The University as an Educational Application Service Provider

Proposal

Purdue University is partnering with a local middle school class to facilitate the diffusion of information technology within K-12 schools. The business world has embraced the model of the application service provider, wherein one business will serve as an application host for another business. This involves providing services ranging from simply providing a server for an application to be deployed on to customizing the application or providing ongoing support for the application’s user base. Given the limited resources available to many K-12 classrooms, adopting this model within the educational environment can be an effective way to try out technology before making a substantial investment. Depending on how successful this approach turns out to be, there may even be the possibility of continuing this partnership long term instead of just on a trial basis.

With the partnership between Purdue University and Susan Thomas at East Tipp Middle School, an eighth grade art class will have the opportunity to use a course management system that would not have been otherwise available due to limited financial and staffing resources. The local school does not have the money to invest in an application of this scope, and they definitely do not have the technical staff necessary to install and support it. Attempting to do so would be overkill, especially since at present the teacher is primarily interested in seeing what the system provides, and is not set on adopting such a system. Under this pilot study, the university’s course management system will be used by the teacher as a way to support a variety of learning initiatives within her classroom and to explore the possibilities that may be opened through using this tool.

While the tool itself may be seen by some as a medium for delivering distance education, even at the university it is used extensively for aiding in the delivery of on campus instruction. Although it makes sense for use on campus for such tasks as distributing materials, presenting grades, and continuing the activity of the classroom even after the classroom time is over, all of these activities are usually seen as something required by higher education but not as useful for the K-12 classroom. What use does an eighth grade art class have for a course management system? That is a question that will not truly be answered until the system is put in the hands of a creative teacher. Hosting the application for the instructor removes a substantial hurdle, and positions her to immediately begin experimenting with the capabilities and potential uses, rather than keeping her trapped at the point of trying to obtain funding for it or staff to deploy it. Her exploration can begin from the moment access is given.

This application is scaled for the enterprise, with enterprise level capabilities as well as enterprise level resource demands. This study will extend the opportunity for using a tool of this scope to the secondary grade levels. Furthermore, this pilot study has ramifications for higher education as well. Purdue University, due to its size, was able to purchase and support an application such as this. The system is administered by a team of technical and instructional staff across four campuses and is delivered to various extension and outreach programs. It is only through the combined resources of these various stakeholders that the adoption of a system like this becomes feasible. For smaller schools, such as those composing the Indiana Independent College Network whose thirty members each have less than 2500 students, it is unlikely that the investment could be justified. However, if a larger school were willing to host the application on their behalf, the goal becomes much more attainable.

The purpose of this study will be to examine the feasibility of a larger school serving as a provider for a smaller school. We expect to learn what issues arise when we attempt this as well as how the system will be put to use in a setting like this. Would a practice like this make sense for others?