

Internship Experience Report

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Final Portfolio Review

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Organization, Information + Learning Sciences

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1. Executive Summary

In undertaking the internship position with Taos Academy Charter School (TACS), I signed up for 400 hours, twice the length of the suggested OLIT Internship period. Because I was asked to give more time, I was able to complete multiple, interconnected work projects, stemming from the results of an organizational evaluation which I designed and implemented for the school, acting as an external evaluator. The evaluation reporting documents were included in a large body of information submitted to NM State PED Charter Division representatives in support of the re-charter effort this month (October 2013). Approval is pending. The school has been highly successful in meeting its stated charter goals, and proactively serving its community. The results of the evaluation, combined with research into Learning Management Systems (LMS), which could streamline or replace disparate technology systems, yielded a selection of the Edvance360 system from a narrowed group of possibilities. Edvance360 LMS now serves as a platform offering systems integration, course delivery, social tools, plus parent access to further increase the sense of community of primary stakeholders (parents, students, staff) both on and off campus. In June, I was asked to continue under new contracts for faculty development and LMS Support, and to redesign the public website in time for spring 2014 enrollment. Without my program of studies, none of this work would have been possible. Before starting the OLIT program I was working as a freelance Graphic Designer in Taos, not making enough income to pull my weight

supporting a family of four. Now, I feel assured that there is interesting and meaningful work for me in support of my professional goals. Using research, technology, creativity and communication skills to develop solutions to complex organizational problems I will be able to contribute to the greater good of society and the planet. This broad goal has not changed since my childhood and adolescent understanding that art and the creative minds which produce it can change the world (though I may not ever have recognized this as a professional goal until my work in OLIT 561). The sense of self-fulfillment from work to improve education systems, and thus improving lives, is immeasurable and it drives me to continue in this area of work.

2. Taos Academy Charter School

Upon initial interview, Ms. Filiss shared with me the school's goal of improving integration of technology systems for greater user efficiency, and the goal of measuring and improving the sense of community among stakeholders. Both factors, she stated clearly, were key elements to maintaining student enrollment and the school's success. TACS is a flipped-blended 5th-12th (MS/HS) school of around 200 students in its fifth year of operation. The school is located in Taos, New Mexico, but offers a flexible program that meets the needs of a variety of learners and their diverse life schedules. As I have learned, their creative and supportive approach to educating children and teens was highly effective for some students, especially, those for whom the traditional schools in the area had caused stress

and frustration, either academically or emotionally. Their model of instruction (flipped-blended) offers anytime-anywhere online access to Common Core compliant curriculum through the Edgenuity online learning software. Instructors at the school serve as support in live “enrichment” courses, as well as other creative live courses which develop students’ 21st Century Skills. Among these skills, are technology, and leadership. Flipped-blended learning leaves the lectures at home and frees instructors to support mastery during in-school hours. Students attend school two days per week from 8am-4pm and the other days they are able (or required depending on performance measures) to participate in Student Success Lab (an on-campus quiet study hall with live tutoring) from 8am-12pm. They can then choose to continue their day with STEAM classes (where working community professionals offer courses in their area of expertise over a 9 week period, for a fee of \$10 per student), or they can take the afternoon for out of school activities. STEAM classes such as Music, Media Arts, Rocketry and Dance are offered to round out the academic program in a way that allows students to explore these topics through experience and receive dual credit for their time.

If a student is succeeding in their courses without much class time, they are able to adjust their academic schedule to fit their life, including accommodating their civic, athletic, or employment goals, etc. TACS partners with UNM Taos, as what they call the College Link program. Successful and independent juniors and seniors who are ready to move ahead, may take college level courses at no cost to them while still in high school. Immediately I was

impressed by the school, what it offered, and how it seemed to bend over backward to suit the needs of a student as an individual.

3. The Work

In response to Ms. Filiss’ thoughts and the upcoming re-charter goal, I suggested an evaluation of the school’s technology systems and sense of school community. I thought a formal evaluation would show how we might be able to more fully support the broader community through technology, and how we might streamline integration of various technology systems to create a more efficient and functional experience for staff and administration. With this investment in technology, we would be improving student and parent experiences as well.

4. The Evaluation

While taking Dr. Portzline’s Program Evaluation, I was guided through the process of developing an evaluation plan to measure the school community and its views on technology through the use of evaluation techniques/instruments including research, observation, archival data, and questionnaires. The plan included eight key questions, which turned out to be a huge bite in terms of data collection.

