Digital Learning Discussions Webinar Wrap
Digital content: Build vs buy
Webinar Date: December 10, 2020

Panelists

Jennifer Echols, Director Mesa Distance Learning Program & Personalized Learning, Mesa, Arizona

Stacy Hawthorne, Director of Online Programs, The Davidson Academy, Reno, Nevada

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Description

Online instruction requires digital content--whether the instruction is temporary remote learning, or a long-time online school. Each school or district must decide whether it is buying content, building, or a mix of both. What factors should go into this decision? What paths have schools and districts chosen? This panel explored the content build vs buy decision from a variety of perspectives.

Five findings

1. Build AND BUY not build VS buy

Although we titled the webinar "Build vs buy," the better way to think about this issue is: what are you building, and what are you buying? Even the largest curriculum companies tend to buy some of their materials to round out their courses or their catalog. Similarly, districts that purchase most or all of their courses have teachers add content, while districts that build much of their courses usually buy at least some content to augment their building. Build AND buy operates along a spectrum, based on district needs, experience, capacity, and resources.

2. Content decisions should be made *after* decisions about students, goals, and teaching

Content is not a first-order decision, and should be considered only after the district is clear on its online or hybrid program goals for students, how it intends to use teachers, and many other program-specific issues.

3. Districts building courses need a team, and time

Schools and districts building their own courses report that the process can take three years, after an initial 500-hour investment. They often have teams of instructional designers, augmented by subject matter experts, who may be teachers on release time or being paid extra. Because of the major time and resource commitment to build courses, some districts build courses and then supplement with purchased courses from providers or collaboratives, including state virtual schools and private providers.

4. Districts buying content need a formal evaluation process and ongoing reviews to ensure ongoing alignment with goals

Content decisions should not be long-term, but should be re-evaluated against shifting program goals, with a view towards updating course acquisition strategies as needed.

5. A partial list of issues to consider, when evaluating what should be built and what should be bought, include:

- Alignment with standards (state, NGSS, etc.)
- Alignment with program goals and evidence of efficacy towards those goals
- Student engagement
- Consistency across district courses
- Elementary vs older students
- Intellectual property issues
- Content refreshing needs
- Aligning content and platform
- Generating and using student data for instructional purposes
- High quality graphics, videos, animations etc. vs text
- Accessibility and universal design
- Total cost of ownership
- Difference between digital content in an instructional mode that relies on real-time video, versus instruction relying on asynchronous methods.
- Appropriate uses of Open Education Resources.

Key quotes

Jennifer Echols: "When we think about building our courses, we are always keeping in mind the learning model (synchronous or asynchronous), the platform that it will be delivered through, and alignment with our state standards and our district instructional framework."

Kelly Schwirzke: "Early on, we started with content decisions, but starting about ten years ago, we shifted to focusing on what is our overarching goal, and what content can help us towards that goal? We constantly evaluate the content that we acquire. We both license and build content, but mostly focus on licensing, because we feel that approach allows our teachers to focus on their relationships with students. Building content is not as simple as switching what we as teachers did in classrooms, into the online environment. Building is difficult and time-consuming."

Stacy Hawthorne: "At Davidson (a school for profoundly gifted students), we build our content because of the nature of our students. I can't think of another district where I would recommend that they build all of their content as we do. Building a course takes 500 hours initially, and course development is a three-year process. In year one our goal is to not harm students. In years two and three we tweak and improve the course—in addition to those initial 500 hours."

Jennifer Echols: "If you're not involved in this work (building courses), you don't know how much time it takes. We build our own courses because we like the flexibility, to make changes, add materials, swap sections when we want to. I have an instructional design team of seven specialists; their full-time job is to develop content. They work within our district framework using backwards design, success criteria, and other elements. We also use subject matter experts and use teachers that we pay on top of their teaching time. We try not to link to outside resources because of the way that links

change so often. We also have a robust review process of teachers, parents, and students, before the course is released—and still we have to revise."

Questions and comments from attendees
Q: How do you handle labs?
A: (Stacy H) We have a full lab kit for each course that is mailed to students and they do labs online with instructors. The kits are custom built for us by a lab company.
(Jennifer): We have built some digital labs, and also ask students to conduct hands on labs at home using common household materials.

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