Selecting Quality Internet Classes

Kansas State Department of Education
Technology Assistance for Kansas Educators (TAKE)

Taking classes over the Internet is becoming a viable and popular alternative for schools all over the country. Schools across Kansas are beginning to utilize the Internet to deliver all types of online courses for both students and teachers. As more and more classes are being offered, many of us are asking, "How do we select a quality course for our students?" This is not an easy question to answer. Currently there is very little research on the specific components that make up an effective online class.

During the summer of 2000, the Kansas State Department of Education asked that question to several educators who are involved in online teaching and below you will find a summary of their comments. One thing is clear, online instruction is here to stay and schools need to begin planning for how best to utilize this powerful, but complex, delivery system.

Many of the same features you look for in an effective "on site" course carry over to online instruction. It is still critical that the content be engaging, the instructor communicates effectively, students be given a variety of ways to demonstrate mastery of concepts, and that the course work is relevant and tied to real world experiences.

Here are some things to consider when selecting an online course.

Course Content

The purpose, goals, objectives, and requirements for success should be clearly stated and easy to relate to the local situation.

1. How do the goals and objectives correlate to local, state, and national standards for the course?

2. Is there a detailed syllabus or outline including materials needed, timelines, communication expectations, and how work will be evaluated?

3. Does the course require a lot of "off-line" resource materials? Are those available in your district?

4. Does the course allow for a variety of learning styles? Is there a good balance between text, graphics, video, and audio?

5. What steps have been taken to ensure for the protection of copyright materials offered as part of the course?

6. Are there processes in place to update irrelevant or outdated material and Internet links? How often is this done?

7. Does the amount of content seem reasonable?

8. A quality online course should require students to do some work "off line" and be performance based. Does this course require work away from the computer?

9. Are there built-in, periodic checks of student progress? (Deadlines, Due Dates, Progress Reports) How is it done?

10. Do the content and the activities lend themselves to higher level thinking skills?

11. What accommodations are made for students with learning disabilities?

Instructional Delivery

The course content is presented in a way that is clear, focused, and will engage the students.

1. Is it easy to navigate through the class? Can you easily find the things you need? Is online help easy to find?

2. Are the materials and classroom activities clear, easy to follow, and tied directly to learning objectives?

3. Is a local facilitator needed for effective delivery? If so, who will do this in your district? How often is this facilitator needed? What types of things are they expected to do?

4. Are online instructors making visible efforts to get to know their students? Is there evidence that the teacher communicates with students and monitors their progress on a regular basis?

5. Isolation is one of the big concerns of online teachers. Does the communication system reduce the potential of a student being isolated and facilitate group participation? In what ways are students encouraged to express their ideas and are those ideas available to other students in the class? Is there an easy way for students to communicate with the teacher and with each other? Is there a way to send both private and public messages?

6. What type of support system is provided for the students? Is this support system easy to access and does it provide both technical and educational support?

Assessment

There is a well-established system for providing systematic and timely feedback to students.

1. Online instruction is a form of independent study and monitoring progress is important. How is student progress monitored?

2. Is student work assessed on a consistent basis utilizing a number of different evaluation strategies?

3. Is assessment used to enhance future learning by providing specific and individualized feedback?

4. Are there formal tests? If so, how are they administered? Are they proctored?

5. Does the course utilize a pretest and posttest to gauge both prior knowledge and student growth?

6. How are assessments aligned with local, state, and national assessments currently used in your district?

7. Does the course assign a letter grade? If not, how will credit be transferred to a transcript, if necessary?

Technology

Consider the level of access and the type of technology needed to fully utilize the class.

1. Will the student have necessary and timely access to a computer and the Internet?

2. Does the course use a lot of audio, video, or graphics? These take a higher level of technology. Is the district providing high-speed access to the Internet connection which is going to be used by the students?

3. Is special equipment required (printer, digital camera, scanner, CD)?

4. Does the method of delivery appear to be stable and reliable?

5. Is there 24 hour / 7 days a week access to technical support? Who provides it? How easy is it for the students to get?

6. Does the course require any special technology skills on the part of the student?

7. What is done to ensure that student work and personal information is secure?

School and Community Connection

There is a method in which the school and/or parents can review progress and obtain information about the course.

1. Is the course taught by a certified Kansas teacher? If not, what are the qualifications of the teacher?

2. Is the teacher available to answer questions from parents or school personnel?

3. Can you easily understand the purpose of the course, how it works, and what students will be learning?

4. Is the organization or institution offering the course accredited through a professional standards process?

5. Can the organization or institution offering the course provide a list of references? Who else has used this course?

6. Does the school sign a formal agreement with the provider of the course? If so, are you comfortable with the expectations and understand the agreement?

7. If a fee is involved, is the school responsible to pay even if the student doesn't finish the course?

8. Does the student need an e-mail account to participate in the course? If so, who provides the account?

9. How is the instructor evaluated? By whom? Does the school or student have the opportunity to provide feedback on the course and the instructor?

10. What is the student/teacher ratio?

11. Do the timelines of the course fit with local expectations? Will grades be given at corresponding times? Some online courses are designed to be very flexible with time; what about a student who finishes early or needs an extension?

Key things to keep in mind:

There is a high attrition rate in online courses.

Students tend to sign up for courses because they think it will be easy and fun to work whenever and wherever they want. However, we are learning that online courses are often more difficult and time consuming than traditional courses. Students need to be self-motivated and interested in the content.

Whichever online courses you select, **make sure you closely monitor student performance and obtain feedback** from students, parents, and other educators. Student-to-student and student-to-teacher communication should be encouraged on a regular basis.

Remember that all online courses are NOT created equal.

Competition among developers allows for schools to select the features that best meet the needs of their learners. Be a discriminating consumer.

There are many quality courses available online; it is up to you to select the ones that are right for you.

The bottom line is communication.

Make sure there are numerous opportunities for student-to-student and student-to-teacher communication.