The most labor-intensive instruments were the questionnaires. One was directed at parents and another at students. Items overlapped in both questionnaires to give a more three-dimensional

view of the data. In addition to simple demographic information, the questionnaire posed items to both groups about technology access and use, comfort, preferences, etc. It asked about the individual's sense of community at TACS, in comparison to other school experiences, and in comparison to the perceived best case scenario. For the student specific questionnaire, the focus expanded to include data about technology habits, use of technology for social interaction, confidence in performing specific tasks, the effect of technology on school experiences, and perceptions about the school community at TACS. There were many rating, yes/no and ranking items, and also several opportunities to gather open ended responses. In total there were 63 items on the student survey and 29 on the parent survey. I had purchased a year's subscription to Survey Monkey to manage creation, distribution, tracking and the initial data analysis. Without this tool I would have never been able to handle my data collection and analysis within the time allotted. I am thankful for data analysis software, and online survey creation services like this one.

In addition to the questionnaire, I developed an observation instrument and observed live classes, meetings and events at the school to gain an understanding of who the students and faculty are, what makes them tick, and how they interact. Recording observations allowed me to further flesh out my understanding of the school, and its primary stakeholders, their likes, their needs, their goals. I interviewed staff in groups about technology systems, and their experiences with them, we tried to define the issues and determine where disconnects

were causing frustration. The source of frustration was usually manual data entry, complex roundabout procedures, or overlap of duties. We were also able to convene a meeting with administrative and IT staff and software company representatives to clarify the possibilities for integrating the pieces into a more efficient whole based on our goals.

The evaluation efforts resulted in a group of reporting documents including; systems charts to define ideal information flow processes and the person(s) responsible for them, a text document which both quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed the survey results, and archival and observation data in response to the key questions dealing with community and technology. The main evaluation report along with a series of additional digestible info-graphics were given to the PED Charter Division representatives as a piece of the support documentation for the re-charter process. The last product was the use of evaluation results, budgetary considerations and research to prepare a report for administration and staff to guide selection of the appropriate LMS for the school going forward into the new charter phase, 2014-2019.

5. The LMS

Thoughtful selection and implementation of the LMS was one key to demonstrating movement toward the next phase of the charter, and its resulting modified organizational goals. The charter has evolved over time through the act of running a school for five years as what has been, essentially, a

pilot program. Adjustments have been frequently made; expanding program offerings, technology, staff and even physical infrastructure. Attentive, professional, dedicated staff, founders and the governing council have followed their hearts and their research to this point in the school's development. There are beautiful plans about how it should continue to unfold to support an increasingly diverse population of non-traditional and traditional students alike. Selecting the LMS could have been a painful and/or time consuming organizational decision. By having someone with skills specific to suggesting smart technology possibilities, and time to do the research and reporting, it amounted to a spreadsheet list of options, and a clear front-runner in terms of low annual and one-time costs, high level security and reporting options, high level social and collaborative tools, and high level support and responsiveness to individual clients. Edvance360 stood out as a great choice for a small, 5th-12th grade blended learning environment, because it is flexible enough to suit the varied needs of instructors, guidance counselors, administration, students and families.

Beyond the scope of the initial internship contract, the implementation is underway, with my support, to design and facilitate a faculty development course to train faculty/admin and guide best-practices in online, distance learning and teaching. We have already made great headway in terms of adoption, and course and community building, and despite hurdles of learning new software capabilities and limitations, the reactions from staff have been positive and enthusiastic, more-so than I, or the

administration, had anticipated for the first six months of implementation.

6. Relationship to Program Study, Self-Evaluation, Skill Development

As a beginner, I recognize areas where I could have done more, differently, or less to improve the overall efficiency of the project along the way. I am confident that the final outcome will represent sound organizational decisions and I am proud to have been a part of guiding these changes. An acute awareness that this work would have been impossible without the preparation I received from my instructors and course of study is paramount for me in recognizing and accepting my success. I am personally pleased to have achieved such positive outcomes, and positive feedback for the evaluative work I did, as well as for the selection of the LMS, a valuable tool which I continue to support staff to use to meet their instructional, reporting and community-building goals. This on-the-job experience has really touched every area of my program.

