

I PRO 320
An Online Teachers Community
for Chicago Public Schools
Final Report

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Faculty Advisor:
Jim Braband

Team Leader: Anthony Smith

Sub Team Leaders:

Rawan Abbasi (Focus Groups/Surveys)
Aleksandr Zelenskiy (Programming/Development)

Team Members:

John Enverga
Linda Goldstein
Usman Jafarey
Min Seung Kim
Evan Kruger
Lory Mishra
Justin Moses
Shruti Pasari

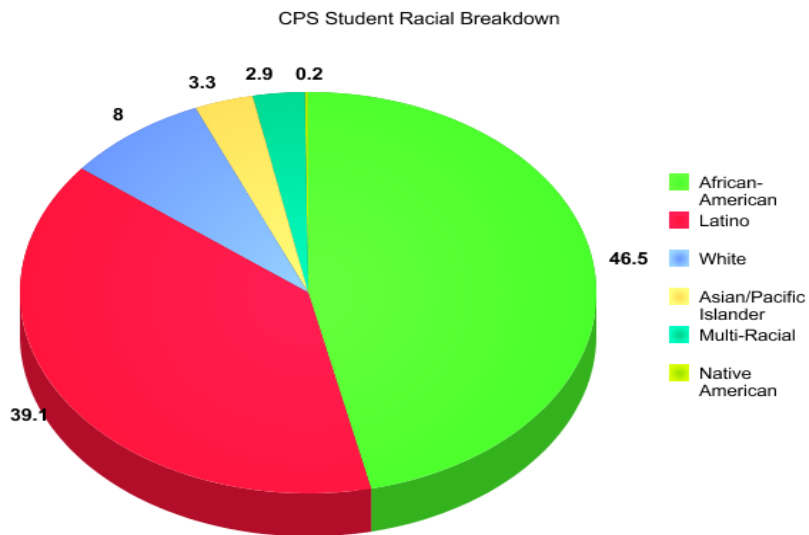
1. Introduction

In IPRO 320, we are all about building an online community for teachers in the Chicago Public Schools. We also wish to extend the scope of this community not just for CPS teachers, but also for teachers of all sorts.

2. Background

The Chicago Public School (CPS) system consists of an incredibly large and diverse population of students. CPS listed the following numbers of schools for the 2006-2007 school year. For elementary schools, it has 407 traditional elementary schools, 41 magnet schools, 18 middle schools, 8 gifted centers, and 9 special schools. For high schools, it has 38 general/technical schools, 10 vocational/career schools, 13 magnet schools, 8 math & science academies, 5 military academies, 21 small schools, 8 achievement academies, 5 alternative schools, and 8 special ed schools

It also listed 35 charter elementary school campuses and 21 charter high school campuses. In total, the CPS listed 21,388 pre-school students, 27,901 kindergarten students, 246,771 elementary students, and 112,541 secondary school students.



The above graph shows the racial breakdown of these students. For the 2006-2007 school year, CPS listed a total of 24,664 teachers. The average student-teacher ratio in elementary schools was listed as 21.1 students to each teacher and 19.6 students to each teacher in high school.

3. Purpose

The problem we are trying to solve in this IPRO is trying to figure out a way to improve the ways in which CPS teachers can communicate and share best practices. To do this, we would build prototype of a web community that would help cater their needs. Over the course of the semester, this web community would consist of 100 registered teachers and feature a front page, a forum, and a wiki of 50 articles. Future IPROs could then expand on this prototype and build upon what we have created.

To help us create this web community, we would need to have input from the teachers themselves. Such forms of input include surveys, phone interviews, and usability testing.

4. Research Methodology

Focus Group

The focus group subgroup conducted surveys through the online tool ConstantContact.com. The questions on this survey were brainstormed by the whole group and refined by the focus team subgroup, and finally input into the survey website by a member of the development team. The survey was distributed/marketed by CPS teacher Kevin Hall, advisor to IPRO 320, through FirstClass, and the email system that all CPS teachers are required to use. Although several thousand teachers received this mass email, such emails are not often checked by the typical teacher, and such emails are often obscured due to technical complications on the FirstClass website. Thus, there was some difficulty in achieving 100 responses in response to the survey. Data was analyzed and made available to the development team for design strategy changes.

The second method of eliciting feedback was phone interviews. Interviewees were those from a list of interested parties provided by Kevin Hall who responded to email and set a time. Interviews were about 20 minutes. There were four successful phone interviews. These interviews were conducted by members of the focus group on their own cell phones. Notes from the interviews were uploaded to iGroups for general perusal. The focus group examined the interviews for common themes, which could guide the group in design and marketing, not to mention further content development (i.e. next year.)

Development Team

The intent of the research on the development team is to build the system of the online community, attract CPS teachers into the online community and to lead them active contributors.

We elicit the following research questions from our goals.

- Are there any other existing online communities for teachers, what benefits do they provide and how can we improve it using what technical methods?
- Is there a transition cycle of the online community and what features does it have in each phase?
- How can we promote the active contributions of our users?

