ERAU’s eTeaching Zone: A Virtual User’s Community for Web Instructors

Dr. David C. Pedersen
Embry Riddle Aeronautical University
600 S. Clyde Morris Blvd.
Daytona Beach, FL 32114
pedersed@db.erau.edu

Abstract: With 130 teaching sites around the world, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University faces unique challenges in supporting faculty who want to use the web for instruction. While faculty members have been able to learn how to use the web via online modules, there has been little opportunity for them to share ideas and learn from each other. The eTeaching Zone enables faculty members to collaborate with peers, stay abreast of WBI developments, access support, and, most importantly, feel that they are part of an important instructional initiative of the University.

Profile of Community Members

The eTeaching Zone is a community for all ERAU faculty members who use the web for instruction. Like most communities it consists of a diverse population. Some faculty members teach totally online courses, while others are just beginning to post a syllabus and a few course notes. In the eTeaching Zone, the novice benefits from the experience of the accomplished, the experienced user gains fresh insights from the novice, and everyone can solicit advice for new undertakings.

Community Planning

The eTeaching Zone is a planned community. Before its inception, research was conducted to determine what qualities make virtual communities and web portals successful. Several common factors for success emerged. Effective communities are built around a common interest, pertinent content, group identification, a sense of belonging, and opportunities to participate. The key element in the success of an online community is its ability to attract continued participation by its members. Members in an online community must perceive it as valuable to them and that they are a vital part of it.

Community Components

The inaugural version of the eTeaching Zone started off with a tour to orient new members to the community. The primary components of the community were a bulletin board, online resources, a gallery of example courses, and an eLounge. The bulletin board was used to discuss educational technology issues and to post help questions to the group. The online resources provided access to educational technology links, ERAU web resources, an EPSS for ERAU web tools, an educational technology calendar, and online tutorials developed by the ERAU Ed Tech Team. The gallery contains links to ERAU and other courses with web components. The eLounge was designed to be a place to escape and have fun. It contained jokes, games, and aviation related interest items.

Community Development

The initial development of the community consisted of creating a “look and feel” for the community, posting the original bulletin board topics, creating web pages with links to various resources and educational technology news and events, and finding resources for the eLounge. The community was developed in WebCT utilizing its bulletin board, calendar, and tracking tools. Tracking member usage of the community and the various components provided information for continual revision of the community to improve its usefulness.
Community Evolution

The eTeaching Zone was opened to the ERAU web faculty without all the components planned for it. In order to establish that it would be a constantly changing and growing environment, several resources were purposely not included in the original community so they could be added in the first several weeks. The idea was that continued additions to the community would promote continued interest and return visits.

As all communities do, the eTeaching Zone has changed over time. Following the initial planned additions to the community, other changes and additions were made on the basis of member usage and suggestions.

Future Development

The eTeaching Zone is somewhat of a living being. With the changes in web technology and accompanying changes in the instructional implementation of the web, there is no doubt that the community will change accordingly. The focus for the future is to make the adaptations necessary to keep the eTeaching Zone a vital community for the Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University web faculty.