focus:**

Remember that the goal is always to improve teaching and learning in your school or district.

The Result. The Curriculum Collection takes staff development to a new level by sharing the resources created so all teachers can view the talent and creativity of teachers within their own district.

Conclusion

Educational portals are valuable, but you can create a gateway for your community that offers streamlined content and is often created by its own members. Take one step at a time by creating incremental goals in its creation. Customizing your own portal helps by looking at the particular needs of your learning community. District portals can be an invaluable resource for the whole learning community. The message they send speaks volumes about the commitment the district has toward learning and sharing. The focus is on the direction and needs that are unique to the district. Ultimately, the content and resources included are driven by the district's instructional vision and intended audience. Before long, you will see how these first steps may lead you to the realization that through the efforts of the district portal, your entire learning community can become empowered.

them in varied ways to enable students to master the content. Lessons and practice pages were created so the students could learn 24/7.

The Result. We have created a site that enables students to successfully master curriculum content. A myriad of students wrote to let us know that the site was a valued resource enabling them to pass their exam. Parents also wrote to express their appreciation of our work. It is a great way to help their own children not only for the test but also for the day-to-day work that their children are having difficulty with. The site enabled them to help their children because the resource specifically addressed the content that was taught in class. This was one way they could help their children find success. Last but not least, we heard from teachers. They used the site as a resource for their students in class. They also used the resources to

expand their repertoire of ideas and ways to teach certain skills. They now had a place to find out how other teachers may be teaching the content.

Curriculum Collection

The Goal. We hoped to increase our teachers' professional development opportunities by allowing them to see some of their colleagues exemplary lessons. As part of our staff development program, we incorporated a consistent piece into the courses we taught. Each course would end with the teachers creating a project from what they learned in class that could in turn be used with their students.

The Process. Our programmers created a system to allow teachers to submit projects they created either as part of a staff development offering or on their own. Then they set up a database that was searchable by type of projects, grade level, and/or keyword.



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