The resources that we had found to answer the questions above was largely on the Web. The development team members gathered information and presented on every Monday, and we discussed further research and how we are going to apply these findings into our system development.

First, we gathered the list of online content management systems for developing the platform of the online community. Discussing pros and cons of each system, tikiwiki, the free open-source content management system, was selected as our platform. Then, we researched on the alternative solutions of teacher online community and learned from there what features we might include. Besides, the resources on promoting of contributions on online were discussed to lead our community to be active.

5. Assignments

The team was broken down in 3 different teams, the development team, the deliverables team, and the focus group/research team. Each week Wednesday the team would come up with a list of general tasks that needed to be completed over the weekend. Both the development team and focus group/research team then assign these tasks to individual group members. The deliverables team was in charge of the predefined deliverables for the IPRO and gathering the information from the proper individuals to assemble the document. The group took some time to come up with an effective method of coming up with tasks to be completed. As we started interviewing teachers and IPRO day approached, the amount of work increased. This chart encapsulates the work that was completed by the group throughout the semester.

Task	Date Started	Date Completed	Total Hours	Members Who Completed
Research Online Communities	1/20/2008	2/2/2008	15	Linda, Alex, Tony, Min
Wrote Cover Letter	2/5/2008	2/21/2008	5	Rawan, Shruti
Project Plan	2/10/2008	2/20/2008	7	Tony
Code of Ethics	2/16/2008	3/6/2008	10	Justin, Linda, Usman, John, Rawan, Lory, Min, Shruti, Evan
Website Running	2/14/2008	3/1/2008	10	Alex, Usman, Min, Justin
Created Survey	2/20/2008	3/3/2008	6	Linda, Rawan, Lory, Min
Midterm Report	2/26/2008	3/9/2008	10	Tony, Justin, Linda, Usman, John, Rawan, Lory, Min, Shruti, Evan
Midterm Presentation	2/26/2008	3/5/2008	6	Alex, Tony
Website Updates	3/1/2008	Present	50	Alex, Usman, Min, Justin, Tony
Gather Contacts	3/10/2008	Present	10	Lory, John, Rawan
Interview Questions	3/15/2008	3/29/2008	8	Lory, Linda, Rawan
Survey Results Gathered	3/16/2008	4/6/2008	2	Min, Lory
Interview teachers	4/1/2008	4/14/2008	8	Rawan, Linda
Final Report	4/14/2008	5/1/2008	10	Tony, Justin, Linda, Usman, John, Rawan, Lory, Min, Shruti, Evan
Posters	4/14/2008	4/25/2008	12	Min, Rawan, Linda
Final Presentation	4/14/2008	5/1/2008	15	Justin, Tony, Lory, Alex, Rawan
Abstract	4/14/2008	4/25/2008	3	Usman
I PRO Website	4/14/2008	4/25/2008	5	Alex, Tony

6. Obstacles

A major obstacle our team faced was actually contacting the teachers in order to talk to them. Teachers have their own schedules, and those schedules may conflict with the schedules of IPRO team members. It will also be an obstacle to travel out to the schools in order to talk to teachers due to transportation costs and time. The transportation issue, however, is resolved by communicating with teachers through the phone and the Internet. This long-distance communication may have a few disadvantages, though. It may be difficult to have a conversation and collect the necessary information that you could obtain face-to-face. Also, it is easier to ask follow-up questions face-to-face.

Another obstacle would be getting the teachers to use the website and having the teachers contribute to the community. This is a long-term goal of the IPRO. We are able to let teachers know of the existence of the website, but whether or not they stay is what is really important. The community part of our website cannot exist without a set of people who

will continually contribute to the website in order to foster a sense of community.

7. Results

Focus Group

The focus group team researched and browsed other scholarly based websites (i.e. Discovery Educator Network, SMILE, first class, etc.) in order to seek motivation and ideas for potential features on our website. We distributed a survey along with a cover letter several different times to several Chicago Public Schools, in order to gauge their interest in such a site and also to better understand what CPS teachers need to produce a school environment that is both supportive and conducive to learning. In all, we received 117 responses from participating teachers, albeit at a slow pace. Many teachers were simply too busy to respond to our e-mails and cover letters, let alone fill out a survey. In any event, the survey results were favorable, in that, many of the teachers (roughly 65%) expressed genuine interest in a site that would allow them to communicate with other teachers regarding most notably the sharing of lesson plans and best classroom practices. Also, the fact that many teachers (70%) admitted to using the internet several times a day for work-related tasks was encouraging in its own right. Finally, as I mentioned previously, the task of getting participants proved to be somewhat daunting. Our team, with the help of Kevin Hall, redistributed the survey and cover letter several times to a variety of schools. Each time the survey was distributed, the participation by teachers decreased steadily after each passing day; thus, we found it necessary to redistribute the surveys on several occasions.