Even though the Program Evaluation course was central to framing the work at TACS, Instructional Design, eLearning Course Design, Culture and Global eLearning, and Theory and Practice of Distance Learning made it possible for me to build the questionnaires for the evaluation, and analyze and recommend LMS options with a professional understanding and taxonomy. Organizational learning courses, like Designing Knowledge Management Solutions, Organizational Learning,

and Knowledge Application and Dissemination helped me in my research for an appropriate LMS, and helped guide my recommendations about organizational best-practices for gathering, storing and sharing knowledge among stakeholders. Instructional Use of Computer Simulations, and Contemporary Instructional Media gave a voice and vehicle to developing my creative ideas through technology on-the-job. This translated into ideas about using the LMS to expand teaching and learning opportunities, at a distance, or in supplement to face-to-face instruction, especially because the school focuses on students themselves learning and owning these skills to create and design effective media communications, and using simulations in their daily coursework.

My broad knowledge of all of these subject matter areas prepared me immensely to do the job with success. The Adult Learner (though each course played a part) prepared me to develop and embrace my unique design perspective through exploration of learning theory and historical context, and to recognize and leverage the power of my creativity toward developing research and technology-based and systems design solutions to complex problems. I gained group work skills in many of my OLIT courses; I realized the power of group collaboration, knowledge co-creation, and the power of a community of practice/inquiry to advance knowledge in an area. I learned skills to both lead and follow effectively. I also learned the value of using direct language to hone my writing style and skill to meet various objectives, and how perform effective internet searches for information.

These skills were essential in working with a close-knit group of people at this organization, reporting to a very busy supervisor, and working with a staff of unique and intelligent adult learners. One size does not fit all in terms of training, and any trace of pigheadedness is ineffective and can derail your personal and group success. Luckily, I was able to learn these skills and recognize my assets through observation and experience during my courses so that I could bring my best professional skills into the workplace, where it counts. I feel that I was well-prepared to enter the workplace, and though it was my first professional experience with many of these skills, I felt confident executing them. The other invaluable skill set which OLIT delivered is that of understanding and meeting objectives on a timeline and within budget and creating professional, and often interactive, work products that achieve stated objectives.

This may seem obvious, but it was the design of OLIT courses which allowed me to develop the key workplace skills, and expect professional outcomes from myself, and those with whom I collaborate. I believe this sets me apart from other workers. I am product-centered and goal-oriented. On the job, I gained new skills, and saw some gaps in my learning. I learned how to analyze data, and create competent and effective reporting products, which was not something we covered in Program Evaluation. I should mention that if I were to focus on becoming a professional evaluator, I would need to take several other courses to strengthen my data analysis skills, and broaden my ideas about reporting. I did the best I could with heuristic knowledge, internet research,

and my creativity and media design skills.

My supervisor was happy with my outcomes, but it was one thing she mentioned I could improve in her evaluation of my work. This also stretched out my contract hours, as I spent so much time in data analysis. For a full-salary worker, my skills would not have been sufficient. At intern rates, my struggles on the clock were somewhat expected. I embarked on a long journey without all my provisions, I suppose. But I survived, and ultimately conquered, as I was offered more work, not terminated.

7. The Learning Experience

My work with TACS has been and continues to be invaluable as an initial work experience. It has shown me that I can use diverse professional skills and my natural creative gifts to improve organizational outcomes. Working directly with people and learning about the complex problem from them, as opposed to studying a case, and knowing that work has real and measurable outcomes in the community is incredibly humbling and rewarding. In my youth, I used to always take the bossy leadership position on projects, but learning when to interject experience and opinion has made it so that in groups, I share work more equitably, don't require such extensive control, and can do beneficial tasks, like editing, layout or develop a design, when the content is not my expertise. I have also developed my Project Management skills through this work. I have set timelines, managed personnel and meetings, developed guidelines and objectives, collected

resources and reviewed the work of others toward a final goal.

I did not come into OLIT from an OLIT-compatible professional career, or so I thought at the outset. Like a stereo system, OLIT experience, skills and study, amplified my abilities and the value of the work I could competently perform, along with sharpening my existing creative skills toward producing those valuable products. Combining technology skills and business/organizational knowledge has made my creative skills exponentially more marketable and valuable.

I expect that this internship experience will prepare me to professionally offer similar services to other developing hybrid schools, or schools that want to expand their offerings by adding a distance component. I feel that I am prepared to effectively evaluate schools' strengths, support increased ROI from a marketing perspective, and intervene for organizational change where weaknesses are found. I can also see similar applications in working with nonprofit or NGOs as areas of interest for me. I am only interested in work in the private sector if it is a very grounded company with strong ethical and employment principles whose work I believe in. I am still exploring exactly how to market myself, as this array of skills doesn't readily fit into a title, other than broadly as "consultant". I am hopeful that I will connect with others who can form a strong team with me, combining our expertise to take on these kinds of projects.