

The Zews Project: Fostering community across off-campus cohorts

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Abstract

The Reich College of Education has taken the lead in serving both graduate and undergraduate students in the western half of North Carolina by offering a significant number of programs via extension and distance learning. Teaching at a distance presents unique challenges -- particularly, in maintaining fidelity to our conceptual framework and our commitment to creating coherent communities of practice for teaching and learning. The Zews Project is designed to address these challenges by publishing an online multimedia newsletter -- created and produced by off-campus students from multiple cohorts -- intended to increase students' sense of presence, connectivity, and belonging. The newsletter will be published five times throughout the year and will detail the people, projects, and other activities in which RCOE students are engaging at eight of the twelve off-campus locations where ASU and the RCOE have a presence. Online surveys and focus interviews will provide data to examine the effectiveness of the project and results will be shared at department meetings and across the state via a state-level technology conference.

Objectives

The purpose of this project is to utilize current technologies to foster a distributed community of practice among the students and faculty involved in the RCOE's largest off-campus programs. The Zews Project will foster collaboration and collegiality by connecting participants at multiple locations and by providing a medium for enhancing program development and cross-cohort collaboration through the implementation of social constructivist principles. Traditionally, issues related to presence, communication, and modeling effective uses of technology have hampered efforts to embed social constructivist principles within and throughout both the formal and informal learning environments -- particularly, those related to off-campus programs. The Zews Project will benefit the Reich College of Education by (a) increasing a sense of belonging to and affinity for the university; (b) increasing cross-cohort and cross-program collaboration; (c) fostering a developing community of practice among students in off-campus programs; (d) increasing awareness and flow of information among all participants; and (e) encouraging further program development within innovative ICT environments such as AET Zone, the 3D virtual world developed by the Instructional Technology faculty in the Department of Leadership and Educational Studies.

Description of the project

This fall, Extension is coordinating 51 graduate cohorts and an additional 25 undergraduate cohorts. Of these, 66 (87%) are RCOE programs. The HMHEC and WSSU cohorts, alone, represent more than one-quarter of the RCOE programs offered off-campus, and account for

roughly 300 of the total number of RCOE off-campus student enrollments. Additionally, Instructional Technology, Educational Leadership, and Reading remain at the top of the list when it comes to number of off-campus students and number of off-campus locations served.

The Zews Project aims to capitalize on existing relationships between Instructional Technology, Reading, and Educational Leadership to develop a model for other programs as they seek to infuse social constructivist principles and effective uses of ICT into both off-campus and on-campus programs. To that end, the Zews Project will call upon the collective expertise of the faculty and students across these programs who have already formed effective, collegial working relationships and who have demonstrated facility with advanced multimedia technologies.

Graduate students currently enrolled in off-campus programs in Instructional Technology, Reading, and Educational Leadership will utilize web-based and hypermedia technologies to produce and publish a multimedia newsletter five times throughout the year. The newsletter content will be decided upon by consensus among the student participants (an Editor, a Publisher, and one "beat" reporter from both HMHEC and WSSU) and under the guidance of the Zews Project Advisory board, comprised of principle investigators. The newsletter will contain news, student- and faculty-spotlights, anecdotes, examples of student work, and calls for collaborative work across multiple cohorts. Each "beat" reporter will be responsible for covering multiple sites. The WSSU beat will include the Yadkinville center, Ashe county, and Wilkes county. The HMHEC beat will include CCCT&I, Burke, and Cleveland. The Editor will be responsible for overseeing the coherent construction of the newsletter and ensure that each of the sites is appropriately represented. The Publisher will be responsible for ensuring that all technical aspects of the newsletter are covered.

All Zews participants will be required to use advanced multimedia software, including but not limited to: Moviemaker, Frontpage, GIMP (image editor), Audacity (audio editor), Visual Communicator (video capture/editing), and advanced scripting. Also, participants will be required to have an advanced working knowledge of hardware such as wireless computers, microphones, webcams, and scanners. As a result, only those students in the MSA or Reading programs who have completed FDN 5220 and are enrolled in (or have completed) either FDN 5420 and FDN 5320 will be eligible to apply at this time.