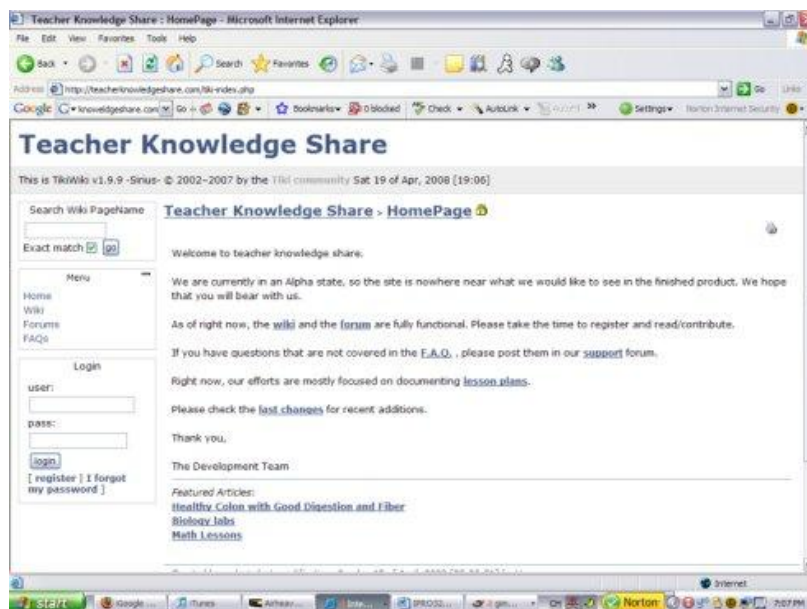
Furthermore, we conducted four phone interviews. Initially, our team had decided to physically go to the schools and conduct focus group interviews, yet time, or lack thereof was once again a major issue for the CPS teachers we managed to get a hold of. Some of the general feedback we received from these interviews was helpful. For instance, the general consensus of these teachers was that they used firstclass.com mostly for e-mail and that was a product of lack of aesthetic appeal and more importantly, they complained the site was too slow. Another useful piece of feedback came from Larry Waites (...High School) who was very interested in our site, specifically a potential forum dedicated to AP teachers. Another teacher said she uses Google frequently for particular questions or concerns and suggested we separate lesson plans and ideas into categories, which are mindful of teachers with limited resources and materials. All in all, the results and feedback we received from our CPS participants was overly positive and suggested that such a site would certainly be helpful; however, time constraints and busy schedules was a

continuing theme for potential participants and users, and this problem should certainly not be taken lightly by future IPROs dealing with CPS.

Development Group

The development group created a functional website with all of the desired features (a wiki and a forum with a front page connecting the two) using the TikiWiki open-source platform. The wiki was seeded with over 50 articles retrieved from the Smile program website(www.iit.edu/~smile) and other various sources. The forum was setup with a basic set of discussion sections. A design template was created to enhance the visual appeal of the website; however, the implementation of the template to the website is a future work.

Current website:



Design template:



8. Recommendations

What will be the future of this IPRO's project? Future IPROs that will continue this project will build on the web community that we have created, and continue getting input from teachers on how to improve the website. They can do this by building membership among teachers. There could also be a donation system set up to help improve the website. They can ask for more feedback from our contacts, or create a new contact list.

Future IPROs can expand the scope of the project inside and outside CPS. They can also find ways to perform risk management – such as dealing with plagiarism and filtering out users. Also, there could be a marketing plan – ways to go about funding, advertising, becoming self-sufficient, and remaining a not-for-profit organization.

Future IPROs can add additional features like calendars. They will also need to deal with hosting and domain. And finally, they will need to organize the forum structure.

In conclusion, there are many things that could be done to build on this prototype of a web community. Future IPROs will simply need to figure out what needs to be done based on our recommendations above.

9. References

Evolution of Online: Communities power point: overview of different types of users on online communities

cscw2004preprint.pdf: Contains information on how to keep users motivated on an online community

ListofVirtualCommunities.pdf: Contains a list of online communities for different types of users

Ofcom Report Focus Group.pdf: Report about social networking

Ofcom Social Networking report.pdf: Report about social networking

Other Good Websites For Online Community Design Tips.doc:

List of websites containing communities

Twelve Tips for Growing Positive Communities Online.doc: document outlining how to develop a good online community

VirtualCommunityDesign.pdf: From wikipedia, contains information about online communities

10. Acknowledgements

-Kevin Hall: Science Coach at Dyett, came in a couple of times and gave us an overview of the CPS system. If we ever had any questions he was the person we would ask. He helped us edit our online survey and sent it out to all CPS HS teachers through first class for about 3 weeks. He also showed us firstclass.com which is the site CPS teachers somewhat use (so we got to see its features- and why teachers complain about it so much).

-Ken Schug: came in one day during class to explain smile@iit.edu. We have been using this website a lot for our site, so it was a big contribution

-IPRO 332: gave us a list of teachers that we can contact for phone interviews

-Alicia Howe: phone interview

-Roy Coleman: phone interview

-Larry Waites: phone interview

-LaShawn Yancey: phone interview

-Nia Abdullah