Timeline

September 2005	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • advertise for Editor and Publisher positions from among the IT cohorts at HMHEC, Ashe, and Yadkinville • advertise for beat reporters among the Reading and MSA cohorts at HMHEC and Winston-Salem • purchase equipment and software • hold online orientation meeting for Zews participants within AET Zone
October	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • create Zewsstands and Zews Office within AET Zone • select Editor, Publisher, and beat reporters • construct Social Presence Awareness Survey

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • construct Technology Integration in Programs Survey
November	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • produce a "test" edition of Zews and pilot with students in Reading, MSA, and IT programs • pilot Social Presence Awareness Survey • pilot Technology Integration in Programs Survey
January	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • publish first edition of Zews • administer SPAS to all students at the 12 off-campus locations • administer TIPS to all students at the 12 off-campus locations • begin work on second edition of Zews
February	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • publish second edition of Zews • begin work on third edition of Zews
March	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • publish third edition of Zews • begin work on fourth edition of Zews
April	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • publish fourth edition of Zews • begin work on final edition of Zews
May	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • publish fifth edition of Zews • administer SPAS to all students at the 12 off-campus locations • administer TIPS to all students at the 12 off-campus locations
June June (cont.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • analyze pre- and post- data from SPAS and TIPS • compare results from the beat sites to the non-beat sites • draft results into a report and submit for publication
July	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • submit final report to Dean Duke
August	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • submit presentation proposal for NCETC 2006
September	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • share results at LES, LRE, and C&I department meetings
November 2006	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • present outcomes at the North Carolina Educational Technology Conference in Greensboro, NC

Outcomes and Assessment

The success of the Zews Project will be measured using the following instruments and assessments:

- **Five editions of Zews:** The Zews team will solicit feedback from readers/viewers after each edition is published. The feedback will be related to content, format, accessibility, relevance, and breadth of coverage.
- **Social Presence Awareness Survey:** A brief online survey will be developed to measure the extent to which off-campus students are aware of the presence of each other. Social presence is a critical attribute of effective learning environments, and may be instantiated via group membership, participation rates in collaborative online activities, a sense of "knowing" each other, comfort expressing emotions (e.g., humor, fear), and perceived influence of one's action over another.
- **Technology Integration in Programs Survey:** A brief online survey will be developed to measure the extent to which students perceive ICT is being integrated and utilized effectively at their location and within their program. Factors might include: accessibility, usability, support, relevant use, frequency of use, and variety of use.

All off-campus students at the following locations will be encouraged to complete the SPAS and the TIPS at both the beginning and the end of the spring semester: HMHEC, WSSU, CCCT&I, Ashe, Burke, Cleveland, Yadkinville, Wilkes, McDowell, Surry, Alexander, and Rutherfordton. The overall impact of the project will be judged based on the significant difference in responses on each instrument at the beginning and end of the semester, as well as between the locations that were represented (i.e., "beats") versus those that were not. Finally, students will be interviewed at each "beat" site and asked to share their general perceptions of the project's effects.

Dissemination & Sharing Plan

The Zews Project will be shared in the following ways:

- **Link within AET Zone:** Currently, students enrolled in Instructional Technology, Educational Leadership, Reading, Curriculum & Instruction, and the Doctoral program are utilizing AET Zone for both formal and informal interactions between and among locations. The project will create "Zewsstands" throughout the 3D world, and a Zews Office within the Student Services Building, making the newsletters, surveys, and other information about the project visible and available for all.
- **Links from the RCOE and Extension websites:** the Zews team will request that the RCOE webmaster and Extension and Distance Learning webmaster include links to each edition of Zews from a prominent section of their respective websites.
- **On-site advertisements:** The Zews team will request that flyers be posted at each of the 12 off-campus locations each time a new issue is published, directing students to the Zewsstands and website links.
- **Presentations:** The Zews team will present the results of our project at LES, LRE, and C I department meetings. Also, we will present our results at the state-level NCETC conference.

Budget

Item	Num	Cost	Subtotl	Total
Personnel				2,400
Faculty Advisors	3	0	0	
Editor	1	600	600	
HMHEC beat	1	600	600	
WS beat	1	600	600	
Producer	1	600	600	
Equipment				1,800-5,800
Wireless microphone	7	120	840	
<i>Dell Inspiron 6000D</i>	2	<i>2,000</i>	<i>4,000</i>	
Webcam Live Ultra	7	80	560	
Hard drives	4	100	400	
Software				4,140
Visual Communicator	3	350	1050	
Ultra Dev	3	330	990	
Overhead				
Travel	30	.40/mi + \$15	1,200	
Conference	4		900	
TOTAL:				8,340 - 12,340

Budget narrative

Personnel - The budget includes a \$600 stipend for each of the student participants. No stipend is request for the faculty advisory board.

Equipment - microphones and cameras are requested for creating multimedia reports from each off-campus site, as well as for videoconference meetings between the project participants and with the faculty advisors. External hard drives are required to store the large media files created for each issue. If the project can utilize existing laptops at the Anderson and HMHEC centers, then no additional computers are necessary. If these are not available, then 2 will be required and the higher of the two budgets would apply.

Software - Most of the requisite software may already be found on the laptops available at most of the participating sites. However, specialized software will be required to produce the multimedia portions of the newsletter.

Overhead - Travel costs will cover mileage and meals for each of the beat reporters to visit each of their sites five times throughout the year. The conference cost covers hotel, mileage, meals, and registration expenses for each of the four student participants. The expenses for the advisory board's participation at the conference will be requested from their respective departments.